Διεξάστηκε ένα έργο με σκοπό την εξέταση του ύφασμα, του χρώμα, του συμβολισμού και της σημασίας του στο Βυζάντιο (4ος-15ος αιώνες).

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Silk, Culture and Being in Byzantium: How Far Did Precious Cloth Enrich “Memory” and Shape “Culture” Across the Empire (4th-15th centuries)?

This paper explores the relationship between “culture,” “being” and “memory” in the context of the use of precious cloth in Byzantium between the 4th and the 15th centuries. It asks the question, How far did precious cloth enrich “memory” and shape “culture” across the Empire over a millennium of time? The paper is arranged under three headings: I. Being; II. Belief Systems and III. Social Process.

Method and Definition of Terms

Several thousand precious Byzantine textile artefacts, hundreds of written reports concerning their uses, and many visual images of Byzantine textiles and costumes survive (Fig. 1).1 This provides a rich ground for investigation of “memory.”

Keywords

Byzantine silks, cultural tradition, memory and being, social norms, beliefs and values.

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and of “cultural transmission” across a single category of artefact in Byzantium, and it calls for the application of fresh approaches to Byzantine cultural research. Increasingly, contemporary theoretical research on human cognition builds up useful models concerning cognition and cultural transmission across society, and this lecture explores how well such theory, in combination with traditional Byzantine research methods, may be applied to Byzantine Material Culture studies, and in particular to Byzantine textiles and dress. The present author has produced a chart, which outlines the key approaches to material culture studies in Byzantine fields (Fig. 2).²

The advantage in this method is that the definitions of key terms as taken from contemporary theory are sufficiently broad and abstract as to be applicable across societies and over millennia of time. “Culture” is defined as “the site of shared concepts and norms, which can be transmitted,” and it is seen as being active across “all forms and results of human activity.”³ “Cultural transmission” is defined as the transfer of “concepts and norms” across minds.⁴ Concepts and norms are defined as “systems of common belief and value,” transmitted between minds as “mental units of culture” (memes), in human speech and action.⁵

According to this contemporary theoretical model, “concepts and norms” can be embedded into cultural artefacts, and through practices associated with these, ideas can be passed between minds and an ordered environment can be created. Memory is important, in so far as it informs representation attached to, as well as practices associated with artefacts. In “cultural transmission,” “memory” as defined here is both “explicit” and “implicit,” and it operates in three ways:


³ Also described as a “shared set of practices and understandings,” see Elder-Vass, op.cit. (n. 2), chapter 3, Culture and Rules, p. 37-54, esp. 39. ODB, I, 561-562 presents only a very general definition of “culture.”

⁴ “Cultural transmission” is treated only very briefly in the ODB, I, 562-563. There is no discussion of the nature of the mentalities involved or of individual subjective reaction to cultural norms. Elder-Vass, op.cit. (n. 2), distinguishes between “subjective and objective moments of culture” and considers that “cultural content” exists as “beliefs of individuals,” but attains its “objective aspect” through endorsement by different types of social structures (that is made up of collectives or groups and termed “norm circles”). Key issues about the relation of materiality and material expression in the context of Byzantium were set out as a chart and discussed in detail within a thorough examination of earlier discussions amongst European Byzantine scholars and other academics in, A. Muthesius, “Studies on Material Culture – Some General Considerations,” in Muthesius, Byzantine, Islamic and Near Eastern Silk Weaving, op.cit. (n. 1), study XV, especially p. 212-283, with chart on page 243.

⁵ Boyer – Wertsch, op.cit. (n. 2), pages 290-292, refers to experimental and development psychology theory to suggest that different minds have similar ways of organising incoming information, which allows distinct individuals to share “norms and concepts” (memes) in common. This is how the transmission of culture occurs between minds. This process is termed “cognitive predisposition.”
Fig. 2. “Material Culture” chart (Anna Muthesius).
I. Being

The term ‘Being’ as used in this paper, has two separate definitions:

- collective Roman heritage in relation to ethnicity, and
- individual sense of “true self.”

In relation to the first definition centred on questions of Roman identity and the question of ethnicity the traditional image of Byzantium painted by scholars over the last century, pointed to a historically, politically centralised, trans-ethnic Roman Empire, in which each, individual Roman was held to be personally loyal to the Emperor. Religious identity was seen to rest upon the idea of Empire as “oikoumene” with Orthodox rite and Imperial rule cemented together. Culturally, Roman identity was seen as that predominantly based upon use of the Greek language and styles of appearance.

