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The *Witches' Cloth*: An exceptional textile in Sant Joan de les Abadesses

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El drap de les Bruixes, or the 'Witches' Cloth' (MEV 557), is a silk cloth measuring 245 x 109 cm originally from the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses and conserved at the Episcopal Museum of Vic since 1888. It was used until recent times as an altar frontal, though its original form and purpose are unknown. While Sant Joan de les Abadesses has a comprehensive archive, there is no mention of the cloth in the earliest inventory, from the year 1217[1]. In a later inventory of 1357[2] we find complete descriptions of each altar and its adornments, which include a series of cloths that were not located in the monastery church. In particular, '*rubeam signatam signis diversarum bestiarum*' may refer to a cope for which part of the Witches' Cloth was used – perhaps the fragment now missing from the upper band of decoration. The first documentary evidence of the cloth's existence may be the record of a pastoral visit to the monastery by the archpriest Sebastià Illa, on 14 July 1621. In his description of the altar he notes '*Item un palit vermell dit de las bruxas*'[3], for which he requested the monastery's chief administrator to commission two large candles. The next evidence we find is from a later pastoral visit, made by the archpriest Francesc Vergés in 1674. From his report, we learn that the Witches' Cloth is no longer placed on the altar but instead housed in the sacristy of the monastery church: '*Item lo palit de sati mostrejat dit lo palit de las bruxas molt vell y dolent*'[4].

While the cloth is comparatively well preserved, there are nonetheless clear signs of various alterations over the centuries, and close analysis reveals several areas that have been sewn and repaired,[5] suggesting that the original piece was cut in order to be re-purposed as a pallium or altar frontal[6]. It was in this

1 Francesca Español has associated "*quam vocatur aquilarum*" from the 1217 inventory with the *Witches' Cloth*. In our view, this is more likely a reference to the *Teixit de les àguiles*. ESPAÑOL BERTRAN, Francesca, "Sant Joan de les Abadesses durant els segles del Romànic", in CRISPÍ, Marta; MONTRAVETA, Míriam (ed.), *El monestir de Sant Joan de les Abadesses*, Sant Joan de les Abadesses, 2012, p. 50.

2 MASDEU, Josep, "Un inventari de l'any 1217 de Sant Joan de les Abadesses", *Butlletí del Centre Excursionista de Vich*, IV (1921-1924), 1923 (Vic), pp. 141-146; MASDEU, Josep, "Un inventari de l'any Sant Joan de les Abadesses", *Butlletí del Centre Excursionista de Vich*, 1915-1916-1917, Vic, p. 44.

3 Visita, inventari, rendes i beneficis i manaments promulgats per Sebastià Illa, arxipreste, 1621-1623, f. 2r [Archive of the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses – pastoral visits].

4 Visita pastoral i inventari de Francesc Vergés, arxiprest, 1674, f. 17r [Archive of the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses – pastoral visits]; published recently by: CRISPÍ, Marta; MONTRAVETA, Míriam (ed.), *El monestir de Sant Joan de les Abadesses*, Sant Joan de les Abadesses, 2012, pp. 192-194.

5 PEREZ PENA, Laia, "El paño de las brujas: nuevas vías de investigación", *Anales de Historia del Arte*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2013 (in press).

6 We recall the words of Father Gudiol (1893), who refers to "a silk cloth used as a frontal". *Catálogo del Museo Arqueológico Artístico Episcopal de Vich*, Vic, 1893, p. 224.

The Witches' Cloth (MEV 557). ©Museu Episcopal de Vic. See zoom.

Details of the cloth, showing repair work. ©Laia Pérez Pena.

Detail of the selvedge, showing the lining of linen and lustring. ©Laia Pérez Pena

new form that the cloth was conserved, mounted since the Baroque period – if not earlier – in a simple wooden frame. The frame itself, now in storage at the Episcopal Museum of Vic, still shows traces of silk thread from the Witches' Cloth in the nails at the joints[7]. In addition, the selvedge shows signs of strengthening, again from the Baroque period, with the addition of two or three internal layers of linen and lustring to give the fabric greater stiffness[8].

Iconographic programme

The decoration of the Witches' Cloth is arranged in three horizontal bands. The central band shows an imaginary animal: a winged lion with two bodies, a tail in the form of a snake[9] and geometric hair in concentric lines that end in a zig-zag pattern, imitating the lion's mane. Two symmetrical wings fan out beneath the figure, in one case with a small gap in the decoration to the right, presumably the result of an error in the initial preparation of the design[10]. The animal's feet are decorated with white circles and red lines that recall animal portrayals in Persian art[11]. The figure is framed twice, first by two smaller wings that project from the shoulders and join just above the lion's mane, and second by the tail, which forms an arch rising from the outermost corner of the lower wings and passing over the figure's head. The tail structure, outlined in yellow, is formed by horizontal blue lines in a zig-zag pattern to imitate the scaled appearance of the snake's body, upon which are placed small animal heads that may be griffins. The decoration of the cloth's central band is completed by two symmetrical bird figures that face one another, set in the spandrels of the outer arch, a composition repeatedly found in various forms

7 Specialists from the Abegg-Stiftung and the MEV agree that the frame is clearly Baroque.

8 This formal analysis was conducted as part of research in preparing the dissertation for the master's degree in Analysis and Management of the Artistic Heritage, PEREZ PENA, Laia, *El drap de les Bruixes: qüestions entorn a l'origen, temàtica i funció d'un texit excepcional*, 2012 (in press), supervised by Dr Manuel Castiñeiras.

