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L'évolution de la broderie de tradition byzantine en
Méditerranée orientale et dans le monde slave
(1200-1800)

Underside Couching in the Byzantine World

Le point couché retiré dans le monde byzantin

Η βελονιά “underside couching” στον Βυζαντινό κόσμο

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Underside Couching in the Byzantine World

Abstract: It has long been a shared assumption of textile specialists that the underside couching technique was used exclusively in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. England is the most renowned medieval center of gold embroidery in this technique, although sporadic examples are known from other centers, particularly in Italy. Works of gold embroidery that employ underside couching, no matter how Byzantine their stylistic appearance, have been attributed to Western workshops based on the principle that the Byzantines were ignorant of the technique. New information, however, should prompt a reevaluation of this assumption. Several examples that have recently come to light from the regions north of the Black Sea suggest that the Byzantines and their Slavic neighbors may have experimented with the underside couching technique in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Keywords: Byzantine world, England, Middle Ages, underside couching technique

Le point couché retiré dans le monde byzantin

Résumé : les spécialistes du textile ont longtemps partagé la conviction que la technique du point couché retiré était utilisée au Moyen Âge exclusivement dans le monde occidental. L'Angleterre est le centre le plus renommé de borderie au fil d'or dans cette technique, même si des exemples d'autres centres, sporadiques, sont connus, particulièrement en Italie. Des broderies à l'or qui utilisent le point couché retiré, malgré leur apparence extérieure byzantine, ont été attribuées à des ateliers occidentaux en partant du principe que les Byzantins ignoraient cette technique. Mais des exemples, récemment révélés, du nord de la mer Noire suggèrent que les Byzantins et leurs voisins slaves ont pu expérimenter cette technique au *xii*^e siècle et au début du *xiii*^e.

Mots-clés : Angleterre, monde byzantin, Moyen Âge, technique du point couché retiré

Η βελονιά “underside couching” στον Βυζαντινό κόσμο

Περίληψη: Για μακρό χρονικό διάστημα, κοινή πεποίθηση των μελετητών του υφάσματος διεδνώς υπήρξε το γεγονός ότι η τεχνική της βελονιάς κεντήματος «underside couching» ήταν σε χρήση κατά τον Μεσαίωνα αποκλειστικά στον Δυτικό κόσμο. Πρόκειται για τη βελονιά που αφορά τα σύρματα και μεταλλικά νήματα, όταν αυτά απλώνονται πάνω στην επιφάνεια του υφάσματος βάσης και στερεώνονται με μεταξωτό νήμα, το οποίο τραβά τόσο πολύ το μέταλλο προς τα κάτω, ώστε το σύρμα ή μεταλλικό νήμα από την πίσω όψη να σχηματίζει μια δηλειά σε κάθε βελονιά. Η Αγγλία, λοιπόν, αποτελεί το πλέον γνωστό κέντρο στη Δύση, όπου τα χρυσοκεντήματα παρουσιάζουν την προαναφερθείσα τεχνική, ακόμη κι αν σποραδικά άλλα κέντρα έχουν να επιδείξουν τέτοιου είδους παραδείγματα και, πιο συγκεκριμένα, στην Ιταλία. Κεντήματα αυτής της τεχνικής, επομένως, παρά την Βυζαντινή εξωτερική τους εμφάνιση, έχουν αποδοθεί σε εργαστήρια Δυτικά βάσει της αρχής ότι οι Βυζαντινοί αγνοούσαν την εν λόγω τεχνική. Αντίθετα ωστόσο, περιπτώσεις κεντημάτων που αποκαλύφθηκαν πρόσφατα βορείως της Μαύρης Θάλασσας αποτελούν σοβαρές ενδείξεις ότι τόσο οι Βυζαντινοί, όσον και οι βόρειοι Σλάβοι γείτονές τους χρησιμοποιούσαν την τεχνική «underside couching» κατά τον 12ο αιώνα και στις αρχές του 13ου αιώνα.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά : η Αγγλία, ο Βυζαντινός κόσμος, ο Μεσαίωνας, η βελονιά «underside couching»

Underside Couching in the Byzantine World

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Among historians of medieval embroideries, there is a kind of received wisdom that the Byzantines used surface couching exclusively. That is to say that in Byzantine embroideries, the metallic threads (whether made of gold or silver-gilt foil wrapped around a silk core or made of drawn metal wire) remain on the face of the fabric to which they are secured by the couching stitches and never penetrate the support textile. Underside couching (French: *point couché retiré*, German: *Anlegetechnik mit versenktem Metallfaden*), that technique in which a tiny loop of the gold thread is pulled through to the back side of the supporting fabric by a couching thread – generally of linen – is a feature thought to be absent from Byzantine embroidery (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. DIAGRAM OF UNDERSIDE COUCHING TECHNIQUE

Image : redrawn by Jacqui Hopely Monkell.

