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# The Medieval Dress and Textile Society

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Feb 2021

[www.medats.org.uk](http://www.medats.org.uk)

Issue 93



Image of the Bacton Altar Cloth on display at Hampton Court Palace.

Photo by Challe Hudson

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## **Message from the Chair by Ninya Mikhaila**

It is almost a year since Medats members last met in person for the study day at Norwich Museums. None of us would have foreseen that we would still be dealing with so many restrictions to our normal lifestyles and activities in 2021. Though the situation looks to be improving it does not seem likely that we will be back to 'normal' in May and the committee has therefore taken the decision to make the annual conference and AGM online events via ZOOM. The conference will take place on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> May on the theme of *Animals and textiles*, and a call for papers is included in this issue. The AGM will take place at 3pm on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> April, also via ZOOM. An agenda will be sent to all members by email in March. Since the last newsletter was sent out in November, we have enjoyed several online events including Pat Poppy's excellent talk on beds and bedding c.1350-1600 and two informal sessions on the Bacton Altar cloth hosted by Christine Carnie and Challe Hudson. These events were very well attended and have attracted participants and new members, many of whom are from outside the UK. Though we have all had to adapt to using the technology to get together virtually it really has had a positive outcome in making our events much more widely accessible, and many have told us how much they appreciate being able to attend a Medats event without the need to travel to London. The smooth running of the events has been in no small part due to Heather MBaye's generosity in sharing her time (and Zoom account) to enable them to happen. The Bacton Altar cloth sessions were run as free events, open to all. However, the popularity and high demand has led the committee to make the decision to restrict all future such events to members only. We plan to continue running these events on a regular basis and will send details out by email to all members as topics and dates are confirmed. If any of you have photographs from an exhibition or museum visit, or a personal research project you'd like to share please do let our programme secretary know by emailing Natalie Bramwell-Booth at [programme@medats.uk.org](mailto:programme@medats.uk.org). Looking forward to the autumn of this year we are in discussion with The Museum of Leathercraft in Northampton who are offering a bespoke talk for Medats – more details will be in the next newsletter. I do hope to see many of you online soon, and in person in the not-too-distant future.

# Call for Papers

Medieval Dress and Textile Society  
Annual Conference  
to be held online on the afternoon of  
Saturday 8th May 2021

## *Animals & Textiles*

Proposals are invited for 20 minute papers to be given on relevant topics dated between c.400 and c.1625

Suggested topics include:

- Collars and harnesses - Dogs, horses, oxen, ferrets, squirrels & elephants
- Animal armour - War horses, war dogs, and battle creatures of all kinds
- Animal apparel - Theatre, performance & display
- Animal products in textiles - Wool, silk, beaver fur felt, rabbit skin glue, whale baleen

Animal depictions in textiles - Tapestry, embroidery, painted textiles, leather

Submissions to be emailed to Natalie Bramwell-Booth  
[programme@medats.uk.org](mailto:programme@medats.uk.org) by March 31 2021

Background image: The Lady and the Unicorn, Tapestry (detail),  
Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris. Inventory number Cl. 10831 à 10836

## **Beds and Bedding c.1350-1600, Zoom talk given by Pat Poppy 28<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

The paper was a very general look at beds and bedding in the period. A written version is available online at [https://www.academia.edu/44673485/Beds\\_and\\_Bedding\\_c\\_1350\\_1650](https://www.academia.edu/44673485/Beds_and_Bedding_c_1350_1650).

The paper looked first at the bedstead itself, and then at all the layers of textiles that make a “bed performed,” that is a bed with everything that is related to it. Much of the information is from fourteenth and fifteenth century wills and 1590s Exeter probates.

At all levels of the social scale, the bedstead itself is always worth a lot less than the textiles that go on it. In Exeter in 1597 Richard Hedgeland, a joiner, owned a bedstead valued at 11s, the mattress and bedding textiles were worth £2.

While the wooden frame was referred to as a bedstead, what today would be a mattress, is usually called a bed. A bed mat was placed on top of the bed cords or slats to form a flat surface on which to place the bed. The contents of the bed depended on what you could afford. Down beds seem to be used only by aristocracy. The 1590 Exeter inventories have 60% feather beds, 30% flock, and 10% are dust beds, which are those made with chaff or straw. This under represents dust beds, as people who leave wills and inventories are those with some money.

Bolsters are the long pillows that go across the width of the bed to support the head and, like the bed, they could come as dust, flock, feather or down. Pillows are separate from and smaller than the bolsters. You would almost always have both a bolster and a pillow. A Lincoln will of 1450 states, “I wol that lohn Cook haue a matrasse, j bolster, j paire of Blankettes, ij paire of shetis, & j pillow.” Sheets almost always come as pairs, the textiles used include Holland, dowlas, canvas, lockeram and hempen. According to the OED cambric first appears in accounts in 1530. By 1535 Katherine of Aragon is listed as having sheets of cambric as well as sheets of holland.

