# Linens, Clothes and Ornaments. Writing on Altar Textiles

Vincent Debiais

# Über Stoff und Stein: Knotenpunkte von Textilkunst und Epigraphik

Beiträge zur 15. internationalen Fachtagung für mittelalterliche und frühneuzeitliche Epigraphik vom 12. bis 14. Februar 2020 in München

Herausgegeben von Tanja Kohwagner-Nikolai,
Bernd Päffgen und Christine Steininger

*Sonderdruck*

2021
Harrassowitz Verlag

Abbildungen auf dem Umschlag: Buchstabendetail der Saumumschrift des Sternenmantels Heinrichs II. (Diözesanmuseum Bamberg Inv.Nr. 3.3.0001), Foto: BAdW Inschriftenprojekt, Uwe Gaasch
Ausschnitt aus dem Epitaph für Margaretha von Preysing, geb. von Pienzenau, und ihren Gatten Michael von Preysing zu Kopfsburg, Klosterkirche Seligenthal in Landshut, Foto: BAdW Inschriftenprojekt, Anselm Steininger

Das Vorhaben wurde gefördert im Rahmen des Akademienprogramms von der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und vom Freistaat Bayern.

BAdW BAYERISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

Aufgrund der Einschränkungen im Kontext der Covid-19-Pandemie im unmittelbaren Anschluss an die Tagung und während der Publikationsvorbereitungen konnte in manchen Fällen keine Überprüfung der Literatur stattfinden. Die Autor:innen waren bemüht, die Zitation gewissenhaft vorzunehmen. Etwaige Abweichungen können jedoch nicht ausgeschlossen werden. Wir bitten dies zu entschuldigen.

Die Autor:innen haben sich frühzeitig um die Einholung der Bildrechte bemüht, allerdings kam es aufgrund der Covid-19-Pandemie zu Verzögerungen beim Rücklauf. Berechtigte Ansprüche werden im Rahmen der üblichen Vereinbarungen beglichen.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über https://dnb.de/ abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at https://dnb.de/.

Informationen zum Verlagsprogramm finden Sie unter
https://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/


Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.
Druck und Verarbeitung: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-447-11697-8 eISBN 978-3-447-39209-9

*W. K. viro doctissimo humanissimoque magistro,*
*quippe qui hoc colloquium parandum instigabat,*
*memoriae ergo grato animo dedicatum*
A. Z.

# Inhalt

# Linens, Clothes and Ornaments – Writing on Altar Textiles

*Vincent Debiais*

## Abstract

Dieser Beitrag bietet eine Zusammenstellung von Inschriften (ob nur in Abschrift überliefert oder erhalten) auf Textilien, die zur Zelebration der Eucharistie benutzt wurden, sei es im Zusammenhang mit dem Ort, dem Vollzug oder dem Vorsteher der Feier. Über die Präsentation der Vielfalt der inschriftlich ausgeführten Formeln hinaus, sollen zunächst wiederkehrende Themen aufgezeigt werden, die zur Inszenierung und Vertiefung der Bedeutung der liturgischen Feier beitragen, indem sie durch die Beschriftung der theologischen Verbindung zwischen der Realpräsenz im Sakrament und dem zeitlosen Gedächtnischarakter des eucharistischen Vollzugs materiellen Ausdruck verleihen. Dann wird versucht die paläographischen und liturgischen Bedingungen von Beschriftungen zu untersuchen, die in Materialien ausgeführt werden, die von der Messexegese als „Schleier", „Haut" oder „Fleisch" Christi beschrieben werden. Abschließend beschäftigt sich der Beitrag mit den Fragen der Dokumentation von beschrifteten Textilien im breiteren Zusammenhang der „Epigraphik von Objekten". Dabei geht es um Inschriften, die für den Betrachter nur zeitweise sichtbar und lesbar sind, seinem Blick dann aber durch Faltung und besondere Aufbewahrung entzogen werden. Der Umgang mit diesen beschrifteten Stoffstücken erzeugt Muster von Verbergen und Aufdecken von Schriften in der christlichen Perspektive der Transformation. Mit Beispielen aus der Zeit vor dem 13. Jahrhundert will dieser Beitrag die epigraphischen Äußerungen mit anthropologischen Fragen verknüpfen, die die Bedeutung und die Benutzung von Gegenständen im Mittelalter betreffen.

This paper proposes a synthesis of the inscriptions (known or preserved) in the textile elements used in Eucharistic rituals, whether it concerns the ceremony, its location or the officiating priest. Beyond the immense variety of inscribed formulas, it first seeks to identify the recurring themes that contribute to the scenography and exaltation of the celebration's meaning, by materializing through writing the theological link between the actuality of the sacrament and the timeless Eucharistic commemoration. It tries then to understand the paleographic and liturgical implications of writing when embodied in a material described by the exegesis of the Mass as Christ's "veil", "skin" or "flesh". Lastly, this communication envisions the documentary questions posed by inscribed textiles, in the broader context of the "epigraphy of objects", with inscriptions intermittently visible or readable, then removed from the reader's sight by their folding and storage. The manipulation of these inscribed pieces of fabric creates patterns of hiding and revealing of writing, from the Christian perspective of *trans-formation*. Towards examples prior to the 13th century, this communication would like to place the epigraphic documentation in line with some major anthropological questions concerning the meaning and use of objects during the Middle Ages.