Underside couching is associated first and foremost with England and its eponymous *opus anglicanum* embroidery production, although scattered examples of underside couching are known from other locations, including Sicily, South Italy and Venice – but not Byzantium.¹ This, at least, was the conclusion reached

1. SCHUETTE & MÜLLER-CHRISTENSEN, 1963, p. 12; MONNAS, 2016, p. 12.

by Pauline Johnstone's foundational survey, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*, in which she professes not to have been able to find any example of underside couching in either Byzantine or post-Byzantine embroidery. Johnstone thus concludes that underside couching was "a technique unknown to Byzantine embroiderers".² For the past half-century, therefore, it has been treated almost as an axiom that the presence of underside couching on a work of gold embroidery can be used to exclude Constantinople — and the Byzantine Empire more broadly — as the locus of production.³

FIGURE 2. EMBROIDERED PANEL, ATTRIB. VENICE, CA. 1325. EMBROIDERED SILK IN METAL THREAD AND SILKS, LINED WITH LINEN AND SILK VELVET

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, T.92-1969.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Underside Couching as Tool for Attribution

This principle of treating underside couching as decisive evidence against a Byzantine attribution applies even when the style of the piece is extremely Byzantine. One may take as an example the embroidered panel with a half-length figure of the blessing Christ, surrounded by a floral border, now in London (Fig. 2). Christ's facial type with the highly arched brows and slender nose, the rendering of the shadows on his neck, and the articulation of the drapery all are typical of Palaiologan art of the early fourteenth century. The Latin inscription of Christ's open book, "*Ego sum lux mundi*," on the other hand, suggests

2. JOHNSTONE, 1967, p. 67.

3. On the other hand, the *absence* of underside couching is used to argue a Byzantine attribution in the case of the embroidered roundels on a manipel from Halberstadt Cathedral (MELLER, MUNDT & SCHMUHL, 2008, p. 212).

a Western provenance. Technical analysis discloses the presence of the underside couching technique, which has led the museum to attribute the work to a Venetian workshop of the early fourteenth century.⁴

A more complicated case arises with the Grandson Antependium now in the Historical Museum in Bern (Fig. 3).⁵

FIGURE 3. GRANDSON ANTEPENDIUM, CENTRAL PORTION ATTRIB. TO CYPRUS, LAST QUARTER OF 13TH CENTURY; SIDE PANELS ATTRIB. ENGLAND, EARLY 14TH CENTURY. GILDED SILVER THREAD AND COLORED SILK THREAD EMBROIDERY ON A TABBY (CENTRAL PANEL) OR TWILL (SIDE PANELS) SILK TEXTILE GROUND

© Bernisches Historisches Museum, Bern. Photograph Nadja Frey.

At first glance, the center portion of the hanging is quite Byzantine in appearance, with its enthroned Virgin and Child between two censing archangels. Despite this impression of a Byzantine composition, there are a few anomalies. Most obviously, the presence of the diminutive donor figure in a full suit of mail and surcoat at the foot of the throne speaks to the admixture of Western European elements, as do the heraldic blazons on either side. The identification of the armorial blazons links the work to the patronage of Othon I Grandson, whose biography places him at various times in Crusader Acre, Cyprus and England, while the measurements of the antependium link it convincingly to the altar formerly in the cathedral of Lausanne.⁶

4. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, T.92-1969. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93469/embroidered-panel-unknown/> Last accessed 12 August 2019.

5. FLURY-LEMBERG, 1988, p. 107-111 & p. 460, cat. no. 2; MARTINIANI-REBER, 2006 & 2007; BACCI, 2008; MUTHESIUS, 2013, p. 195-196.

6. The altar, made of black Saint-Tryphon marble, is now in Berne. Personal communication with Marielle MARTINIANI-REBER, 2 February 2020.

