The Gates of Hell

A look at the Fashion of Sideless Surcotes in Western European Art and Textiles

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* I did not know this

Sideless surcotes, also called Pellotes[1] and "The Gates of Hell" are easily the most recognizable garment item, or 'look' of the middle ages. Romantic inclination abounds where sideless surcotes go; in scholarly circles they are as hotly contested today as they were 800 years ago. The question of whether or not they existed at all has, by all rights, been put to rest. The current focus of academic debate in regards to sideless surcotes centers on the purpose of these garments, if in fact they were anything at all beyond ceremonial gestures. In addition to numerous representations on tomb brasses, in manuscript illuminations, literature and sculpture, several pellotes and sideless surcotes have survived the ages to bear immutable witness to their own existence.

The origins of the sideless surcote aren't specific. Manuscript illuminations and tapestries depict pellotes of a sort, dating to the early 12th century. The sideless surcote is not to be confused with the less radical sleeveless surcote, though the garments are very similar, particularly until the late13th century[2]. True sideless surcotes are distinct in that they have some material cut away from the outer tunic under the arm, which can amount to a vertical slit or a wide, gaping window to the cotehardie, kirtle or other garment below. The pellote probably evolved from the sleeveless tunics donned in the western world since the time of the ancient Greeks. For practical purposes of comfort and mobility the fashion seemingly spread quickly; examples of this style of garment can be found throughout medieval western Europe. Both men and women donned the sideless surcote[3]. As the style evolved, men began wearing a shorter version, which by 1340 had attracted the angst of more conservative chroniclers. The trend was derided as being "foreign and outlandish" and detractors "looked longingly back to the 'good old days' when longer, larger tunics offered what they considered to be proper coverage of the body (Leventon, 53)." A surviving collection of medieval textiles and garments within the Museo De Talas

they are always on the lookout for sermon fodder!

well sideless surcote is a mouthful!

1 The word "Pellote" is Spanish for "sideless surcote." Though it may make somebody, somewhere roll over in their grave, I am going to use the interchangeably. Take THAT, somebody, somewhere!

2 Textbook, page 344, figure 16.32: Saint Theodore (1230-35) wears a very early sleeveless surcote in a transitional form very similar to the pellote. Thanks. That's the one @ Chartres, I know him well.

3 Textbook, page 457, figure 20.24: Lady Embraces the Poet Konrad von Altstetten. Manesse Codex, c. 1300.

Medievales at the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos, Nacional includes several pellotes and accompanying garments belonging to the successive 13th and 14th century generations of a family of Spanish royalty. These include the reddish silk pellote of Enrique I, King of Castille[4]. The garment is interwoven with darker bands of a contrasting silk, and trimmed at the seams, not just the borders, with 24ct gold and silver foil. The "Enrique" also has an unusual tabbed bottom-hem, vaguely reminiscent of the dagging technique used on sleeves and hems at this time. The most magnificent of the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas men's surcotes is that of Fernando de la Cerda[5]. The garment is restored and in remarkable condition. Extremely deep-cut 'gates' are cut into the piece, which is finished with a "close" key-hole neck line, and a slightly pleated front. The fabric in the lower portion was cut on the diagonal to emphasize fullness, and the material is described as "castilian cloth" and rendered with heraldic emblems, though not the specific heraldry of Fernando de la Cerda. A son of King Alfonso X was interred at the Monasterío, and his funerary garb consisted of two pellotes[6]; one worn over the other. The top pellote is much shorter than the bottom and is possibly trimmed from a longer garment. The fabric is "brocaded silk" in a red and cream geometric pattern of diamonds. True to the Medieval passion for "Punky Brewster"-like pattern mixing, the lower garment worn with it is blue and white brocade with silver embellishment.