## 1 Writing on the altar

During the 1859 excavations of the Roman city of Calama (today, Guelma in Algeria), a square altar slab made of white marble (Fig. 1) was found bearing a beautiful but difficult to date inscription, maybe from the 6th or 7th century according to the letterforms and content.[1] The inscription is now kept in the

1 DALC 1870.


Fig. 1 Altar slab from Guelma (7th century). Drawing published in the Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie

Louvre Museum in Paris where it is part of the group of emblematic inscriptions claimed by Algeria in the context of heritage decolonization. The inscription written in large capital letters opens and closes with a cross. It mentions the place where the relics of the saints where located in the altar, the *memoria*: "Under the sacrosanct veil of the altar is the *memoria* of the saints of the *massa candida,* Saint Isidore, the three holy children, Saint Martin and Saint Roman".[2]

The inscription from Calama belongs to a long-term epigraphic practice in Christian context which consists in writing on the edge or slab of the altar the list of relics placed in it during its consecration.[3] For example, the three altars of the abbey church of San Miguel de Escalada (Spain)[4], consecrated during the 10th century (Fig. 2), show three finely carved inscriptions opening with the formulae *hic sunt reliquie conditur*, *hic sunt reliquie recondite* and *hoc in altare sunt reliquie*. As the Calama inscription, the texts from San Miguel de Escalada intend to display through the carving of letters what is materially hidden in the altar, under the slab or in the foot. The inscriptions, by mentioning what cannot be seen, do not only aim to identify the relics or to commemorate the consecration of the altar[5], but to reveal with material words what is invisible.[6]

## 2 Writing on the veil

The inscription from Calama possesses a special feature in its content which makes it a hapax in the late antique and medieval epigraphic documentation. It mentions that the relics of the saints are located under the veil of the altar (*sub hec sacro santo belamine*), that is to say under the tablecloth that covers the altar slab during all the liturgical ceremonies, in the 7th century as it does today.[7] From the early Middle Ages onwards, the tablecloth tends to remain in place permanently in the church, except during the three days before Easter when it is removed and lets the stone unveiled and visible in the sanctuary. In all cases, therefore, the veil covering the altar also hides the inscriptions mentioning the relics; they become legible only when the tablecloth is removed, folded and stored among the liturgical objects used during the celebration of the Eucharist. The disposition of these texts on the altars of Calama and San Miguel de Escalada, the absence of any reference to their consecration and their textual content indicate, however, that the use of inscriptions is less intended, in this specific situation, for the publicity of the text than for ensuring through the presence of letters the actual presence of the relics, hidden from the faithful's sight. Placed under the stone, under the letters and under the veil, the relics in the altar persist in a material shape in the presence and form of the inscriptions. The epigraphic text ensures the permanent presence of the content of the text, and this feature seems to be one of the most important reasons of epigraphic displays during the Middle Ages.[8] In his treatise against Donatus written around 370, Optatus of Mile-

2 The text reads: *SVB HEC SACRO/SA(NCT)O BELAMINE ALTA/RIS SVNT MEMORIAE / S(AN)C(T)O(RV)M MASSAE CANDI/DAE S(AN)C(T)I IESIDORI / S(AN)C(T)OR(VM) TRIV(M) PVERORV(M) / S(AN)C(T)I MARTINI S(AN)C(T)I ROMANI.*

3 On this very aspect, see Pallottini, Monumentalisation.

4 Rodríguez Suárez, Altares 4.

5 On the inscriptions of altars, see Michaud, Epigrafía; Gagné, L'écriture.

6 Debiais, Croisée.

7 For all these liturgical and historical aspects, see the old but still fundamental study by Braun, Paramenti.

8 Debiais, Messages 234–247.

Fig. 2 Altar slabs, San Miguel de Escalada, Spain, 10th century. Photo: Natalia Rodríguez Suárez

vis explicitly associates the presence of the veil on the altar with the mysteries and truth resisting from the apprehension of the human senses.[9] By covering the inscription with the veil, the mystery of the *virtus* is strengthened and this material cover-up must lead the faithful to sharpen his prayer to unravel the mystery of the invisible.[10]

The tablecloth or veil is an essential object of the liturgical system and, in general, of the setting of the sanctuary.[11] Dedicated during the ritual of the inauguration of the altar (with the chalices, patens, books and other instruments needed for the celebration of the Eucharist), the tablecloth usually made of linen covers the altar table and hides the entire construction, except for the lower part of its base. The very rare surviving medieval examples are made of precious fabrics, decorated with geometric or vegetal, bright-colored patterns. Because these objects are few, almost nothing is known about their archaeological characteristics, and we must refer to inventories of treasures and sacristies, accounts of foundation and consecration, and to hagiographic texts to measure the place of these fabrics in the liturgical practice and the staging of medieval churches. Because of this lack of archaeological information and following the medieval texts referring to the veil or the tablecloth, altar clothes actually appear in the sources as a theological object – this is the case for many liturgical objects which practical function remains unknown and seem to exist only as supports or pretexts for complex theological discourse.[12] Within the exegetical treatises on the mass, the altar veil is accurately described in its form, materiality and decoration, and even more so in its liturgical

9 Optatus Milivetanus, Contra Donatistas VI, 1,10 (SC 413) 166.

10 This is the primary function of reliquaries according to Hahn, Reliquaries; Hahn, Reliquary effects.

11 In her very recent Ph.D. thesis, Julie Glodt made a significant balance of what can be known about the textile setting of the sanctuary: Glodt, Carne.