However, after AD 1204, shrinking borders, increased regionalism, and issues of religious compromise (Union of the Churches) had led to a weakening of the sacral dimension of Imperial rule. Kaldellis argued that Orthodox Christian identity became increasingly detached from Imperial Roman identity from the 13th-15th centuries: “ethnic Romans” (those not loyal to the Emperor) were distinguished in the sources, from the Rhomaioi (those loyal to the State). Byzantium as “nation State” post AD 1204 rather than as “Imperial Empire” is an idea that he has put forward. How far might such contrasting definitions of Byzantine identity bear individual truth, and if so, both be reflected in the use of precious cloth?

The subject of “Being” in the second sense, that is of discovery of the “true self” as part of personal identity in Byzantium, has still to be explored in relation to cultural artefacts. Byzantine belief was centred upon concepts of self-knowledge gained via the embodied self, aided through reason, an attribute of the higher self. The whole subject of the relation of body/soul, of self-awareness, self-correction, and the relationship between reason and spirituality is important for understanding Byzantine attitudes towards cultural transmission through objects. A comprehensive re-reading of texts to extract specific information about this aspect of Byzantine Material Culture is desirable.

In the field of “Being” as part of identity, Page’s book, “Being Byzantine” is relevant. She tested concepts of “ethnicity” against Byzantine historical documentation. She concluded that the concept of Byzantine Roman identity was transformed following the Latin conquest of AD 1204. After that time, there was no single uniform sense of ethnic identity amongst the Romans. Ethnic identities were not static but developed in response to major political changes, in particular to the Frankish conquest. Page’s observations, concerning how historical circumstance can affect “Being” is relevant in relation to Byzantine textiles and dress, in so far as dress acted as hierarchy, social signifier and medium of social recognition not only in Byzantium but also in the West.

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5 Boyer – Wertsch, op.cit. (n. 2), 292, discusses “implicit and explicit cultural acquisition in different domains.” On p. 312-313 “the interplay between explicit episodic memory and the largely implicit processes that govern knowledge acquisition and belief fixation” is discussed. In this process physical objects and events serve as cues to trigger inferences. It is common inferential processes across different minds, which allow humans to maintain similar concepts and norms within different social groups, and this underpins a culture. For discussions of these issues across historical time, see further, C. Gosden, Social Being and Time, Oxford 1994. The present author would suggest that similarities between cultures of different civilisations over historic time, as seen for example, in the identical symbolic uses (social, religious and political) of silks across the Byzantine, Islamic, Near and Far Eastern Worlds, implies that universal basic human needs lie behind development of symbolic object/man related culture in general.

6 Boyer – Wertsch, op.cit. (n. 2), 292.


8 Ibid., 317-397. For the term “Greci” see 336-337, 345-351, 357-368.

9 The concepts of “body” and “soul” are discussed in the ODB, I, 299, and III, 1931-1932. See further, G. Podskalsky, Theologie und Philosophie in Byzanz, Munich 1977.

10 G. Page, Being Byzantine: Greek Identity before the Ottomans, Cambridge 2008, 267-281. Cf. ODB, II, 1797 for the ethnic term “Rhomaioi” in contrast to “Graikoi.” The ODB entry argues that mainly the state used the former term, whilst the latter term generally appeared in a religious context.

11 Page, op.cit. (n. 10), 267-281.

a. Dress as Hierarchy, Social Signifier and Medium of Social Recognition

Being and identity whether Roman or ethnic, was expressed through dress and dress codes mattered to the Byzantines. From the legal prohibitions upon the use of certain tailored, restricted purple silks reserved for Imperial use, to the bans on actresses and prostitutes dressing in costly garments of silk, dress functioned as a hierarchical social signifier, a medium for social recognition, and a moral code (Fig. 3).¹³

When production of silks was increased and decentralised in the 11th to 12th century, women of Constantinople were reported on the streets as wearing fine silk garments from Thebes and Corinth.¹⁴ This democratisation of luxury outside the Byzantine Imperial court, lower down the social scale, allowed for more individual expression of “Being” in the sense of self-awareness of social image. The messages embodied in the use of fine dress drawn from Imperial practice and filtered through aristocratic circles, lent status to the female citizens of the Capital. But it was not only Byzantine court precedent that would have been influential. Already in the 4th century Diocletian Code, it is evident that many categories of more and less precious silk and purple garments had been sold upon the open market to the citizens of Rome. Roman traditions also have to be considered.¹⁵