Women were hardly in better stead with medieval traditionalists. The fashion of the sideless surcote was a very literal expression of the greater, philosophical ideals of female beauty at the time. The evolution in the sideless surcote for women meant a shift from the floor-length, loose outer-dress of the late 11th and early 12th centuries to a very fitted and sculptured garment by the 14th century. The openings for the arms became much longer and wider, restricting the size of the front of the gown to a near-hour glass shape and exposing the form of the woman in her tight under-dress to casual sight. This aspect of the sideless surcote is what won it the name "The Gates of Hell" from chroniclers and

4 Appendix, Image 9.
5 Appendix, Image 10.
6 Appendix, Image 8.a and 8.b. "A" is a comparison of the two by size; "B" is the striped undergarment in full.

religious traditionalists. It is the fitted and tightly structured top of the pellote in conjunction with flowing, full skirts that epitomizes the Medieval ideal of beauty. It is a garment specifically made to emphasize to advantage each woman's figure in concomitance with the ideal. The lengthy upper portion of the gown gave the appearance of the desirable elongated torso; the generous swath of fabric (especially if trimmed in fur) across the hips at the bottom of the 'gates' exaggerated the width of the hips.

In France and England, the fashioning of the 'bodice' of the sideless surcote became more tailored and reinforced. The front-piece of the surcote in its latest form had an almost bib-like appearance and was bolstered further by the use of fur to delineate the sensuous curve of the bodice and 'gates.' France and England generally followed each other closely in fashion, and the sideless surcote phenomenon was no exception, though variations did appear. "In the main cut of the *surcot*[7], both in England and in France, had all along remained the same...[but] in France the upper portion was always entirely made out of fur (Köhler, 177)." The statues of Isabeau de Bavière[8] and Jeanne de Bourbon[9], and the burial effigies of Hugues de Roucy and his wife at St Yved's Church[10] demonstrate this "French" style at its most extreme, though it may be reckless to suggest that the French wore the fashion in this manner to the exclusion of other means, or that the style in question was worn only by the French. The statues depict the two queens in splendor and elegance. The skirts fall in full, graceful folds to their feet. Isabeau especially has a lovely, lilting quality; her crespinettes frame her smiling face beautifully and her posture is suggestive of the "Vierge Dorée" at Amiens Cathedral[11]. She somehow makes it look tremendously fun to be young, beautiful, rich, a queen... wait... where was I?

Statues such as these are in part, what fuels the debate regarding the actual day-to-day use of the

7 This is the author's spelling and emphasis. I have encountered a few variations on the word and spelling. I chose "surcote" for consistency with the accepted terms "cote" and "cotehardie."

8 This statue has also been identified as possibly either Jeanne de Armagnac or Jeanne de Boulogne et Auvergne.

9 Appendix, Images 1 and 2. The "buttons" are irregularly carved decorative elements presumably depicted from "life", and were not functional.

10 Appendix, Image 3.

11 Textbook, page 355, figure 16.49. "Virgin and Child," (Vierge Dorée) Trumeau, south transept portal, Amiens Cathedral. (1260-70)

sideless surcote in Medieval times. The controversy surrounding the Gates of Hell center primarily within the theory that the gowns were essentially an iconographic expression[12]. Detractors contend that the gowns are indelibly associated with royalty and that tomb brasses and effigies extant of non-noble women depicted in the pellote are simply examples of post-mortem wishful thinking. Some contend that the garments were ceremonial in nature and were only worn by nobles and perhaps only then on special occasions, if they were worn at all. The preponderance of art works depicting women (and men) in the garment *are* primarily of royalty or nobility[13]. While it is likely that as the style became less fashionable in the 15th century, extent depictions of nobles and allegorical figures wearing the pellote were primarily an "expression" more than reality, the burden of physical evidence certainly supports the idea that the sideless surcote was embraced and worn by many people, regardless of station and in a variety of forms, for centuries.