12 As an example of these objects, see the liturgical combs studied by Palazzo, Peignes.

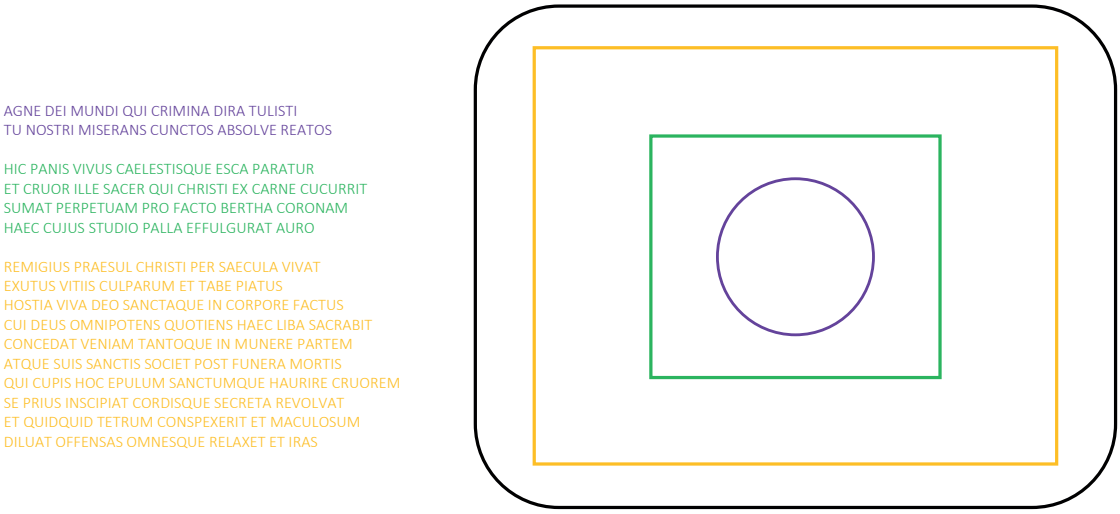


Fig. 3 Distribution of the inscriptions in Bertha's tablecloth from Lyon (France). Graphic: Vincent Debiais

meaning. According to Amalarius of Metz in the 6th century, and still for William Durand in the 13th century, the tablecloth is the shroud covering Christ's corpse in his tomb; it must be made of linen to evoke the earthly nature of his body; it must be bleached to evoke his sufferings in the Passion;[13] it must be covered with another cloth to evoke the reunion of the soul and body. As a sign of Christ's death and resurrection, it must be marked with the image of the cross and venerated as much as the altar itself in the celebration of the Eucharist – the priest kisses the tablecloth at the beginning of the mass, not the altar.[14]

Nothing is said in the exegesis of the mass about the presence of alphabetical inscriptions on altar clothes. In fact, it seems that these medieval objects make a limited use of epigraphic writing, unlike metal instruments such as chalices, patens, ciboria, or crosses placed on the altar during the ritual.[15] This observation can be extended to all textiles put into action in the sanctuary: liturgical garments, choir drapes, pieces of cloth on the altar show few inscriptions, except for singular elements with complex eucharistic exegesis, such as liturgical gloves.[16] Such a feature of the documentation raises many questions to which this paper will return in its conclusion.

According to an initial inventory conducted on the inscriptions from France, Spain, Portugal and Italy, we have knowledge of ten altar tablecloths bearing an epigraphic text before the 14th century; for half of these objects, the content of the inscriptions is lost. It is known for example from the *Liber pontificalis* that Popes Gregory IV and Leo IV offered to churches in Rome in the 6th century several precious altar cloths with embroidered inscriptions mentioning their name and their donation, but the text is not recorded in the account of the papal deeds.[17] In the inventories of treasures and sacristies, we find more references to the decoration (patterns and colors) that constitutes the distinctive features of the objects, their visual added value.

## 3 Bertha's tablecloth

Among the inscriptions listed in this preliminary survey, a now lost object presents a singular text, namely the altar tablecloth offered, in the third quarter of the 9th century, by Countess Bertha to the cathedral of Lyon.[18] Bertha's tablecloth is known thanks to the modern detailed description of the content and disposition of the text embroidered in gold letters on the textile. The inscription consists of sixteen hexameters constructing a complex discourse on three themes:

13 Durantis, Rationale IV, 29, 3 (CC CM 140) 379.
14 Hubert, Introibo 9–21.
15 Bayer, Essai gives many examples of this type of inscriptions.
16 See in this volume the contribution by Estelle Ingrand-Varenne.
17 Borgioli, Wearing 171–173.
18 Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale 17, R 17: 80–81.

the Eucharistic sacrifice, Bertha's gift, and the intercession of the saints (Fig. 3).