Blanket was a white or undyed woollen textile used for clothing, as well as for bedding. The idea of blankets on beds is around by the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Like sheets, blankets come in pairs. While the fabric is rarely mentioned and is assumed to be blanket, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century other textiles might be used: in various inventories there are references to blankets of fustian, kersey and cotton(the woollen fabric). Over the blankets there would be a quilt, coverlet or rug. Coverlets and rugs seem to overlap. Rug as a textile term appears in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, described as a warm shaggy frieze. The Exeter inventories have coverlets of rug, tapestry, thrum, arras, crewel, yarn, dornix and skreede. Few have a colour mentioned, those that do are green, white and crimson.

The probates appear to indicate that most of “the common sort” did not have a bed that needed bed curtains. Where they do have them, the bed curtains seem to be a plain fabric.



Above: Detail of Christine de Pizan presenting her manuscript to Queen Isabeau of France, c.1410 – c.1414, British Library, Harley MS 4431, f. 3r © British Library Board

Almost all come with rods sometimes specified as iron rods. Very few colours are mentioned for bed curtains but both green and red and green together appear in the probates. Fabrics again are rarely mentioned, but there are mentions of say, cloth, flannel, kersey and durance.

At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century John Wycliffe writes the “aparel of chaumbre, as in proud beddis, testeris & curteyns”. Among the Exeter inventories there are far fewer testers and valances than there are curtains, and these tend belong to the richer merchants. Tester, colour and valance go together and with the bed curtains, valances and testers sometimes are a matching set, coordinating with the coverlet, and the upholstery of other furniture in the chamber. Joan de Beauchamp, Baroness Bergavenny, who died in 1435, left in her will, which was in English, a “bed of velvet white and black paled, with Quyshions, Tapettes, and formers that long to the same bed.” At the top of society royalty had the most ornate beds. In 1376 Edward the Black Prince left to “Sir Robert de Walsham, our Confessor, a large bed of red camoca, with our arms embroidered at each corner; also embroidered with the arms of Hereford.”

## Bacton Altar Cloth Zoom Study Group, by Challe Hudson

Medats is beginning a new programme to support small groups of researchers in their efforts to collaborate on a project by providing an online forum in which they can present their ongoing work and seek input from interested members of the public. Christine Carnie assembled the first group around the topic of the Bacton Altar Cloth and invited Medats members Jenny Worrell, Challe Hudson, and Natalie Bramwell-Booth to contribute to the



discussion.

After multiple small virtual meetings, a little planning, and a lot of unanswered questions we hosted a public Medats Study Day via Zoom on Saturday 9 January. The presentation was relaxed and conversational as we shared photos of the Bacton Altar Cloth taken last winter when it was on display at Hampton Court Palace, answered queries from some of the 120

people who joined the call, offered some of our unanswered questions and received many helpful suggestions from participants.

During the first session we presented some of our observations about the materials and embroidery techniques with which the altar cloth was made, gave a summary of its history and its recent conservation, and hypothesised about which plant species each motif represents. We started with the motif on the top left corner of the front, which we had numbered 1, but only made it to motif 15 out of 80 because we spent so much time happily zooming in on details of the work, occasionally sharing images from herbals, jumping to other similar motifs on the altar cloth, debating the exact botanical features that define whatever species we were considering at that moment and taking a wide variety of questions from the audience.



Given the great interest in the topic and the small number of motifs examined, additional study days were immediately scheduled and both Challe and Natalie began blogging their personal observations about the Bacton Altar Cloth. You can find Challe's blog at [www.1500stitches.org/london](http://www.1500stitches.org/london) and Natalie's at [www.seventeenthcenturyfashion.com](http://www.seventeenthcenturyfashion.com).

On 23 January at the second study day we shared with an audience of about 80 people our still-evolving understanding of how the embroidery stitches were worked, corrected some errors in our previous observations, and shared a variety of portraits that contained late Elizabethan and Jacobean textiles featuring similar botanical motifs, insects, beasts, and human figures. We considered how the portraits tended to show a shift from monochrome embroidery to the many vivid hues of the Bacton Altar Cloth, which are even more visible when viewing photos of the less faded underside of the embroidery.

Despite extending the time for the public Study Day session we still found we had many motifs to look at and questions to discuss, so we scheduled another session for Saturday 20 February, which is free for all to join via the link on the Medats website. The small group also hopes to present a paper at the upcoming Medats conference focused on the animals represented on the Bacton Altar Cloth.