The pellote and sideless surcote were worn by non-nobles; in fact, they were almost certainly worn by laborers. The lifestyle of active, hardworking people dictated choice of garb far more than vanity or materialism. A preoccupation with good appearance didn't originate with the nobility, and the affectation of an outer garment meant that the textiles underneath were protected. Two full cotes or a surplice over a cote essentially hampered the wearers movements, as well as adding a formidable weight when one considers the relative thickness and quality of Medieval woven goods. A 13th century image of a scribe at his labors illustrates this point quite literally. The young man is bent over his work, intently scribing away with his feet comfortably spread and his extra skirting gathered behind him as a modified cushion. In contrast to the cleric depicted in a sleeveless robe on the facing panel, the scribe's surcote has deeply slitted sides; the opening extending from his shoulder well past his waist. [14]. This adaptation is discussed by Sarah Thursfield in The Medieval Tailor's Assistant: "The simple style

12 Appendix, Image 3. This tomb effigy is indicative of yet another source of debate about the sideless surcote, and medieval women's garments in general: the existence and possible use of heraldic dress, reinforcing the stereotype of ceremonial-only purpose.

13 Appendix, Image 4.

14 Textbook, page 369, figure 17.8: Blanche of Castile and her son, Louis IX. (1226-34).

replaced the gored surcote in general wear," therefore "working [people] might still wear it in the 15th century(Thursfield, 125)." The elimination of sleeves on the outer garment would not only have removed unnecessary weight and restriction of movement, it would have also offered access to interior pockets or pouches hanging from the girdles or belts often worn under the sideless surcote, on the under-dress. This belt is definitely not a functional wardrobe accessory on pellotes such as those worn in the previously discusses statues and other works, and is theoretically retained by the wearers of the 'gates' as a symbol of chastity or virtuous intent[15]. For more industrious persons, a belt or girdle would have been an invaluable tool, not just for securing a pouch under the sideless surcote, but also as a means of "hitching up" the length and extra material of any garments they wore as they worked. Peasants or any individual unable to dress except in the most conservative manner, due to income or vocation, may have modified the pellote further to suit their needs, while still retaining the essential shape of the garment. "Some 14th century peasant women... had long slits at the sides of their skirts, suggesting a narrower, more economical garment, slit for greater ease of movement (Thursfield, 117)." A surviving example of a convention, "common" sideless surcote can be seen within the garments that comprise the Greenland "Herjolfsnes" bog cache of 14th century clothing. The garment is known as "Herjolfsnes 37" and is crafted of "regularly woven, firmly spun threads" of "four-shaft twill (Nörlund, Appendix)." A compromise between the Herjolfsnes garments and the ceremonial splendor of a Queen is represented in the burial brass effigy of Sir John and Aleyne de Creke, c.1340-5, at Westley Waterless, Cambridgeshire, England[16]. Aleyne's pellote is simple in design and far more angular than the later representations of the sideless surcote, particularly those that are French in origin. It bears a striking resemblance to the surviving pellote of Leonor of Aragon[17] in the collection of the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas. The color of Aleyne's sideless surcote is of course, lost to us but its major appeal is in the regular and precise use of decoration at the borders and

yes!

15 Evident on Appendix Images 1-4.
16 Appendix, image 5.
17 Appendix, Images 11.a and 11.b. "B" represents the gown and saya prior to a 20th century restoration.

edges of the under-and-outer garments. Her pellote is "hitched up" through the use of pins or an unseen thin belt or girdle to reveal the under-skirt. This could suggest that women who didn't wear the deeply cut "Gates of Hell" may have be more inclined to show an under-dress in this fashion. One may reason from there that the women who donned the more extreme versions of the sideless surcote didn't attempt to "hitch" the skirt, and that the depictions of the belts worn under the outer surcote are a reinforcement of the style as much as a symbolic statement of morality.