In the center of the fabric touching the altar table, an image of the Easter Lamb flanked by the letters alpha and omega was girded with the distich: "Lamb of God, who remove the terrible sins of the world, in your mercy, absolve us, all sinners".[19] The inscription refers to the *Agnus Dei* chant sung during the fraction of the bread, and the sacrificial lamb refers to the many images of the animal on or above the altar in Christian churches.[20] The circular layout of the inscription around the lamb refers to the compositions of some patens from the central Middle Ages, such as the famous Abbey Pelagius' paten (Fig. 4) kept in the Louvre Museum.[21] When the priest pronounces the *Agnus Dei* above the altar, the center of the tablecloth is covered with another fabric, the corporal, on which the liturgical instruments have been arranged: the image and inscription woven on the tablecloth are covered with another cloth and therefore are invisible. One can hypothesize that the content of the text and image is then supported on the one hand by the priest's voice, and on the other hand by the images and texts of the paten.

On the edge of the altar table, a four-verse inscription describes the Eucharistic sacrifice as it happens when the first inscription is hidden: "Here are prepared the living bread, a heavenly food, and the sacred blood that flows from Christ's flesh. For this gift, may Bertha receive the eternal crown; thanks to her zealous care this tablecloth glitters gold".[22] The first distich echoes the prayer *Offerimus* recited by the priest before the *Memento*; the second distich is a request for the donor's salvation and a poetic description of her gift. Like the tablecloths mentioned in the *Liber pontificalis,* Bertha's fabric combines the donor's name and the eucharistic gifts to ensure her salvation. The wording in the inscription from Lyon does not refer to the texts drawn on altars of the Middle Ages, but rather to the inscriptions placed on portable altars, which often refer to the consecration of bread and while presenting the name of the donor[23], as one can read for example on the portable altar of Countess Gertrude, dated ca. 1038 (Fig. 5) and today kept in the Cleveland Museum of Art.[24] Unlike monumental altars, portable altars are not covered with a fabric during their liturgical use – their inscriptions are therefore visible during the Eucharist.[25] The presence of the inscription in Lyon and the mentions from the *Liber pontificalis* probably attest to the same practice of association between the donors' names and several references to the Eucharist in the writings displayed on the altar – one can find the same practice in a large number of texts inscribed on chalices, for example.

Fig. 4 Abbey Pelagius' paten, Place of origin: Santiago de Peñalba (Spain), 12th century. Photo: Louvre Museum Paris, Daniel Arnaudet

The last ten verses of the inscription from Lyon are placed at the ends of the tablecloth, at the foot of the altar, and visually and grammatically form a continuous text from one side to the other. It first proposes two prayers, the first addressed to Saint Remi, the second to God; it ends with an invitation to conversion of morals addressed to the priest and the faithful.[26] The in-

19 *AGNE DEI MUNDI QUI CRIMINA DIRA TULISTI, TU NOSTRI MISERANS CUNCTOS ABSOLVE REATOS.*

20 Marcel Angheben has recently insisted on the Eucharistic compositions on diverse objects; see Angheben, Reliquaires.

21 Favreau, Inscriptions 39: *CARNEM QUAM GUSTAS NON ADTERIT ULLA VETUSTAS PERPETUUS CIBUS ET REGAT HOC REUS AMEN.*

22 *HIC PANIS VIVUS CAELESTISQUE ESCA PARATUR ET CRUOR ILLE SACER QUI CHRISTI EX CARNE CUCURRIT SUMAT PERPETUAM PRO FACTO BERTHA CORONAM HAEC CUJUS STUDIO PALLA EFFULGURAT AURO.*

23 Favreau, Autels gives an overview of these inscriptions.

24 Handbook, Cleveland Museum 95: *DERTRUDIS CHRISTO FELIX UT VIVAT IN IPSO OBTULIT HUNC LAPIDEM GEMMIS AUROQUE NITENTEM.*

25 Hahn, Altars; Palazzo, L´espace.

26 *REMIGIUS PRAESUL CHRISTI PER SAECULA VIVAT EXUTUS VITIIS CULPARUM ET TABE PIATUS HOS-*

Fig. 5 Portable altar of Countess Gertrude, Place of Origin: Germany?, 11th century. Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art

scription of the Lyon tablecloth thus transcribes in the textile what is read on other liturgical objects, mainly in the texts drawn on the calices and patens (manipulated by the celebrant only), as we can see with the objects from Saint Godehard in Hildesheim (Fig. 6).[27] Such a transfer from metal (on objects that are removed from the altar after the mass) to textile (which on the contrary remains on the altar and in the sanctuary) could maybe indicate the will to make these requests for prayers monumental and stable, to make them visible and perhaps readable by all the faithful, but it remains very difficult to confirm without the confirmation of all the medieval liturgical arrangements. This transfer would in fact be much more consistent with the practices of medieval writing to see the presence of the inscription in the fabric as a way to stage Bertha's name in a permanent and direct contact with Christ.