9 MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, XXII, Barcelona, 1986, p. 273; MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, X, Barcelona, 1987, p. 398.

10 SHEPHERD, Dorothy; VIAL, Gabriel, "La chasuble de Saint-Sernin", *Bulletin de liaison du CIETA*, 21, 1965 (Lyon), pp. 20-31.

11 *Frieze of Griffins*, from the palace of King Darius I at Susa. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Sb 3322.

Detail of decoration on the central band. ©Laia Pérez Pena.

Plaque of St Peter from a monastery in the north of Syria (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 50.5.1). ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of Byzantine art[12]. The bird can be identified as a crested ibis[13], represented by the hieroglyph *Akh*, an immortal element in the Ancient Egyptian belief system that, together with the *Ka* and the *Ba*, made up the three parts of the human soul. Over time, the *Akh* came to signify a roaming spirit, moving between humans and the gods, that is particularly associated with embalming and the mummification ritual[14].

The upper and lower bands of decoration, which are identical, are based around pairs of facing peacocks. From the Persian tradition, the peacock was commonly used in early-Christian and Byzantine art to symbolise the immortality of the soul and is depicted on many sarcophagi and in numerous mosaics from these periods. The peacock's chest is adorned with a pearl necklace, while the belly bears a distinctive pattern formed by petals in the shape of inverted hearts. The tail rises vertically and joins with that of the bird in the adjoining section of the design, forming an oval arch. Within this is a depiction of the *hom*, or tree of life[15], from the Mesopotamian tradition, with

12 As is the case of various miniatures of the *Evangeliari de Lorsch*, a Carolingian ivory plaque depicting the Virgin Mary as a Personification of the Church, from Aachen, and several Byzantine silver plaques from a monastery in the north of Syria.

13 MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, XXII, Barcelona, 1986, p. 273; MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, X, Barcelona, 1987, p. 398.

14 CIMMINO, Franco, *La vida cotidiana de los egípcios*, Madrid, 2002, pp. 157-158.

15 Rosa M. Martín i Ros also suggested that it could be an Egyptian instrument such as the systrum. MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, XXII, Barcelona, 1986, p. 273; MARTÍN I ROS, Rosa M., "Teixit de les Bruixes", *Catalunya Romànica*, X, Barcelona, 1987, p. 398.

Detail of decoration on the lower band. ©Laia Pérez Pena.

a central trunk and branches ending in rounded floral depictions. Each pair of peacocks is separated by a simplified vine with fruit to either side, above which are floral motifs before the vine ends in an upward bunch of grapes that sits between the harpy-like talons of the lion figure in the upper band[16]. This particular element is both decorative and compositional, serving to harmonise the formal and symbolic characteristics of the two bands in a single iconographic programme.

16 There are many examples of Sasanian, early-Christian and Byzantine art in which peacocks are juxtaposed with vines, as is the case of the Grape Harvester and Peacock mosaic from the Church of Maaut El Naama (Syria), conserved at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Production from the Levant

There are many surviving examples of Byzantine textiles manufactured in workshops around the Eastern Mediterranean, across Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Though it can be difficult to distinguish between items produced in each of these regions, written sources describe major centres of production

Tunic fragment. Egypt, eighth or ninth century. ©Christie's.

Ibis cloth (Paris, Musée national du Moyen-Âge-Thermes de Cluny, CL. 21959).

in Alexandria[17], Tyre, Sidon and Antioch[18]. It is among this group of fabrics with strong Byzantine and Sasanian influences – though not conditioned by the styles of metropolitan production – that we should consider the Witches' Cloth, which can be dated to the ninth or tenth century[19]. Though by this period Muslim rule had extended across the Eastern Mediterranean, it has been suggested that Christian weavers may have found refuge in Syrian monasteries and also in Egypt, where Coptic Christians continued to weave with the permission of the Muslim authorities[20]. The only documented examples of Byzantine silk textiles from the eastern Mediterranean are those recovered from monastic burial sites and found in cities such as Antinoe and Akhmim, in Egypt[21]. ●

17 T. K. THOMAS, "Coptic and byzantine textiles found in Egypt: corpora, collections and scholarly perspectives", in R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in the Byzantine World. 300-700*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 137-163.

18 We refer to the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Geniza Documents*, and to other contemporary sources cited by historians, particularly in work related to the trade and import of textiles around the Mediterranean Basin in the Late Middle Ages.

19 PEREZ PENA, Laia, "El drap de les Bruixes: al-Ándalus, Sicília o Síria?", *Síntesi. Quaderns dels Seminaris de Besalú*, 2, 2014, pp. 75-92. PEREZ PENA, Laia, "El paño de las brujas: nuevas vías de investigación", *Anales de Historia del Arte*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2013 (in press).

20 MUTHESIUS, Anna, *Byzantine silk weaving. AD 400 to AD 1200*, Vienna, 1997, p. 66.

21 *Ibis cloth* (Paris, Musée national du Moyen Âge-Thermes de Cluny, CL. 21959), found at Antinoe, samite, fifth or sixth century; *Textile fragment* (London, British Museum, n-1904,7-6,41), eighth century, probably found at Akhmim, and *Silk textile fragment* (Londres, V&A Museum, T.56-1936).