In Byzantine Egypt a social hierarchy of tunics was clearly developed, and the inter-mingling of traditions is even more evident.¹⁶ By the 5th to 6th centuries, linen tunics with woollen tapestry weave panel decoration depicted both secular hunts and scenes with classical themes from Byzantine tailored dress do not stand up in practice. For instance, catalogue number 8, an earlier Byzantine silk, might well have been tailored in the west later to serve at the translation of the relics of Saint Servatius at Maastricht in 1164. See Muthesius, Byzantine Silk Weaving, op.cit. (n. 1), 73 and n. 92 on p. 79, and catalogue M36 on p. 175-176, for bibliography of the different fragments of this silk, which survive in different locations.


depicts the figure of Dionysius, bears a Christian cross symbol upon the neck, and has prominent shoulder square decoration of Imperial Byzantine type. This “middle-market” range tunic with its amalgamation of concepts of Imperial grandeur, Hellenic heritage and Christian belief, says much about the mentality of some members of the “middling classes” of Byzantine Egypt.

The “luxury-market” range of tunics in Byzantine Egypt, used a similar mixture of images, but were woven in more costly yarns, for example in linen mixed with silk, and they had angora or cashmir goat wool decoration, and also employed the use of costly dyes. These top range tunics suggest that luxury textile workshops were operating, perhaps in Constantinople, in Alexandria and in centres of Syria prior to the Arab conquest. They also indicate a hierarchy of dress that distinguished “middling” from “higher” strata of Byzantine society in Egypt.

Meanwhile, documentary sources and archaeological finds from Byzantine period sites in Israel, confirm that the ordinary Byzantine wore linen, wool, cotton, or goats hair clothing, whilst documentary sources of the same period, indicate that the poorest and the destitute resorted to old clothes turned inside out, or to rags. Some types of “working clothing,” were depicted in an 11th century Agricultural treatise manuscript: here the ivory carver is in long tunic, whilst the land workers wear short tunics, as do a hunter and a soldier. The latter tunic is tailored to distinguish the soldier’s profession. In the same manuscript, an imported Persian fashion is reflected in the depiction of a tight, buttoned short jacket, and elsewhere a female surrounded by what are perhaps servants has on an elaborate, decorated mantle over a thin inner tunic, with a wide turban on her head. In the same manuscript a wrestler appears in a loincloth, and a dancer is shown in a flowing, fancy long tunic. Dress clearly distinguishes professions such as judges and the military, as part of the stratification of Byzantine society.

b. Dress as Socially Engendered Behavioural Code

Dress was also used to communicate socially engendered behaviour codes. Moral codes were built into the use of precious fabrics from an early period, such as that diaphanous cloth, for example, was considered inappropriate for female costume. Fine silks were considered inappropriate indicators of status for actresses and prostitutes. At the same time, practical codes were applied to cloth types, and cool fabrics (linen and cotton) were advocated for summer-wear against thick ones (wool), for use in winter, for instance.

Sumptuary laws as such, were not uniformly issued in Byzantium as a standard part of legislation affecting domestic social consumption. However, in the 6th century, when luxury dress of the Imperial court was placed on sale in the “House of Lamps” for use by the “aristocracy” of the Capital, a riot ensued in which the “mob” burnt the venue down.

The Book of the Prefect of the time of Leo VI, documents the importation of foreign luxury clothing into Constantinople, and this Emperor allowed ordinary citizens to include scraps of purple silk decoration on their tunics. At this time the wealthy appear to have been permitted to produce at home, high-grade silks for their own domestic consumption, whilst the 10th century Baggage Train account attached to the Book of Ceremonies, also speaks of ordinary

17 King, op.cit. (n. 16), 263-264 and fig. 12.
18 Ibid., 265 and fig. 15.
19 O. Shamir, “Byzantine and Early Islamic Textiles Excavated in Israel,” in A. Muthesius (ed.), Textile History 32/1 (May 2001), 93-105, figs 1-18 and pl. 4. Old clothes and rags worn by the poor are discussed in F. Koukoules, Byzantion, Bizos kai politismos, Athens 1949, 3 and 29, with n. 9 citing, Die Gedichte des Christophoros Mytilenanos (ed. E. Kurz), 99, 63, and Amasterios of Amasia, PG 40.212. Further related discussion is in Muthesius, Silk in Byzantium, op.cit. (n. 1), 67-84, and Ball, op.cit. (n. 12), 82-85, and 89-98. Ball argues no specific military uniform existed but it is known that silk leggings and other silk tunics were amongst garments carried into battle in the Byzantine Baggage Train. See J. F. Haldon, Constantin Porphyrogenitus. Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions [CFHB 28], Wien 1990, 239-244.
20 The manuscript is published in I. Furlan, Codici greci illustrati della Biblioteca Marciana, 1-5, Milan 1978-1988, refer to gr. z479 and see, Muthesius, Silk in Byzantium, op.cit. (n. 1), pl. 78.
22 Discussed in ibid., 6, p. 275 and n. 2.
23 See ibid., 2, part 2, p. 15 and n. 8-10.
24 Ibid., 2, part 2, p. 22 and n. 12, citing Asterius of Amaseia, PG 40.165.
26 For imported silks refer to Koder, op.cit. (n. 13), section 4, p. 91-95 and section 5, p. 95-97. For purple scraps of silk see, P. Noailles – H. Dain, Les Nouvelles de Léon VI, le Sage, Paris 1944, 272-274.
tunics imported from Egypt, available on the open market in the Capital. A wide variety of clothing was evidently available to serve all social strata.