Three aspects must be taken into account here: the first aspect is material and practical in a certain way; it concerns the permanent installation of the tablecloth on the altar – a theoretical permanence, at least – as opposed to the removal and storage of liturgical instruments. The second aspect is theological and concerns the complete assimilation, if not the equivalency between the altar and Christ – *altare Christus est*, write many Carolingian authors, following Saint Ambrosius.[28] The third aspect is technical and symbolic and concerns the empirical incorporation of writing into textiles – words and fabric form a

*TIA VIVA DEO SANCTAQUE IN CORPORE FACTUS CUI DEUS OMNIPOTENS QUOTIENS HAEC LIBA SACRABIT CONCEDAT VENIAM TANTOQUE IN MUNERE PARTEM ATQUE SUIS SANCTIS SOCIET. POST FUNERA MORTIS QUI CUPIS HOC EPULUM SANCTUMQUE HAURIRE CRUOREM SE PRIUS INSCIPIAT CORDISQUE SECRETA REVOLVAT ET QUIDQUID TETRUM CONSPEXERIT ET MACULOSUM DILUAT OFFENSAS OMNESQUE RELAXET ET IRAS.*

27 DI 58 (Stadt Hildesheim) Nr. 64: *HVC SPECTATE VIRI SIC VOS MORIENDO REDEMI. HEC SACRA SVMPTVRVS SIT CORPORE MENTEQUE PVRVS + EX HOC NE PEREAT QVO VITE PREMIA SPERAT.* On this object, see Debiais, Stratification 9.

28 Debiais, Nudité 184.

single *textus* in the weft of fibers. The etymology of the Latin word *textus*, as reported by Isidore of Seville among others, refers to both textile and grammatical composition insofar as the manufacture of text and fabric is based on the same mechanical action of weaving, that is to say to pass one element into another to create a binding piece. Cécile Treffort has recently listed the "textual weavings" and textile metaphors used to describe the form and quality of the early medieval poems.[29] In Venantius Fortunatus for example as on the Lyon tablecloth, verses are the threads and the poem is the weft (*trama*) of the fabric.[30] Verse 6 *Haec cujus studio palla effulgurat auro* refers by metonymy to the inscription itself (only the letters are woven of gold) and the word *studium* (meaning "zeal", "application", but also "effort" and "mechanical work") could evoke the very action of weaving the name into the fabric.
The inscription of the altar cloth from Lyon is exceptional. It sheds light, however, on the fact that the reasons for writing disregard during the Middle Ages the distinction between the empirical nature and the symbolic status of materials and objects. Moreover, inscriptions are the melting point between materials and their meaning: weaving one's name into the altar linen means covering Christ's body with one's memory; it means participating in the Eucharistic sacrifice and mysteries covered by the inscribed veil.[31] This complex feature of weaving one's identity (a name or part of the body) in the fabric seems to be spread within the medieval material culture as fiction narratives often stage the fabric as a sign or as a substitute of the characters. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, the lover Soredamors weaves one hair into the golden leave of her dress and gives it to Alixandre as a sign of her presence[32].

## 4 Writing on hidden objects

Writing on the altar table also questions the notions of exposure and public display that are by definition linked to epigraphic practices – following here Robert Favreau's seminal works.[33]

Fig. 6 Paten, Saint Godehart, Hildesheim, first half 13th century. Photo: Akademie der Wissenschaften Göttingen, © Elke Schneider

The tablecloth bears a perennial inscription whose exposure is nevertheless periodic or intermittent. What happens to Bertha's name when the tablecloth is removed, folded and stored?
The preciousness of the object given to the cathedral of Lyon probably prevents its permanent installation on the altar to avoid theft and damage. Except for the most important liturgical feasts, the inscription becomes invisible. The poem is hidden in the folds of the fabric. Its relevance – that is, the adequacy of meaning and function between the text and its context – does not disappear, but its exposure is altered. The exegesis of the mass repeatedly emphasizes the number and shape of the folds of the altar cloths, focusing the interpretation on the links between the objects and the events of the Passion: the tablecloth is folded in three in width because Christ stayed three days in the tomb, then in four in length.[34] The written text on the veil experiences a process of *archiving*, as charters and documents do by being folded and stored into library collections.[35] As in the diplomatic domain, the manipulation of the object, the ritual folding and unfolding of

29 Treffort, Tissages.
30 Venantius Fortunatus, Poèmes V, VI, 15 (Ad Syagrium episcopum) (ed. Reydellet 31).
31 Zumthor, Langue 25–35; Treffort, Tissages 56.
32 Boharsky, Kisses 127.
33 Favreau, Épigraphie 5.
34 Durantis, Rationale, IV, 29,2 (CC CM 140) 378.
35 On the notion of "archiving", see Chastang, Lire; Morsel, Texte 11–14.

the tablecloth, would then constitute a new proclamation of the content of the inscription, a present confirmation and a renewed association with Christ.[36] French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in his work on Leibnitz and the Baroque, opposes the archive on one side, and the fold on the other side.[37] The forever completed story, with no possibility of actuality, is represented by the lifeless environment of the archives and their inanimate objects. In contrast, drafts and sketches, repetitions and possibilities, actualities and presences lie in the folding and unfolding of events. This is what the manipulation of the Lyon tablecloth allows for Bertha's name and memory.

