

PLATE I
The Bishop in his coffin at St. Denis.

FRAGMENTS FROM THE TOMB OF AN UNKNOWN BISHOP
IN SAINT DENIS, PARIS

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THE subject of this paper is a history and description of some thirteenth-century textiles now mounted in plastic, and housed at the Yale University Art Gallery. The circumstances of their finding and preservation are as follows: Professor Sumner McKnight Crosby of the Yale University History of Art Faculty, wrote his Doctoral thesis on the Abbey Church of Saint Denis, just outside Paris. During the course of his studies he became so impressed by the importance of this church in the development of mediaeval architecture in France, that he applied for permission to make some excavations in the church in order to determine the sequence and extent of each successive building erected on the site. He hoped by this excavation to reconcile the mass of conflicting evidence that had turned up during his studies. The permissions were given, and work began during the summer of 1938 to be continued in 1946, 1947, and 1948. Much useful information was found, together with some unexpected items, such as a number of unmarked burials under the floor of the thirteenth century church. There were no written records to account for these graves, but, for the most part, there was nothing left to identify. However, one rather crude grave was found in the south transept within the thirteenth century building. To make room for this, a hole had been dug in the fill, and, presumably with wooden forms, a rough plaster and stone coffin had been built. Within this was the body of a man, dressed in ecclesiastical garments, with a painted and gilded wooden crozier in his hands. The head was completely decomposed. There was no sign of any mitre or of any metal objects, rings, pectoral cross, paten, cup, such as frequently occur in such graves. However, the wooden crozier would indicate that the prelate was a Bishop. The burial was covered with a plain uninscribed stone. (Plate I)

This find created quite a problem for an architectural historian. It was decided to apply to the Paris Anthropological and Ethnological Museum (the Musée de l'Homme) for help. Some technicians were sent to Saint Denis who carefully removed the body from the grave and placed it on a slab in one of the small alcoves off the crypt of the church. With the characteristic attitude of a bureaucratic administration, this Museum took no further interest in the burial, leaving it to some other Depart-



PLATE II

Fragments from the Bishop's vestments as received by Mr. Crosby in 1948.

ment to carry on. However, every one was indifferent, and the body remained uninvestigated.

After the excavations in 1947 Mr. Crosby gave a lecture at Yale on his work, and mentioned the find. The writer, who was at that time Curator of Textiles at the Yale University Art Gallery, was immediately interested and demanded samples of the fabrics for analysis. After the season of excavations in 1948, Mr. Crosby brought home a few fragments of these textiles. They were in very poor condition. All but one of them was of plain cloth weave. When they were first studied, one looked like twill, although there is now no evidence of this. There were several layers,

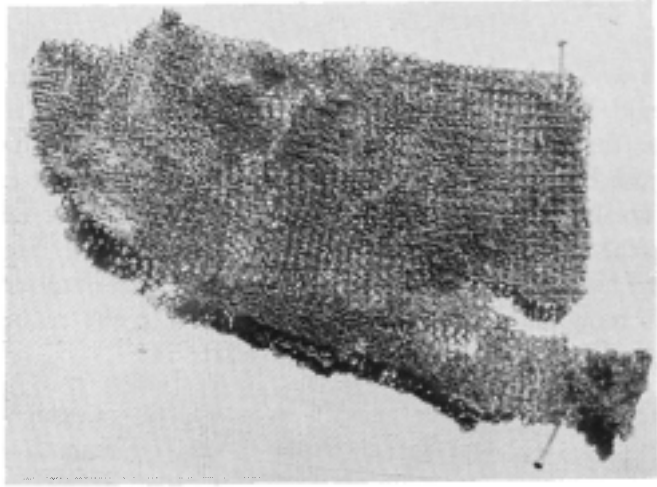


PLATE III

Fragment of Bishop's knitted silk glove (actual size 6 x 3 cm.).