Some notion of “national” consciousness through dress is discernible from the 13th century on. Foreign luxury textile imports were banned in Nicaea in the 13th century, and there were complaints about the use of imported fashions instead of local dress, for instance, in Rhodes in the 15th century. The Venetian Senate in 1339 issued sumptuary regulations in Crete and also briefly regulated importation of Venetian luxury fabrics into the Morea in the 1430s but then recanted. The burial of a Byzantine princess in imported western, tailored silks at Mystra in the 15th century indicates that the lure of foreign fashion did not necessarily argue against Byzantine Imperial identity in the context of the Peloponnes. The silk chemise and robe of twill with floated weft design and damask respectively, are of two different imported western silks, both perhaps Spanish, and the tailoring is of western type. The effects of inter-cultural contact on Byzantine identity, as noted by Page, appear here to be reflected in the use of foreign dress.

c. Dress as Popular Culture

On the level of popular culture, dress images were described in detail within the literary forms of Byzantine epic and poetic writing of the 11th and 12th centuries. In the epic Digenis Akritis, for example, one Roman dress outfit is described as “a marvellous surcoat sprinkled with gold, of purple silk with a white triple border and ornamental griffins.” This

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description clearly harks back to images of Imperial dress. Elsewhere, epigrams upon luxurious decorative objects including textiles were also written, providing evidence of critiques of luxury as formulated for public consumption. However, of special interest is the popular description of a dress fabric bearing the design of lions with twin bodies, for this design has a parallel outside Byzantine literature on an actual silk at Aachen Cathedral as shown here (Fig. 4). The evidence so far discussed, would suggest that: in the popular imagination, both explicit and implicit “memories” of different categories of dress existed as “mental units of culture”; that concepts and norms were embedded into these categories of dress, and that specific cultural beliefs and values concerning dress were transmitted in written, visual and material form.

II. Belief Systems

A. Political Ideology

a. Power and Authority of the State

Turning now to belief systems in Byzantium and first to political ideology, it is clear that the Image of the Emperor was all-important. The power and authority of the State was embedded in the Emperor, who in theory had to portray an appropriate image of secular might wedded to Christian piety. Hellenic, Roman, and Byzantine Christian heritage was used to underpin legitimacy of Imperial rule at different periods, and can be detected in Byzantine written, visual and material evidence. Precious textiles were important, and legitimacy was emphasised through the establishment of Imperial silk weaving workshops from the 4th century onwards, which produced Imperial costumes of special cut using a range of exclusive Imperial purple dyes, and gold embroideries. Particular motifs such as eagles and griffins were used to symbolise the secular and the spiritual attributes of the ruler: in particular the presence of noble ancestors, alongside his particular body shaping hose, and a fancy hat. This suggests that two Imperial images based upon dress (public and private), in practice might have existed.

40 Niketas Choniates, Chronike Diegesis (ed. J. L. Van Dieten), 252.
manded. Silk served as a currency with a value equating to that of gold. As such silk cloth was used to seal alliances and to ransom prisoners in the field of Byzantine foreign policy. As part of Byzantine economic policy, silk trade taxes were shared between Byzantium and the Arabs at Aleppo for a period of time. Tax was also levied on the sale of precious silks in Constantinople in the 10th century.

d. Civilising Associations of Byzantine Governance

In 968, the Byzantine Emperor Nicephoros informed the Latin envoy Luitprand, when he failed to smuggle out of Byzantium, a piece of forbidden purple silk: "As we the Byzantines surpass all other nations in wealth and wisdom, so it is right that we should surpass them in dress. Those who are unique in the grace of their virtue, should also be unique in the beauty of their raiment."