The questions raised by the intermittent exposure of the altar tablecloth can be extended to many inscribed objects from the Middle Ages whose inscriptions are readable only when they are manipulated. Among them one can find many textile objects. This is particularly the case of provisional liturgical arrangements around the altar structuring the sanctuary for one-time celebrations (fences, drapes, curtains), votive banners used in processions, or decorative elements for theatrical performances and the staging of power (stands for royal entrances, mortuary chapels).[38] These displays have been carefully studied by heraldists and liturgists, but they still need to be listed and analyzed on the epigraphic side.

Among these provisional displays, I would like to focus on a large piece of fabric (about twelve square meters) dated 11th century and today kept in the Museum of the Cathedral of Girona, in Spain (Fig. 7).[39] It presents a rich cycle of images and inscriptions, condensing and glossing the Creation narrative from a cosmological and eucharistic perspective. Many hypotheses have been made regarding the function of the wool embroidery and its visual interpretation is still a challenge for medieval art historians. Focusing exclusively on images, Xavier Barral has recently proposed that the embroidery of Girona is a veil for Lent, that is the large piece of fabric hung before Easter at the entrance of the sanctuary to put the altar out of the faithful's sight.[40]

The use of Lenten veils is attested from the Central Middle Ages onwards. William Durand states for this textile object: "The second veil, or curtain, which, during Lent and the celebration of mass, is laid before the altar, has its origin and figure in the veil suspended in the tabernacle and separated the Most Holy from the sanctuary".[41] The medieval Lenten veils we know today organize their images around two particular themes: the creation of the world and Christ's Passion. The Creation cycle in Girona is apparently obvious: it seems to visually translate the great articulation of the Genesis narrative. However, the conjunction of texts and images shakes the linear narrative in order to highlight certain aspects of the visual discourse: first, the insistence on light and its creative power; then, Christ's central theophany and the evocation of the Eucharist; lastly, references to the cross and Passion. In Girona, the events of the Holy Week are mainly suggested by the inscriptions and their careful, patient, almost meditated reading. The prolonged monumental display of the embroidery on the one hand, and its location between the faithful and the focal point of the ritual on the other hand, allow to consider the possibility of a long-lasting contemplation, and thus to move from an image-based discourse to a texts and images composition which meaning fits perfectly in the time and space of Lent.

The sight on the altar is restored during the Holy Wednesday office, in the middle of the reading of the Passion according to Luke. When reading the verse "And the veil of the temple tore through the middle"[42], the Lenten veil is released and falls on the ground with a loud crash – the Girona veil weighs around a hundred and twenty kilos and it was hung five meters above the ground. It is easy to imagine the staging and effect produced by the Lenten veil falling to the ground and revealing the place of the mystery and its contents: God as image on the fabric disappears, and God in his body appears on the altar. After the darkness covering the earth for three hours after the Crucifixion comes the light of Christ's death, his hope for salvation. In the exegesis, the tearing of the veil is a new revelation: the old covenant, concealed by this curtain, is made visible in the new covenant,

36 Bedos Rezak, Ego offers provocative insights on the links between presence and writing.
37 Deleuze, Pli.
38 Boerner, Voile 67–70.
39 For the latest studies on this object, see Carles, Brodat.
40 Barral i Altet, Brodat 291–305.
41 Durantis, Rationale I, 3, 35 (CC CM 140) 46.
42 Lk 23,45.

Fig. 7 Tapiz de la création, Catalonia, second half 11th century, Cathedral in Gerona, Spain. Photo: Museo de la Catedral

Christ himself as stated in the liturgical words of the consecration: "the blood of the passion is the new and eternal covenant".

As the priest enters behind the Lenten veil, he pronounces the following prayer: "Now that we have been found worthy to enter the stay of your glory, to stand behind the veil, and to contemplate your Most Holy, we prostrate ourselves before your goodness. (…) And having unveiled the veils of the mysteries that symbolically cover this sacred rite, show us in all clarity, and fill our spiritual vision with your endless light, and having purified our poverty of all defilement of the flesh and spirit, make-worthy of this fearsome and fearful presence".[43] The theme of light is central in this prayer as it is in the texts and images of Girona Lenten veil. The inscription LVX is the only text woven with silver-color threads (Fig. 8). The beginning of Ps 145,6 in the inscription of the outer circle refers to the entire psalm making explicit reference to destruction, ruin and darkness on the one hand, and revelation and light on the other hand.[44] The prayer reveals the tone of the inscription written on the tablecloth of Lyon, combining mysteries and conversion. Like Bertha's poem, the inscriptions of the Girona embroidery are displayed in the sanctuary and constitute a path to the meaning of the liturgy, before disappearing into the folds of the fabric on the ground.