The two images of motifs from the Bacton Altar Cloth were taken by Challe Hudson

## **IN THE NEWS**

**Mandelgren Prize** by Christine Carnie

Congratulations to Amica Sundström and Maria Neijman from Historical Textiles in Sweden for having been awarded the Mandelgren Prize in 2021 for their work in deepening and broadening knowledge about medieval picture and pattern worlds and medieval gilded leather coverlets through documentation and reconstructions. Svenska Fornminnesföreningen (The Swedish Antiquities Association) awards the Mandelgren Prize. To quote from a translation of the motivation for the award: "The Mandelgren Prize should be reminiscent of the artist and folklore researcher Nils Månsson Mandelgren's (1813–1899) pioneering documentation of historical and archaeological images, objects and environments, astonishing in quality and scope." The prize has been awarded annually since 2016.

"With the Mandelgren Prize, the Swedish Antiquities Association wants to draw attention to Maria Neijman and Amica Sundström for their solid historical and material knowledge, for their competence and the high ambition in documentation work, and for their genuine desire to spread knowledge about visual worlds, objects and crafts."

Amica and Maria presented two of the leather gild coverlet reconstructions at the first MEDATS Study Day "Learning from Reconstruction" in September 2018.

Their latest work can be seen in an exhibition "Medieval Gilt leather embroidery – reconstructions and new interpretations" in the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm (Historiska Museet) until summer 2021. The exhibition is focused on showcasing how the preserved medieval gilt leather embroideries would have looked like when they were new,

and offers an answer to the question if reconstructions can help us gain knowledge about period work processes.

Four reconstructed coverlets and two cushions were made by the group Guldskinssömmarna (closest translation is The gilt leather seamstresses, but in neutral form, sömmare is gender neutral). The association Skapande Broderi Stockholm were commissioned to make their interpretations of the medieval gold leather embroideries that are also shown in the exhibition. The result is an exciting breadth of expression and composition.

### **Broderer's Crown Update**

Cynthia Jackson's work on the Broderer's crown, which also featured in our 2018 Study Day, has now been published: Cynthia Jackson, 'The Broderers' Crown: The Examination and Reconstruction of a Sixteenth-Century City of London Livery Company Election Garland', *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 16 (2020) pp. 163-203.

### **Open Access Article on the St. Canute Textiles**

Grinder-Hansen, P. et al. Textiles and environment in the showcase containing Saint Canute the Holy († AD 1086): Radiocarbon dating and chemical interactions. *Heritage Science*, 8, (95)2020, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-020-00442-8>



Above: The Eagle Silk from the Shrine of St. Canute in Odense Cathedral, Denmark. Credit: Nationalmuseet/The National Museum of Denmark

## **Tenth century silk found in Scotland**

In 2014 the Galloway Hoard was discovered by a metal detectorist. One of the highlights of this hoard was a vessel, which had been wrapped in textiles. Many of the items inside it had also been wrapped in protective textiles, including silk samite, which may have come from a weaving workshop in Byzantium, North Africa or Southern Spain. Scientists have now been given a grant of £1 million to enable them to further examine the Galloway Hoard. National Museums Scotland (NMS) will carry out a three-year project in partnership with the University of Glasgow, this is entitled "Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard." Further information is available on the Glasgow University website.

[https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline\\_768173\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_768173_en.html)

## **Oldest alabaster effigy of a priest discovered in the U.K. to date**

The alabaster effigy at St Wilfrid's, in Barrow upon Trent, Derbyshire is one of the earliest such carvings. It dates to around 1348, and possibly depicts John de Belton, a priest who died of the Black Death. Much of the interest in the effigy is related to the fact that it has large amounts of original pigment on it, the conservators have found dark red, bright blue, black and green paint as well as gold.

## **Jorvik Viking Festival 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> February 2021**

With the nation in lockdown, for 2021, Jorvik is hosting an online 'Thing' - a gathering of all things Viking. New content will be released daily, with livestreamed events, saga telling, and even a remarkable 360 degree film of the world-famous JORVIK Viking Centre ride. Most of the content is free to access and family-friendly.