Clearly, Byzantine precious cloth was considered an attribute of Byzantine culture and a civilising element. Inscribed Imperial, diplomatic silks sent to the West to promote marriage alliances, bore Hellenic striding lion motifs, and were used to remind the receiver of the ancient legacy of Imperial authority. One example is the Siegburg Lion silk, precisely datable to AD 921-923.

b. Court Codes of Identification

At Court a strict hierarchy was rendered visible through use of very specific different silk costumes of office for each rank of official, as was detailed by Pseudo Codinus for the 14th century. This code allowed the Emperor to distance himself from the court, whilst at the same time enabling Imperial control to be imposed over courtiers. In the same manner the civil service, not least the military, were distinguished through use of silk uniforms.

c. Regulation of the Public Finances

Precious cloth served a role in the regulation of public finances in as far as victorious generals of distinction were rewarded by presentation of valuable Imperial purple military tunics or skaramangia, and part of their pay also could be received in silk from the Emperor, when the occasion demanded. Silk served as a currency with a value equating to that of gold. As such silk cloth was used to seal alliances and to ransom prisoners in the field of Byzantine foreign policy. As part of Byzantine economic policy, silk trade taxes were shared between Byzantium and the Arabs at Aleppo for a period of time. Tax was also levied on the sale of precious silks in Constantinople in the 10th century.

41 See n. 39 above.
44 One thousand silk costumes were amongst other priceless objects, that were sent by the Emperor Constantine IX to the Caliph Al Mustensir in 1045. Refer to, Ibn al-Zubayr, Kitab al-Dhaka ir wa-l-tuhaf (ed. M. Hamidullah), 74-77. On gifts from Byzantine Emperors sent as diplomatic gifts see M. Hamidullah, “Nouveaux documents sur les rapports de l’Europe avec l’Orient Musulman au Moyen Âge,” Arabica 7 (1960), 281-300.
46 In the 10th century in the Capital, silk garments worth above ten nomismata, had to be stamped by the Eparch of Constantinople. See Koder, op.cit. (n. 13), section 8.1, p. 102-103.
48 Muthesius, Byzantine Silk Weaving, op.cit. (n. 1), study IV, 34-38 and 40-41 with n. 1-33.

Fig. 5. Sitten, Cathedral treasury. Griffin silk, 10th century, Byzantine.
Precious textiles played an important part in emphasis of the sacral element of Imperial rule from an early date. Various Imperial figures devoted themselves to the promotion of cults of the Virgin and of Christ, allied to the veneration of cloth relics: not least, the girdle, veil, and mantle of the Virgin, and the Shroud and Mandylion of Christ. Imperial civic ceremony was transferred to a Christian milieu.

In the 6th century a silk altar cloth presented to Hagia Sophia by Emperor Justinian was embroidered with scenes of the life of Christ bordered by scenes of victory featuring the Emperor and in the period up to the 12th century, the Emperors were seen as intercessors between God and man. Michael Psellus wrote of the Emperor Constantine Monomachos: “What the Creator is in relation to you, this you may be in relation to us.” This attitude extended to the concept of earthly court as mirror of heavenly court above. By the 13th century, precious textiles as used by the Church, chose to emphasise a different view of the sacral role of the Emperor. Religious vestments with the image of Christ Patriarch appeared: a reference to the intermediary role of the Church as intercessor between God and his people, without reference to Imperial “Divine right.” A Post Byzantine example occurs on a polos at Hagia Aikaterine’s monastery, Mount Sinai (Fig. 6).

For discussion of the relics of the Virgin see M. Jugie, La mort et l’assomption de la Sainte Vierge, Rome 1944, 688-707. On the mandylion see ODB II, 1282-1283 citing an extensive bibliography on the subject.


Dagron, op. cit. (n. 36), 295-312.

Christ as Patriarch was a common motif on later Byzantine and post-Byzantine embroideries. See Muthesius, Studies in Byzantine, Islamic and Near Eastern Silk Weaving, op. cit. (n. 1), study XVII, 311 and pl. 31-33.
B. Religious Doctrine

a. Byzantium as Ecumenical State
The concept of Byzantium as Ecumenical State involved the amalgamation of Hellenistic ideas about the world, with Christian beliefs about the divine nature of Imperial rule. The concept referred to a civilised world within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, whose Christian centre was the “new Rome,” Constantinople. Successive Byzantine Emperors from the time of Constantine the Great, the founder of ‘new Rome’ identified with the concept as part of Greek tradition and culture. Set against this idea of divine right of Emperors was the question of the spiritual authority of the Church.

b. Spiritual Authority of the Church
Turning from political ideology to religious belief and the spiritual authority of the Church, the moral element of the use of precious cloth is relevant. John Chrysostom, whilst supporting social distinctions in dress (such as the difference in status of master and slave), called for propriety in dress codes across social classes. Asterios, Bishop of Amasia castigated the local population for wearing costumes covered in secular or even in religious designs, retorting that, “By doing this, these people believe they are being pious and are dressing in clothing which will please God. If they were to listen to my advice, they would sell these garments and instead honour what God created in his living image.”