Leonor of Aragon's dress in contrast is rendered in lovely shades of blue-green[18], with a printed and woven design throughout the garment and at the hem. The shape is lacking in the curvilinear appeal of the French and later English pellotes, and yet retains a quaint elegance in its simplicity. The dress is attended by a "saya," also belonging to Leonor and intended to be worn with her 'gates,' though not exclusively. The saya is cut to "disappear" behind the pellote, potentially visible through only the "key-hole" neck line of the pellote. Leonor's saya laced down one side[19] through a series of "tapes" built into the seam, and with the aid of a cord wound through the openings in "spiral" fashion[20]. These items were probably her burial clothing; they, along with Fernando de la Cerda and Enrique I's pellotes are described as being "found" in their graves. I so object to these poor naked corpses! And yet it is wonderful to see the real deal.

The appeal of the sideless surcote is undeniable. It appears in every major form of artwork and in both secular and religious venues for much of the early first millennium. Though styles and embellishments changed, and the vicissitudes of fashion eventually marched on, a form of this garment was worn by persons of both genders and from every echelon of society. They could be practicality itself, or the epitome of improbable fashion. The scholarly dialogue regarding the probability or purpose of these garments outside of a "ceremonial" setting is flimsy. Sideless surcotes obviously existed, were actually worn, and evolved through time to accommodate the needs and aesthetics of their wearers like few other garments could have.

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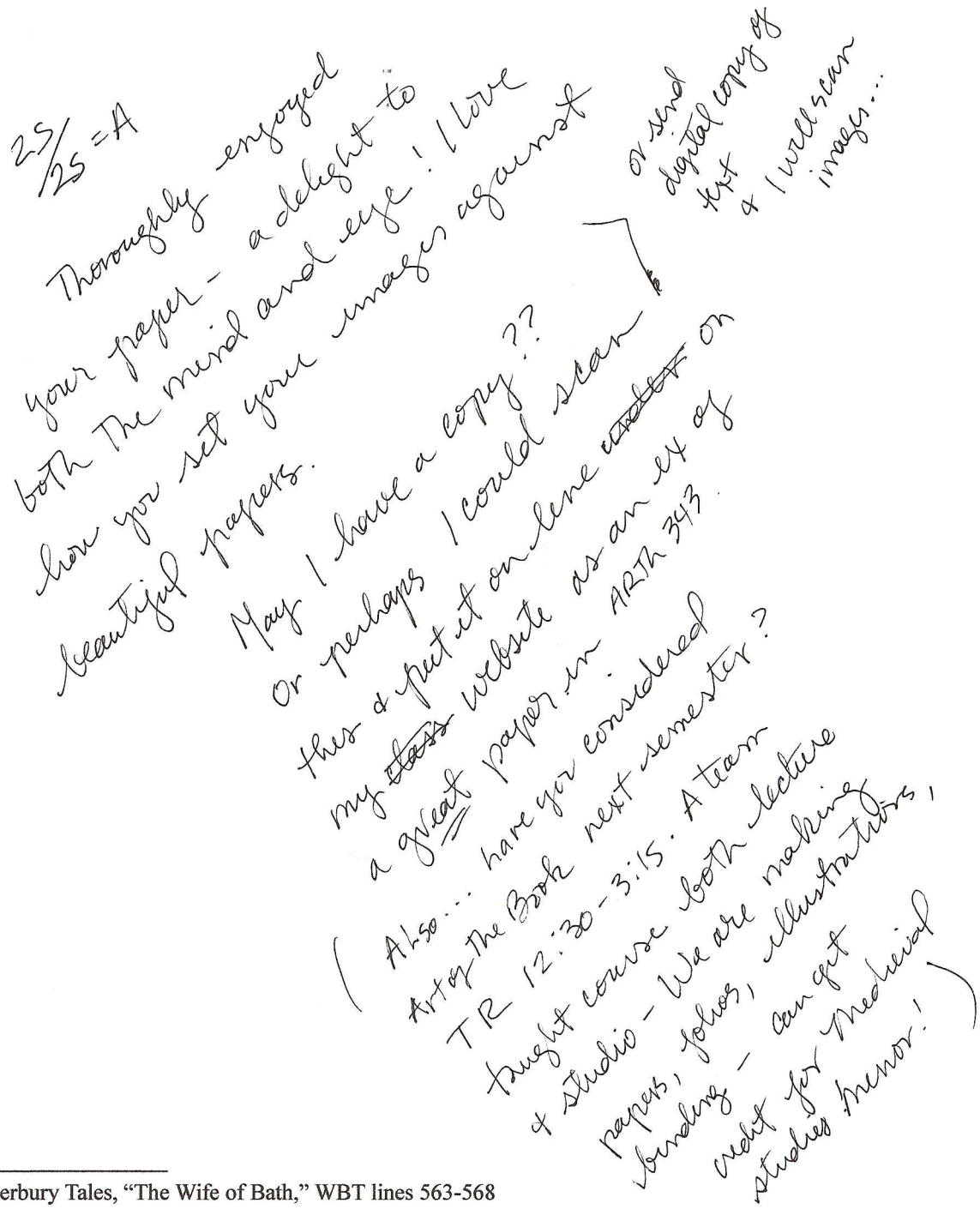
18 Appendix, Image 11.a
19 Appendix, Image 11.c
20 Appendix, Images 11.d and11. e.