43 Boerner, Voile 67.

44 *In principio creavit Deus celum et terram, mare et omnia qua in eis sunt ; et vidit Deus cuncta que fecerat et erant valde bona.*


Fig. 8 The creation of light, detail of Tapiz de la création. Photo: Museo de la Catedral

## 5 Writing on the edges

The possibility of folding, movement, and archiving offered by the fabric is probably what gives the inscriptions and images embroidered or woven on the curtains, tablecloths and veils a special status, at the margins of epigraphic documentation on the one hand, and in tune with the theological and more generally symbolic depth of objects on the other hand. With this important feature in mind, how can we explain that medieval liturgical cloths do not bear more inscriptions – I go back to the question I raised in my introduction? Although the hazards of conservation make it difficult to come up with a clear answer, let's first mention the fact that altar tablecloths are subject to constant renewal due to wear and dirt – their replacing becomes a canonical prescription very early on.[45] Unlike other objects on the altar, including liturgical garments for which more inscriptions are kept, they are rarely hoarded and are destroyed or reused as shreds. Would the transient nature of the object have led to a rare epigraphic display, especially for donors' mentions and memory, *de facto* subject to disappearance with the destruction of the tablecloth? This is a real possibility that epigraphy must take into account when defining the very relative durability of materials and writings.[46] As a general point, inscriptions on fabric are always "writings at the edges", and "writings in contact". Inserted in the weft of the textile, the inscription covers or separates the objects and places. Writing in garments means writing on the body; writing on the tablecloth means writing on the altar. Commenting on the inscription woven on the shroud for Saint Remi in Reims by Charles the Bald[47], Jean-Claude Bonne interestingly states that the text ensures the direct relation between the names mentioned on the fabric and God; because they cannot be read by actual readers in the tomb, they spread the names and prayers towards the Heavens.[48] Like writings on stained glass windows do, inscriptions on fabric articulate the sign with the transparency of the material. The veil conceals less than it reveals the shapes of bodies and objects, and it allows writing and what it designates to coincide – in the proper sense of the word.[49] The investigation on the inscriptions on medieval altar cloths must therefore be continued on a larger corpus, and should invite us, as the organizers of the Munich symposium did, to question the interweaving and points of convergence between the different writing practices of the Middle Ages.

45 Bavoux, Sacralité 95, 123–125.

46 Estelle Ingrand-Varenne organized in Poitiers in 2019 several seminars on the ephemeral dimension of medieval epigraphy; see the online report on these seminars: https://epimed.hypotheses.org/1922 [03.02.2021].

47 Exh.-Cat., Trésors 78.

48 Bonne, Ornements 62.

49 Didi-Huberman, Images 103.

## Sources

**Durantis, Rationale**
Guillelmi Durantis, Rationale divinorum officiorum I–IV. Ediderunt A. Davril et Timothy M. Thibodeau (Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio medievalis 140). Turnhout 1995.

**Optat, Traité**
Optat de Milève, Traité contre les Donatistes II (linvres III à VII). Texte critique, traduction, notes et index par Mireille Labrousse (Sources chrétiennes 413), Paris 1996.

**Venantius Fortunatus, Poèmes**
Venance Fortunat, Poèmes. Tome II. Livres V–VIII. Texte ètabli et traduit par Marc Reydellet. Paris 1998.

## Literature

**Angheben, Reliquaires**
Angheben Marcel, Les reliquaires mosans et l'exaltation des fonctions dévotionnelles et eucharistiques de l'autel. In: Codex aquilarensis 32 (2016) 171–208.

**Barral i Altet, Brodat**
Barral i Altet Xavier, El brodat de la Creació. Un vel de Quaresma móvil per a la catedral románica de Girona. In: Mancho Carles (Ed.), El brodat de la creació de la catedral de Girona. Barcelone 2018, 291–304.

**Bavoux, Sacralité**
Bavoux Nadège, Sacralité, pouvoir, identité. Une histoire du vêtement d'autel. (XIII$^{e}$–XVI$^{e}$ siècles). Diss. Grenoble 2012.

**Bayer, Essai**
Bayer Clemens, Essai sur la disposition des inscriptions par rapport à l'image. Proposition d'une typologie basée sur des pièces de l'orfèvreire rhénomozane. In: Favreau Robert (Ed.), Épigraphie et Iconographie. Actes du colloque de Poitiers (1995). Poitiers 1996, 1–25.

**Bedos-Rezak, Ego**
Bedos-Rezak Brigitte-Myriam, When Ego was Imago. Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages. Boston 2011.

**Boerner, Voile**
Boerner Bruno, Le voile de Carême illustré d'images et la visibilité de Dieu. In: Bord Lucien-Jean (Ed.), Le rideau, le voile, et le dévoilement du Proche-Orient ancien à l'Occident médiéval. Paris 2019, 67–90.

**Boharski, Kisses**
Boharski Morgan, Kisses on Stitches. Words of Active Fetishization of Cloth Bodies in Old French Romance. In: Turner Victoria (Ed.), Words in the Middle Ages. Turnhout 2020, 123–138.

**Bonne, Ornements**
Bonne Jean-Claude, Les ornements de l'histoire (à propos de l'ivoire carolingien de saint Remi). In: Annales. Histoire, Sciences, Sociales 51/1 (1996) 37–70.

**Borgioli, Wearing**
Borgioli Cristina, Wearing the sacred. Images, space, identidy in liturgical vestments (13$^{th}$ to 16$^{th}$ centuries). In: Espacio, tiempo y forma 6 (2018) 169–196.