Detail of Bishop, showing tablet-woven bands in place.

one of which was red, and there were several fragments of tablet-woven trimming braid. There being no facilities for cleaning or studying these objects at Yale, they were taken to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Unfortunately the Boston Museum staff could not make time to do anything about them until in 1951 they were examined by the very competent head of the chemical research department, Mr. W. J. Young. He found the fibers used to have been silk, the red piece dyed with madder, with iron and alum as mordants. The metal threads used in the trimming bands were of silver gilt, wound on a silk core. (Plate II)

Meantime, with curiosity greatly aroused, the writer went to St. Denis in January 1949 and had a chance to see the Bishop. There were no lights in the area of the crypt where the body lay, so that all observations had to be made by flash light. I was accompanied on this visit by François Mathey, Inspecteur des Monuments Historiques. I noted at once, with intense interest, the fact that the Bishop was wearing knitted silk gloves. This was, as far as I knew then, the earliest appearance of knitting in central Europe. M. Mathey suggested that I might like a sample of this. He removed a piece from the palm of one hand and we put it in a small box which I took back to Yale. (Plate III) I still felt that it was the business of the Ministry of Fine Arts to make a proper study of this burial, and that I must in no way interfere. However, had conditions of light been better, much more could have been observed. No notes were made about details of the knitting, viz. how the fingers were set in, or how they were finished off, and no investigation of just how many layers of garments were present. There were quite solid leather shoes with tops coming above the ankles. The crozier was painted in red and blue with touches of gold. There were several layers of vestments, the top one being the chasuble of the form used in the thirteenth century, and still used in the Anglican church. This garment is in the form of a large oval of cloth with a hole cut in the center through which the head is passed. It hangs down to about the level of the knees both front and back and to the elbows on the sides. It was trimmed with braid around the neck and shoulders and down the front. (Plate IV)

During the course of the years the fragments in our possession began to decompose rather rapidly, and in 1958 it seemed best to have them embedded in plastic. The heat used in forming the plastic resulted in a loss of color of the silk, but a considerable enhancement of the metal thread. Finally in 1967, when it appeared that the fragment of knitted glove was also fast disappearing, this also was embedded in plastic. This

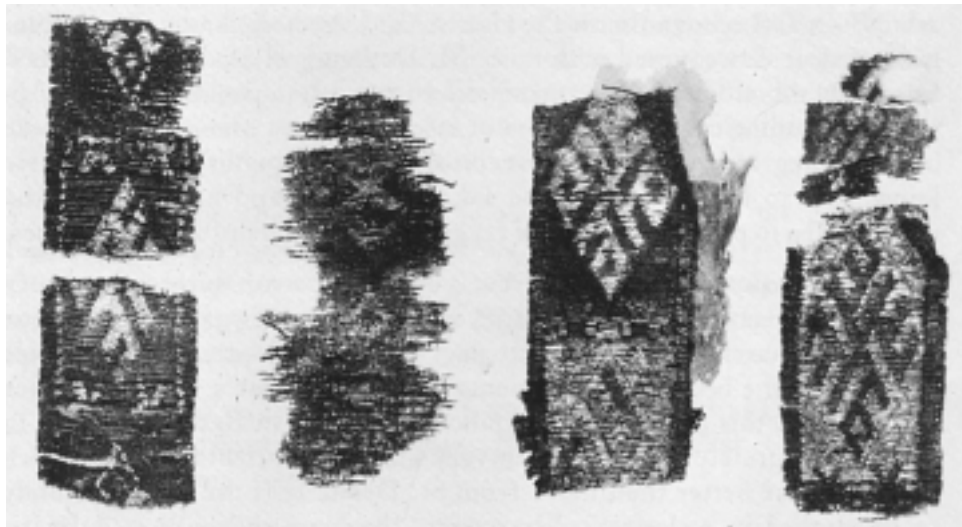


PLATE IV
Fragments (approximately actual size) of tablet-woven bands
from Bishop's vestments.

process has the disadvantage that there is no chance to touch or move the textiles, but on the other hand, they do not disintegrate further because they are shut away from air. The loose fragments are in one mount, the trimming bands in a second, and the knitting in a third.