As an self-proclaimed expert on the condition of the female mind and heart, Geoffery Chaucer's "Wife of Bath" summarized her feelings for her "well-used gates" as such:

> To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
> To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages;
> And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes.
> Thise wormes ne thise motthes, ne thise mytes,
> Upon my peril, frete hem ; never a deel: why?
> For they were used weel![21]



21 The Canterbury Tales, "The Wife of Bath," WBT lines 563-568

Appendix of Enclosed Images

1. Statue of Jeanne de Bourbon, (3 February 1338 – 6 February 1378), consort to King Charles V of France.

2. Statue of Isabeau de Bavière, Jeanne de Armagnac or Jeanne de Boulogne et Auvergne. 14th century, French.

3. 19th century illustration of the brass burial effigies of Hugues de Roucy and his wife. St Yved's Church; Braine, Aisne France. (c.1390)

4. Manuscript illumination of "The Coronation of Phillipa of Hainault," from a 15th century manuscript by Jean Froissart.

5. Brass burial effigies of Sir John and Aleyne de Creke, c.1340-5, at Westley Waterless, Cambridgeshire, associated with "Seymour style workshop."

6. Photograph of "Herjolfsnes 37," originally from Meddelelser om Gronland, Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes; Dr.phil. Poul Norlund; Copenhagen 1924; C.A.Reitzel

7. Illustration of "Herjolfsnes 37," originally from Meddelelser om Gronland, Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes; Dr.phil. Poul Norlund; Copenhagen 1924; C.A.Reitzel

8. (a & b) Images of the restored pellotes of Fernando, Prince of Aragon, (1271-1333) Short and Long. From the Museo De Talas Medievales at the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos, Patrimonio Nacional.

9. Image of the restored pellote of Enrique I, King of Castille (1203-1217). From the Museo De Talas Medievales at the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos, Patrimonio Nacional.

10. Image of the pellote of Fernando de la Cerda (1225-1275). From the Museo De Talas Medievales at the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos, Patrimonio Nacional.

11. (a,b,c,d & e) Images of the original and restored pellote and saya of Leonor (Leonora, Leonara) of Aragon. c. 1244. From the Museo De Talas Medievales at the Monasterío de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos, Patrimonio Nacional.