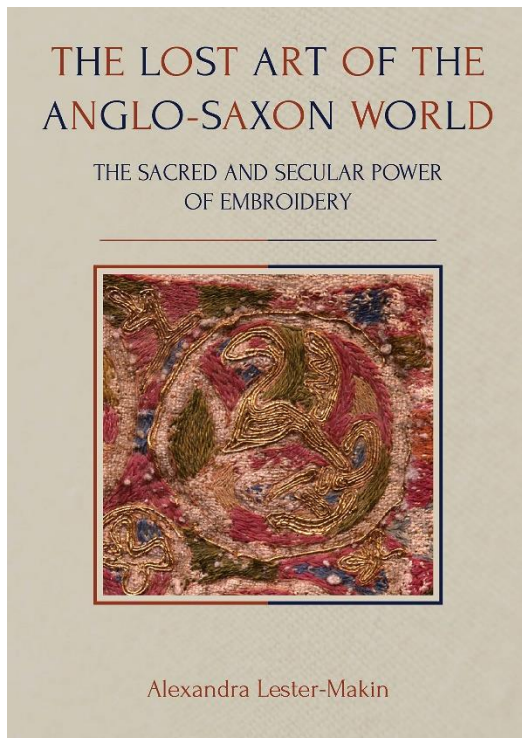
The annual JORVIK Viking Symposium will also take place as part of the Thing. For more details, visit [jorvikthing.com](http://jorvikthing.com)

## **NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS**

Alexandra Lester-Makin. **The Lost Art of the Anglo-Saxon World: The Sacred and Secular Power of Embroidery** (Ancient Textiles Series) Paperback. 256 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1789251449. Oxbow Books (30 Sept. 2019)

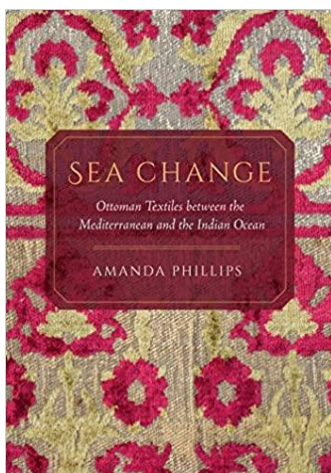
This is an important and innovative book on its subject. As two of the MEDATS committee members supervised the PhD on which it is based, they feel it would be inappropriate to review the resulting book. This is why we have decided not to have a formal review, however the publisher's information on the book is below and indicates its scope and coverage.

"This latest title in the highly successful Ancient Textiles series is the first substantial monograph-length historiography of early medieval embroideries and their context within the British Isles. The book brings together and analyses for the first time all 43 embroideries



believed to have been made in the British Isles and Ireland in the early medieval period. New research carried out on those embroideries that are accessible today, involving the collection of technical data, stitch analysis, observations of condition and wear-marks and microscopic photography supplements a survey of existing published and archival sources. The research has been used to write, for the first time, the 'story' of embroidery, including what we can learn of its producers, their techniques, and the material functions and metaphorical meanings of embroidery within early medieval Anglo-Saxon society.

The author presents embroideries as evidence for the evolution of embroidery production in Anglo-Saxon society, from a community-based activity based on the extended family, to organised workshops in urban settings employing standardised skill levels and as evidence of changing material use: from small amounts of fibres produced locally for specific projects to large batches brought in from a distance and stored until needed. She demonstrates that embroideries were not simply used decoratively but to incorporate and enact different meanings within different parts of society: for example, the newly arrived Germanic settlers of the fifth century used embroidery to maintain links with their homelands and to create tribal ties and obligations. As such, the results inform discussion of embroidery contexts, use and deposition, and the significance of this form of material culture within society as well as an evaluation of the status of embroiderers within early medieval society. The results contribute significantly to our understanding of production systems in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland."



Amanda Phillips. **Sea Change: Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.** University of California Press, due 6 April 2021, 352 pages, ISBN-13 : 978-0520303591, £54.

The author Dr Amanda Phillips is Assistant Professor in the Department of Islamic Art and Material Culture at University of Virginia. Her book is divided into three chronological sections, and while section 3 is too late for our interests, section 1 covers 1200-1500 and section 2 1500-1700.

## MEDATS COMMITTEE CONTACT DETAILS

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## MEDATS SUBSCRIPTIONS

Information about MEDATS and application forms may be had from the Membership Secretary, Linde Merrick, or from the society website: [www.medats.org.uk](http://www.medats.org.uk).

Annual subscriptions (payable in pounds sterling only) run from 1st January – 31st December  
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(paper surcharges as above)

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(paper surcharges as above)

Notes

1: Members may stand for office within the Society, vote in meetings and elections, and gain a discount on attendance at meetings. Within the UK the newsletter is usually available electronically as a PDF file to the recorded email address, or on paper by request.

2: One copy of the newsletter will be sent whichever mode is employed, but both named members enjoy the full range of rights and privileges.

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A full refund will be given if a cancellation is made 30 days or more before the event.

Refunds for cancellations made at shorter notice will be given on a discretionary basis dependant on whether the ticket can be resold or not. The final decision will be made by the treasurer.