On the other hand, Byzantine ecclesiastical vestiture, fashioned out of precious cloth, was considered to signal Church hierarchy and spiritual authority. One important 13th century Byzantine vestment is in the Museo Sacro of the Vatican in Rome (Fig. 8). On the spiritual side, such vestments were considered to symbolise aspects of Christ’s suffering taken on by the priesthood, serving as intercessory agent for the salvation of mankind. The epimanikia for example, symbolised the shackles attached to the wrist of Christ before he was led out to his Passion.

c. Spiritual Image of Precious Cloth
From an early period a spiritual dimension was attached to weaving cloth.

In AD 428-429 Proclus, later Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote a homily for the Feast of the Virginity of Mary. In an extensive weaving metaphor he termed the Virgin, “Handmaid and mother, maiden and heaven, only bridge to mankind: the awesome loom of salvation on which the robe

Fig. 7. Sinai, monastery of Hagia Aikaterine. Christ Patriarch silk, Post Byzantine.


56 The rule by “divine right” claims of the Emperors was brought into focus with the fall of the Empire to the Latin West in 1204. For the effect on relations between Church and State see M. Angold, Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni 1081-1261, Cambridge 1995, chapter 25, “Imperial authority and the orthodox Church,” on p. 530-563.

57 John Chrysostomos, In epistulam ad Hebraeos homilia, PG 63.200.


ΔΧΑΕ ΑΣΤ (2015), 345-362

355
of union was mysteriously woven: whose weaver was the Holy Spirit, the workman the power that overshadowed from on high, the wool the ancient fleece of Adam, the fabric the unsullied flesh of the Virgin, the shuttle the immeasurable grace of him who wove it, and the craftsman the Word who entered through the ear. 60

Saint Theodoret of Cyrrus in a 5th century homily powerfully described the arts of weaving and embroidery as gifts from God. 61

For the period up to the 12th century, precious Byzantine ecclesiastical cloths with religious imagery do not survive in number. There are liturgical cloths with the Communion of the Apostles at Halberstadt, and descriptions in the Liber Pontificalis indicate the existence of woven Christian narrative scenes on silks in use in Rome during the period of Iconoclasm. 62 Where these were woven is unclear. The Vatican Annunciation and Nativity silks are Byzantine twill weave fabrics woven most probably in Constantinople post second Iconoclasm (Fig. 9). 63 This narrative Christian textile tradition may hark back to the types of textiles described by Bishop Asterios of Amasia in the 5th century. 64 What is clear is that these narrative Christian scenes embodied concepts of human salvation and that this aspect of Orthodox faith, was further developed on liturgical furnishings, from the 12th century forwards.

d. Liturgical Intercession

The early development of the liturgy in Byzantium from the 6th to the 7th century saw the emergence of the Constantinopolitan rite, and an engagement with mystic cosmic symbolism celebrated through the liturgy, under the influence of the Mystagogy of Saint Maximos the Confessor (ca. 630). 64 Urban stational, liturgical rites (with the procession of the Eucharist between distant churches) were replaced by celebration of the Eucharist within small, enclosed naves. 65 Saint Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople (ca. 730) stressed the Eucharist as not only mystical rite but also as rite of literal salvation in Christ. 66 This new sense of realism called for greater appreciation of the humanity of Christ, and for realistic images to supplement purely symbolic religious imagery.