12. Illustration of the pellote of Leonor (Leonora, Leonara) of Aragon. c. 1244. Originally from Meddelelser om Gronland, Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes; Dr.phil. Poul Norlund; Copenhagen 1924; C.A.Reitze

Image 1

Image 2


Image 3

blesse dont tous deux estoient issuz
Comet ma dame philippe le hamault
fut mariee au jeune roy edouart de
tyletevve et comment elle fut receue a
londres de tous les nobles et bourgois
moult honorablement

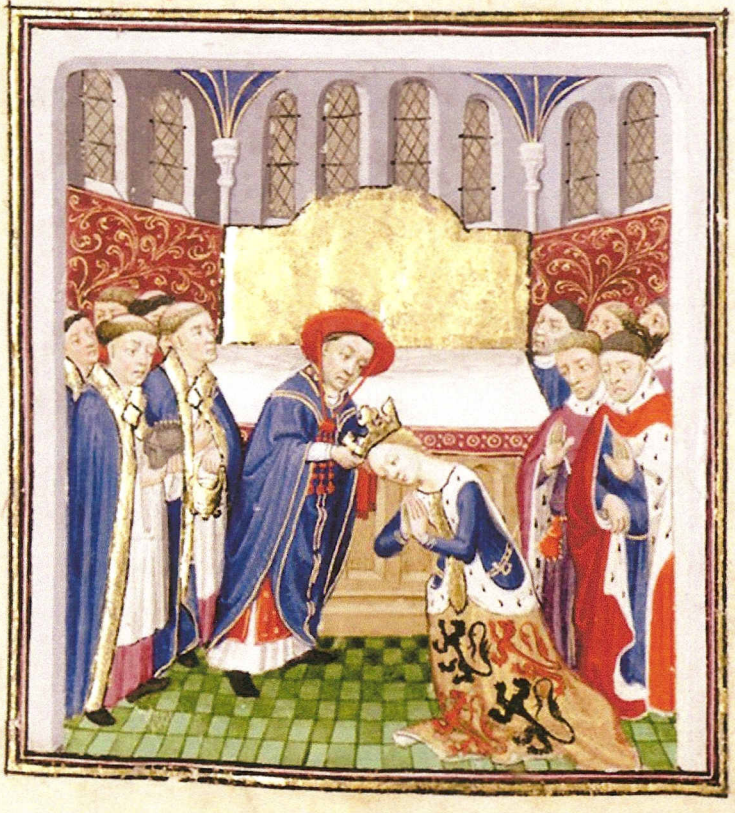


Image 4

Image 5

Tunic

Herjolfsnes no.37

Herjolfsnes 37

Image 6

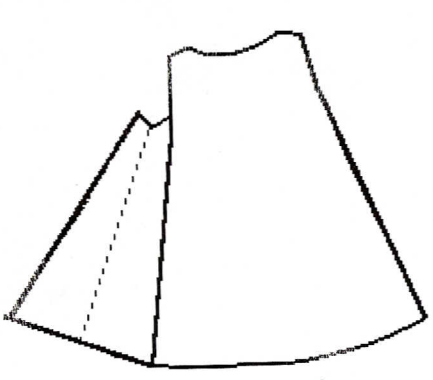


Image 7

Image 8.a.

Image 8.b.

Image 9

Image 10

Image 11.a.