**Braun, Paramenti**
Braun Joseph, I paramenti sacri, loro uso, storia e simbolismo. Turin 1907.

**Carles, Brodat**
Carles Mancho (Ed.), El brodat de la Creació de la catedral de Girona. Barcelona 2017.

**Chastang, Lire**
Chastang Pierre, Lire, écrire, transcrire. Le travail des rédacteurs de cartulaires en Bas-Languedoc (XI$^{e}$–XIII$^{e}$ siècle). Paris 2001.

**DALC**
Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, t. 6–2. Paris, 1925.

**Debiais, Croisée**
Debiais Vincent, La croisée des signes. L'écriture et l'image médiévale. Paris 2017.

**Debiais, Messages**
Debiais Vincent, Messages de pierre. La lecture des inscriptions dans la communication médiévale. Turnhout 2009.

**Debiais, Nudité**
Debiais Vincent, La nudité de Noé et les voiles de l'autel. In: Bord Lucien-Jean (Ed.), Le rideau, le voile, et le dévoilement du Proche-Orient ancien à l'Occident médiéval. Paris 2019, 177–200.

**Debiais, Stratification**
Debiais Vincent, Stratification, montage, symbiose. Les textes et les images du calice et de la patène de Saint-Godehard d'Hildesheim. In: Perspectives médiévales 38 (2017).

**Deleuze, Pli**
Deleuze Gilles, Le pli. Leibnitz et le Baroque. Paris 1988.

**Didi-Huberman, Images**
Didi-Huberman Georges, Images malgré tout. Paris 2003.

**Exh.-Cat., Trésors**
Les trésors des églises de France. Catalogue de l'exposition de 1956 au Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris. Paris 1965.

**Favreau, Autels**
Favreau Robert, Les autels portatifs et leurs inscriptions. In: Cahiers de civilisation médiévale 46/184 (2003) 327–352.

**Favreau, Épigraphie**
Favreau Robert, Épigraphie médiévale. Turnhout 1995.

**Favreau, Inscriptions**
Favreau Robert. Les inscriptions du calice et de la patène de l'abbé Pélage au Louvre. In: Comptes rendus. Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 1 (1993) 31–48.

**Gagné, L'écriture**
Gagné Annick, L'écriture et la matière dans la construction de l'ecclesia (France, XIe–XIIIe). In: Bulletin du centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre 15/1 (2011) 425–437.

**Glodt, Carne**
Glodt Julie, Carne amicus. Vêtir le prêtre, parer l'autel au temps de l'hyperréalisme eucharistique. Paris 2019.

**Hahn, Altars**
Hahn Cynthia, Portable Altars (and the Rationale). Liturgical Objects and Personal Devotion. In: Poul Grinder-Hansen (Ed.), Image and Altar 800–1300. Papers from an International Conference in Copenhagen 24 October–27 October 2007. Kopenhagen 2014, 45–64.

**Hahn, Reliquaries**
Hahn Cynthia, What do reliquaries do for relics. In: Numen 57 (2010) 284–316.

**Hahn, Reliquary effect**
Hahn Cynthia, The Reliquary effect. Enshrining the sacred object. Chicago 2016.

**Handbook, Cleveland Museum**
The Cleveland Museum of Art Handbook. Cleveland 1958.

**Hubert, Introibo**
Hubert Jean, Introibo ad altare. L'autel chrétien du Ve au XIIe siècle. In: Revue de l'art 24 (1974) 9–21.

**Michaud, Epigrafia**
Michaud Jean, Epigrafía y liturgia. El ejemplo de las dedicaciones y consagraciones de iglesias y altares. In: Estudios Humanísticos. Geografía, Historia, Arte 18 (1996) 183–208.

**Morsel, Texte**
Morsel Joseph, Du texte aux archives. Le problème de la source. In: Bulletin du centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre HS 2 (2008) 1–26. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/cem/4132 [08.03.2021].

**Palazzo, L'espace**
Palazzo Eric, L'espace rituel et le sacré dans le christianisme. La liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'antiquité et au Moyen Âge. Turnhout 2008.

**Palazzo, Peignes**
Palazzo Eric, Les peignes liturgiques. Des objets ecclésiastiques au service de la théologie du rituel. In: O clero secular medieval e as suas catedrais. Novas perspectivas e abordagens. Lissabon 2014, 141–154.

**Pallottini, Monumentalisation**
Pallottini Elisa, Monumentalisation et mise en scène des saints dans le lieu de culte: Les listes épigraphiques de reliques dans l'Occident médiéval. In: Angotti Claire (Ed.), Le pouvoir des listes au Moyen Âge – I. Écritures de la liste. Paris 2019, 31–60.

**Rodríguez Suárez, Altares**
Rodríguez Suárez Natalia, Los tres altares de San Miguel de Escalada, algunas consideraciones. In: Progressus. Rivista di Storia Scrittura e Società 2/1 (2015) 1–20.

**Treffort, Tissages**
Treffort Cécile, Tissages textuels et transcendance du signe. Autour des poésies visuelles du Haut Moyen Âge. In: Revista de poética medieval 27 (2013) 45–59.

**Zumthor, Langue**
Zumthor Paul, Langue, texte, énigme. Paris 1975.