In 1959 I again visited St. Denis, this time in the company of M. Jacques Dupont who was then Inspecteur Generale des Monuments Historiques. We found that the Bishop had been moved into an inaccessible chamber behind a six foot high wall. We could only see the body by climbing a ladder and looking over the top of the wall. There had been little observable change, except that, since there had been a great deal of rebuilding and renovation in the church, and the body had remained unprotected, it was covered with dust. M. Dupont was as discouraged as I was with the situation, but promised to see what could be done. Apparently nothing came of this, and at latest accounts, almost all remnants have disintegrated. It therefore seems desirable to publish what little we know, and to hope that, for the sake of history and archaeology, the means taken to preserve these few fragments may be helpful in other cases.

Burial customs vary greatly, but a fair number of thirteenth-century graves of prelates have been found in the course of making repairs or rebuilding churches. For the most part, only articles of small value are buried with the bodies. This accounts for the fact that a wooden crozier was found in this grave as in a similar one opened in Basle Cathedral in 1907. That prelate was dressed in very handsome oriental fabrics which have kept far better than those from St. Denis. It is usual for the body to be clothed in ecclesiastical garments, the long plain alb, a dalmatic (a shirtlike robe with sleeves) and the chasuble described above. Quite often the fabrics are of thin unpatterned silk, as in the case of the St. Denis Bishop. Much interest has been shown in Switzerland in investigating graves of this kind, partly because the Swiss have put in heating in many old churches. They have also been fortunate in having scholars who were interested in preserving the textiles, so that there is more known about them than in other countries.

The knitted gloves were a surprise to find at Saint Denis. Knitting seems to have started in the middle East. In fact the earliest known knitting that can be dated, came from Dura-Europos and is preserved in the Yale University Art Gallery. It was in the year 256 A.D. that Dura was destroyed, so anything found there must have been made before that time. Various bits of early knitting have turned up along the Mediterranean coast of Africa, and there is extremely handsome pattern

knitting in the thirteenth-century finds in Las Huelgas in Burgos, Spain. There is also, in the Textile Museum in Washington, an eleventh-century sock, knit of cotton which is said to have come from India.

Gloves were used by ecclesiastics as early as the ninth century. The earliest were cut from linen or silk and sewn together. They were often embroidered in colors and gold and provided with circular medallions of metal or enamel. A pair of gloves knit of white linen thread and embroidered in silk and pearls with silver gilt medallions was shown at an exhibition of mediaeval vestments held in Munich at the Bavarian National Museum in the summer of 1955. They belonged to Bishop Otto, and date from about 1200. They came from the cathedral of Brixen. Very few knitted silk gloves of the thirteenth century still exist, a fact that gives some importance to those from St. Denis. The knitting is in stocking stitch with no pattern, but whether it is done in the eastern or western manner, it is no longer possible to tell.

From the photograph of the Saint Denis Bishop in his grave it is possible to get an idea of the patterns in the tablet-woven bands. Mr. Crosby was careful not to disturb the vestments and simply took a small sample without trying to get pieces that would give the full pattern. As they are now mounted: (Plate V)

- A Two pieces. Lozenge pattern suggests four capital E's with the bottom of one against the back of the next. 6 x 2 cms. together.
- B Condition fragmentary. 5 x 2.3 cms.
- C Still attached to silk fragments, one of which was red, the others probably originally white. Lozenge pattern in silver gilt (wound on silk core). Ground may well have had an over-all design, but it is too faint now to describe. 5 x 2 cms.
- D In two pieces. The larger one seems to have had originally a yellow ground. 4.3 x 2.2 cms.

Tablet-woven braids have been used to embellish ecclesiastical garments from early times, and there are many fine examples to be seen in our museums. This technique is widely distributed and is found in the Middle and Far East as well as in Dynastic Egypt. It seems to have been used all over Europe, and its presence in this grave gives added importance to our Bishop.