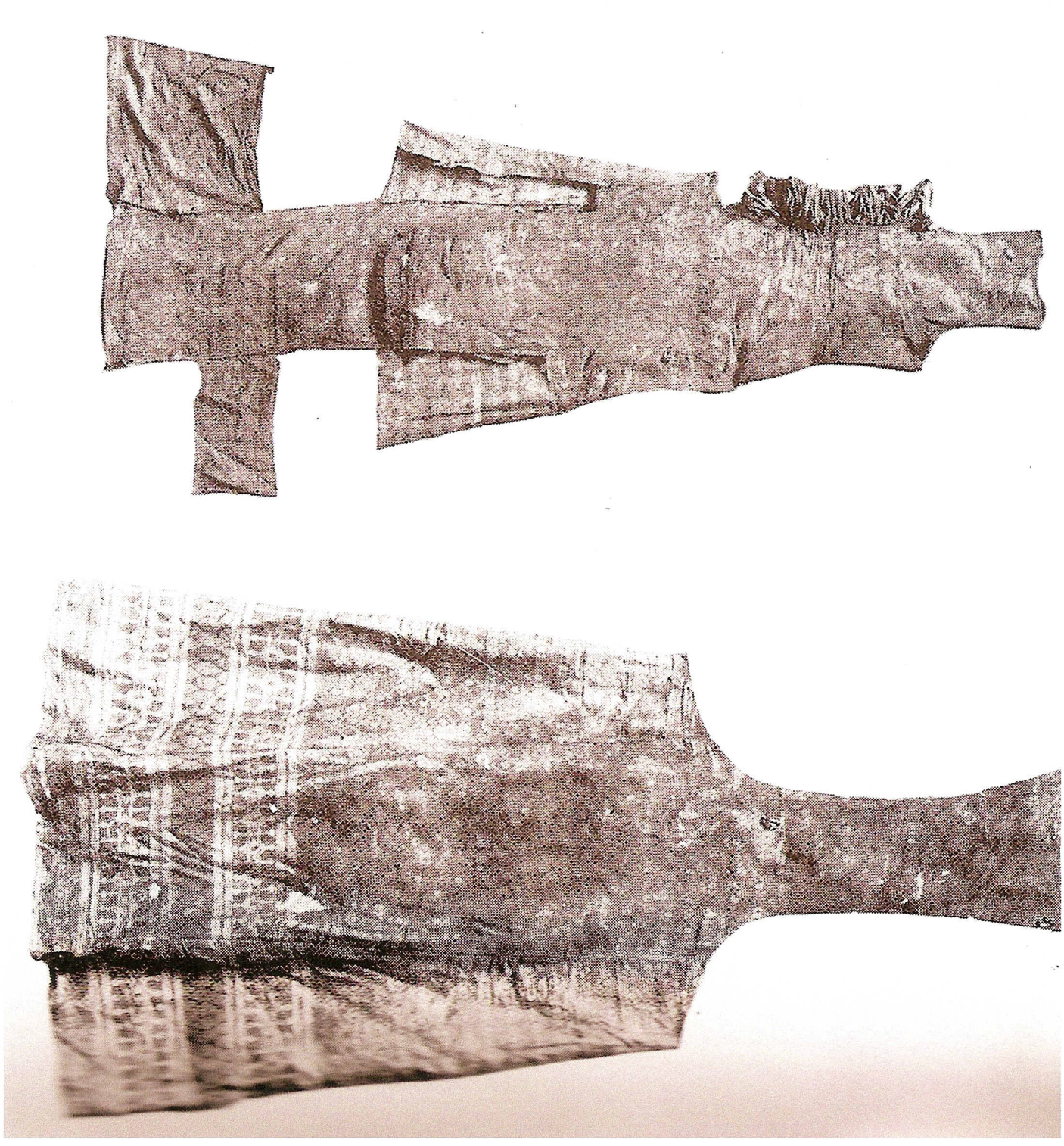


Image 11.b.

Image 11.c.

Image 11.d.

Image 11.e.

Image
120

Other referenced works:

From our Textbook, "Snyder's Medieval Art, Second Edition." by Henry Luttikhuizen and Dorothy Verkerk.

1. Page 344, figure 16.32: Saint Theodore (1230-35). Left jamb, left portal, south transept, Chartres Cathedral.

2. Page 457, figure 20.24: Lady Embraces the Poet Konrad von Altstetten. Manesse Codex, c. 1300. Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg.

3. Page 369, figure 17.8: Blanche of Castile and her son, Louis IX. Dedication page from the Bible Moralisée. (1226-34) Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

4. Page 355, figure 16.49: Virgin and Child (*Vierge Dorée*) (1260-70) Trumeau, south transept portal, Amiens Cathedral.

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Nice sources