

## Conference

### INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKSHOP IN TEXTILE STUDIES: BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE PRODUCTIONS

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

20–21 March 2021

Reviewed by Nikolas Vryzidis

As a result of the continuing public health crisis, yet another academic gathering focusing on textiles was converted into a virtual event. This was the interdisciplinary workshop in Byzantine, post-Byzantine and other related textile cultures, organised by Elena Papastavrou and Paschalis Androudis, under the aegis of the History and Archaeology Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Its prime objective was to raise interest in the interdisciplinary turn that textile scholarship has taken during the past few decades, localising it within the frame of Byzantine studies. The invited scholars covered a wide range of disciplines, from technical to comparative art history, and from historical archaeology to iconology. Moreover, the presentations encompassed periods and regions from medieval Egypt to the early modern Ionian Islands, all bound together with an expansive interpretation of Byzantine textile culture.

The first panel offered medieval perspectives on the material culture of religiosity, beginning with Arielle Winnik's excellent comparative study on the use of inscriptions on textiles in medieval Egypt. Her exploration of



1

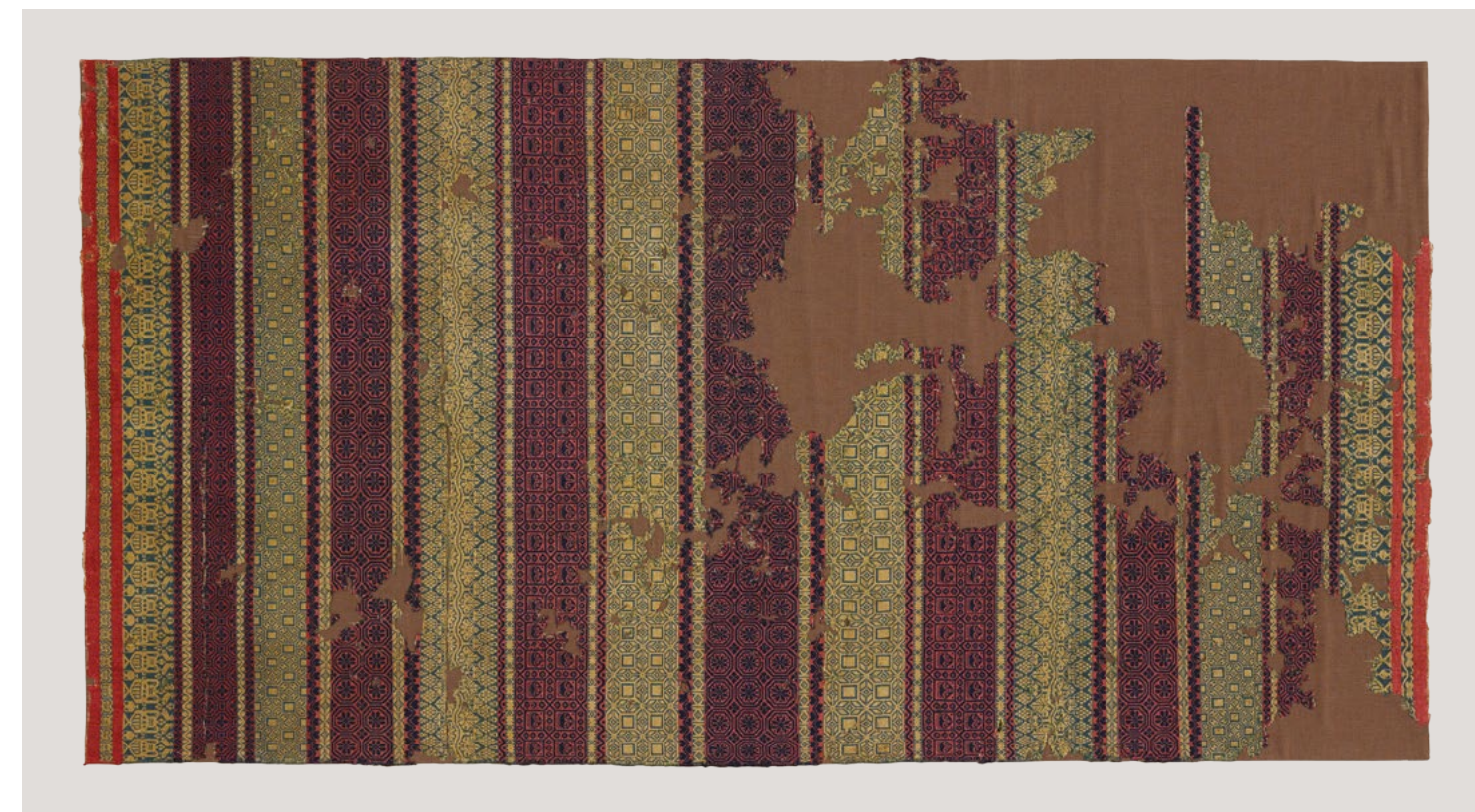
Coptic and Islamic tiraz was compelling, illuminating the symbolism that inscriptions conveyed on the textiles used by both Christian and Muslim Egyptians. In the next presentation, Marielle Martiniani-Reber touched on a Latin chasuble's twofold status as both a relic and a reliquary. Made of