A mid-Byzantine Church decoration programme was devised to celebrate both the divine and the human Natures of Christ. 66 Christ Pantocrator appeared in the dome, and the Virgin as intercessor in the apse, flanked by the Communion of the Apostles; a symbolic representation of the Eucharist. Christ’s humanity was symbolised through Christological scenes placed on the pendentives of the central cupola (Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation and Baptism) complemented by further scenes from his life set along the nave. The church decoration emphasised the liturgical intercession,

63 Muthesius, Byzantine Silk Weaving, op.cit. (n. 1), 67, catalogue M35, with plates 20A and 20B.
64 See note 58 above.
68 E. Giordani, “Das mittelbyzantinische Ausschmückungs-system als Ausdruck hieratischen Bild Programms,” JOBG 1 (1951), 103-134.
which enabled the salvation of Mankind. In turn, doctrinal concepts about human salvation were transmitted upon precious church furnishings used for the re-enactment of the liturgy. Christ as “intercessor for the salvation of Man” was symbolised in scenes of the Anastasis, the Communion of the apostles, the Creation of Adam, the Dead Christ (which was developed into the Epitaphios Threnos or Lamentation scene), and the Melismos (Christ child upon the altar image). Shown here is a 15th century Epitaphios from the monastery of Hagios Ioannes on Patmos (Fig. 10). In the same way Trinitarian doctrine was reflected on imagery of later Byzantine gold embroidery.  

III. Social Processes

A. Social Communication

a. Social Stratification and Social Interaction

Social stratification was discussed above under “dress,” but it should be remarked that historical sources do not provide a standard definition of what were considered the strata of Byzantine society. The most comprehensive definition with division into “upper, middling and lower class” is perhaps also the most general. Others saw the division as between landowners, bureaucrats, manufacturers and traders and artisans. In general,

70 Kaldellis, op. cit. (n. 7), 317-388.
there were notions that manual labour indicated inferior class, and that noble birth and inherited wealth were signs of upper class, but meanwhile notions about the middling class, varied over time and according to context. Social mobility was granted to the manufacturing class up to a point but by the time members of that strata of Byzantine society had reached the Senate, in the 11th century an Imperial clamp-down was imposed to prevent the rise of the “middling class.” In general social mobility was gained through Imperial favour and the award of civil office, so that the individual could then rise through the civil ranks. Grants of favour, monetary and material often accompanied the award of office.

B. Guilds and Occupational Kinship

A special mention must be made of the guilds in Byzantium, including those of the silk workers, the silk retailers and the merchants of imported silks. The present author has produced a chart to illustrate the organisation of the silk industry as shown here (Fig. 11). The regulations of the Book of the Prefect indicate that these guilds operated as a form of occupational kinship within confined urban spaces and that they observed Imperial regulation of their behaviour, their standards of production, retailing and distribution. The regulations included civic duties such as the production of certain “forbidden silks” destined only for Imperial use; and the decoration of the Capital for Imperial parades. These duties engendered a sense of civic duty and civic pride in the guildsmen and allowed for the public display of the fine textiles produced by the guilds. Other guilds and bodies held less desirable festivals that sometimes were condemned and eventually banned by religious and civic authorities. The festival of the Notaries, for example, involved cross-dressing in silks, drunken revels and lewd innuendo. The popular festival of “Agathe” on the other hand, celebrated the good work of female weavers, in the form of a pageant re-enacting weaving processes. Despite its echo of the notion of “labour as spiritual enlightenment,” and perhaps because of pagan associations, this festival eventually died out. All these different forms of public display involved precious or less precious cloths and these communicated messages about “belonging,” profession, status, civic duty and urban
identity across the “middling” strata of Byzantine society. In the same way social messages were probably built into religious fairs, such as that of Hagios Demetrios, in Thessaloniki, where goods including various grades of textiles could be purchased. Lack of social responsibility, on occasion, also was demonstrated in conjunction with precious cloth. There are documentary references to the desecration of the dead and/or of graves, involving theft of precious burial clothing. 77

C. Social Mobility, Social Inequality, Wealth Distribution and Greed

a. Provincial Aristocracy

The social mobility occasioned through the award of civic office was mentioned above and the use of precious textiles amongst this category of individual was profound. The military aristocracy in particular, received precious Imperial silk costumes and these were donated to their private religious foundations. Imperial purple skaramangia were recycled as altar cloths and the inventories of these foundations were full of descriptions of rich silk furnishings, embroidered with religious images, and providing an indication of the scale of aristocratic silk patronage and material wealth of this strata of society. 78

b. Monasteries

In Byzantium, notions of “Christian salvation” and of “spiritual edification gained through material deprivation” were employed to sustain the concept of a just type of social stratification, which underpinned systems of unequal wealth distribution. 79 However, these beliefs did not extend to the exclusion of the acquisition of wealth by monastic foundations. Vestaries of precious textiles were built up through Imperial and aristocratic, religious and lay patronage. 80 The revived, “Neo-Platonic” concept of Pseudo Dionysius, concerning the reflection of the divine light of God through the use of religious objects made of precious materials, no doubt was influential here. 81

c, d, e. Manufacturers, Urban Citizens, Sumptuary Legislation

In spite of what has been said above about the status of the manufacturing classes, the widow Danielis was able to present great numbers of precious textiles to the Emperor Basil I at the time of his accession to the throne. 82 This raises interesting questions about the status of women and their role in wealth creation in Byzantium through textile production, but lack of documentary sources prevents further comment. Similarly, one wonders about the role of aristocratic women in the production of domestic silk textiles in their homes. The regulation in the Book of the Prefect of this form of production, suggests that the sale of valuable


77 Bodies were plundered for their garments pre burial in the cemetery of Saint Luke in Constantinople. See, Oikonomides, “Life and Society,” op.cit. (n. 34), 12.


81 Hypatius of Ephesus explained that material adornment could serve to lead human thought up to the Godhead. See, Hypatius of Ephesus, Miscellaneous Enquiries (ed. F. Diekamp), Patristica Orientalia Christiana Analecta 117 (1938), 127-129, as translated by Mango, op.cit. (n. 50), 116-117.

82 Refer to Hendy, op.cit. (n. 42), 206-207 on the widow Danielis. Hendy cites, Continuation of Theophanes (ed. I. Bekker), Bonn 1938 [CSHB V], 11, 73-77, 226-228, 316-321. The widow Danielis presented major gifts to Basil I twice, once before and once following his promotion to Emperor.

ΔΧΑΕ ΛΣΤ (2015), 345-362

SILK, CULTURE AND BEING IN BYZANTIUM

359

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Fig. 11. "Organisation of the Byzantine Silk Industry" chart (Anna Muthesius).
silks from aristocratic sources had to be strictly prevented. 83

Lower down the social scale one imagines that dowries of Byzantine brides, like those of documented Cairo Geniza, Jewish brides, would have included silk garments and home furnishings (not least Byzantine silk sofas and bed covers of great worth), which in times of need could have been sold to raise funds. 84 As discussed above, sumptuary legislation as such was not popular in Byzantium, and it may have been the potential for raising taxes on the sale of more costly fabrics, which enabled brides at home and abroad to amass rich silk dowries as a buffer against inflation and as a source of income in times of need.

From the evidence discussed in this third part of the paper, it can be said that precious cloth penetrated deeply into social systems in Byzantium and that clear messages about urban and regional identity, professional obligations and standards and occupational allegiance, civic duty and pride, morality and social responsibility were embedded in the appearance of and in the uses attached to these artefacts. Again the contemporary theory fits.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be argued that contemporary cognitive theory regarding “cultural transmission” can be tested against written, visual and material evidence of historical civilisations. Here the theory has been tested in the context of “precious cloth” in Byzantium but equally this research approach could be applied to other areas of the study of material culture across time and space.

The paper has revolved around the subject of human engagement with the Byzantine material world. In answer to the question posed at the beginning of the paper concerning “enhancement of memory” and “cultural promotion” in relation to the use of precious cloth, two points can be made. Firstly, that “Memory” in the sense of knowledge of the historic past was inscribed upon precious cloth in all three ways under consideration: explicitly in the form of traditional motifs; and implicitly, as part of traditional institutional ceremony and ritual, and as crucial element of the fabric of social systems for communication of status, profession, and identity on many levels. Secondly, that the precious textiles served well to communicate concepts and norms about Byzantine political, religious and social organisation, operation and function, a basic tenet of “cultural transmission” in general. The Thessaloniki Epitaphios is an iconic example of the category of religious textiles heavily embedded with messages (Fig. 12).

The overall impression the evidence gives, is one of the “desire” of the Byzantines to present a picture of order across institutions (political and religious) and across social systems, through images on the precious cloths and by way of practices associated with them. To some extent precious cloths were used also to project the concept of perfect harmony between Church and State within a Christian “Empire” or later a Christian “nation state,” even long after the decline of the Emperor’s spiritual standing.

83 Koder, op. cit. (n. 13), section 8.2 on p. 104-105.

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Από τη χρήση των μεταξωτών υφάσματων, οι ανθρώπινες συνάντηση με τον υλικό κόσμο στο Βυζάντιο εκφράζονταν ζωηρά. Οι μνήμες του ιστορικού παρελθόντος ήταν με φανερό τρόπο εγγεγραμμένες στα μεταξωτά ως παραδοσιακά θέματα, ενώ αυτές αυτές μπορούν να γίνουν αντιληπτές από τα μεταξωτά υφάσματα που ανήκαν στην επαρχιακή αριστοκρατία, στα μοναστήρια και γενικά στην κοινωνία.