precious Middle Byzantine silk and associated with St Ebbon, this vestment, from the Sens Cathedral collection, presents a type of multi-layered materiality often encountered in the Middle Ages. The second section of this panel focused on the Byzantine epitaphios; usually embroidered, this veil bears the image of the

dead body of Christ. The two speakers were conveniently put in dialogue with each other: first, Nikos Toutos thoroughly covered the issue of patronage (3), then, Henry Schilb raised thought-provoking questions on what the variants in the epitaphios iconography may signify.

The second panel was dedicated to secular dress, sumptuous textiles and textility in Later Byzantium, broadly conceived. Georgios Makris presented part of his ongoing research on the representation of aristocratic dress in late medieval paintings of the south Balkans, a promising enquiry that has also been the focus of some of his recent publications. Paschalis Androudis, meanwhile, considered the part that textiles played in the shaping of aesthetic in Later Byzantium. By transmitting symbols and motifs regardless of their origin, they created an intriguing interweaving of media, cultures and symbolisms. My presentation, the last one on the workshop's first day, compared late Byzantine and Ottoman textile cultures, by bringing forward the notion of asymmetrical continuity with which the two may relate. As the writer of this review, I leave it to others to comment on how convincing my argument was.

The second day commenced with a panel focusing on Balkan textile heritage. First, Alice Isabella Sullivan discussed the afterlife of Byzantine embroidery in the Danube Principalities, as one of the *Byzance après Byzance* artistic traditions that took roots during the 15th and 16th centuries (1). Next, Nikos Mertzimekis presented an unpublished 16th- or 17th-century *labarum*, attributable



2



3

1 Burial cover of Maria of Mangup, ca. 1477. Embroidery with gold and silver thread and coloured silk on a red satin foundation. Collection of Putna Monastery, Putna

2 Cover, eastern Mediterranean, 5th century. 1.25 x 2.39 m (4' 1" x 7' 10"). The

Textile Museum, Washington DC, 31.11, acquired by George Hewitt Myers

3 *Aër*-epitaphios of the Emperor John Kantakouzenos (detail of the dedicatory inscription), ca. 1347–54. Monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos

to a Moldavian workshop, one of the most important textile heirlooms in the collection of Zograf Monastery (Mount Athos). Tatjana Vuleta closed the panel with a paper that followed the life of the *elibelinde* motif in the art and textiles of late medieval and Ottoman Serbia, a rather original contribution which illuminated the transmission of ornament in the Balkans via the Silk Road.

The final panel accommodated technical art historical perspectives on wide-ranging material. Sumru Belger Krody presented her current research on early medieval wool textiles in compound weave, used as home furnishings in Egypt and beyond. A window into the material culture of everyday life of the period, the objects in question were a pleasure to the eye (2). Then, Elena Papastavrou introduced us to her new project on church embroidery produced in the Ionian Islands under Venetian rule. Through a transdisciplinary study, Papastavrou examined the merging of Byzantine and western European artistic traditions in these refined artefacts.

To continue, Fani Kalokairinou's talk was centred on an underexplored body of objects: early modern block-printed textiles from the collection of the Folk Museum of Larissa. A production with a long-standing tradition in central Greece, block-printed textiles impress with their colourfulness and multifunctionality. The workshop concluded with Anna Karatzani's representative overview on the use of metal threads in Greek Orthodox ecclesial textiles, highlighting the craft's evolution throughout the centuries.

Overall, this was a fairly successful event, attracting a good number of auditors, as well as providing ground for scholarly exchange in a time of relative isolation. This interest, notwithstanding how challenging certain subjects may have been, perhaps expresses the fact that textile studies are having their expansive moment, with lesser-known productions and traditions being brought into the mainstream of scholarship.