The use of Latin and French inscriptions for the Mother of God and the archangels, respectively, also suggests an environment in which Western medieval and Byzantine visual cultures coexisted. Even the Byzantinizing iconography is not itself purely Eastern. Already in 1958, Mechtild Lemberg noted that the spherical form of the censers is typically Western European rather than Byzantine.⁷ In fact, despite their ubiquity in the art of Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, censuring angels in Byzantine art are rather uncommon prior to the Palaiologan period.⁸

If the composition suggests a blending of Byzantine and Western European elements, the same is true of the work's embroidery technique. The execution of the central portion of the antependium is in surface couching, which has suggested to scholars an Eastern Mediterranean origin (whether Byzantium itself, the Crusader states, or Cyprus) in keeping with its hybrid Byzantine and Western European style. The two flanking panels with their vases and twining vines are attributed to a different workshop on the basis of their use of underside couching.⁹ Following

7. 1957/58; cited in MARTINIANI-REBER, 2007, p. 86-87.

8. A pair of censuring archangels, holding thuribles of the short-chained type familiar from Late Antiquity, appear flanking the Virgin and Child in the paintings of the third phase (dated ca. 550-600) in the northern semidome of the Red Monastery, near Sohag, Egypt. Angels in deaconal dress carrying censers figure in the four subsidiary domes of the Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi, dated by inscription to 1164. At the late 11th or early 12th century Panagia Mavriotissa at Kastoria, a pair of angels vested as deacons swing censers on either side of an image of the True Cross on the west wall of the naos. The liturgical roll Stavrou 109, dated on stylistic grounds to the late 11th century, shows the archangels Uriel and Raphael waving censers on either side of the column of text, although it is significant that they are shown dressed as deacons rather than in the loros typical for archangels, as is the case with the Grandson Antependium. Another censuring angel, designated simply as ἄγγελος Κ[υρί]ου, appears in the context of the heavenly liturgy scene that ornaments the prayer of the Proskomide. See, respectively, BOLMAN, 2016, p. 142-144, Figs. 10.19, 10.21, 10.22; SINKEVIĆ, 2000, p. 40, pl. 12, 14, 26, 27; TETERIATNIKOV, 1995, p. 179, Fig. 9; VOCOTOPoulos, 2002, p. 101, 107, Figs. 46, 50. I would like to thank Catherine Fernandez of the Index of Medieval Art at Princeton, Vasileios Marinis, and Courtney Tomaselli for these references.

9. MARTINIANI-REBER, 2007, p. 85, n 3. There is a mistake in the technical information given, where "underside couching" is reported erroneously for the central section; other published sources, including Martiniani-Reber herself, agree that the central portion is surface-couched exclusively. The same error appears in the French text of the exhibition catalogue itself, where "Broderie au point couché retiré" is mistakenly repeated for both the central and flanking panels of the antependium. The error is repeated in MUTHESIUS, 2013, p. 195-196. Schuette and Müller-Christensen attribute the central panel tentatively to South Italy, Sicily, or perhaps Venice; more recently, Leonie von Wilckens and Marielle Martiniani-Reber have favored an attribution of the central panel to Cyprus (von WILCKENS, 1995, p. 279-289).

Marie Schuette and Sigrid Müller-Christensen, the majority of scholars have accepted this technique as evidence of the side panels' manufacture in England, since they have treated underside couching as a virtually equivalent term to *opus anglicanum*.¹⁰ As what follows will demonstrate, this equivalence is false. Not all English medieval embroidery, or *opus anglicanum*, utilizes underside couching, nor are all examples of underside couching English in origin.

Even if the criterion of surface vs. underside couching were removed from the equation, the attributions given above for the antependium in Bern and the embroidered panel in London would likely stand. But what about more ambiguous cases? A prime example is furnished by the Mantle of Philip of Swabia.¹¹ The mantle, identical in form to a liturgical *pluviale* or cope, was excavated from the grave of Philip of Swabia (†1208) in Speyer Cathedral in 1900. It bears on either side of its opening a pair of large (21.5 cm diameter) embroidered medallions with images of a blessing Christ and the Mother of God (Fig. 4). The Byzantine style of the two medallion images is striking. Although their current state of preservation is extremely poor,¹² it is clear that the figures conform to standard Byzantine iconographic types: Christ is shown with a closed codex in his left hand and blessing with his right hand, while the Mother of God holds her hands outward in an orant pose. The figures are labeled with the typical Greek abbreviations for the *nomina sacra* of Jesus Christ and the Mother of God. The rendering of the draperies follows Byzantine conventions, and Christ makes his gesture of blessing in the Byzantine rather than in the Western manner. The alternating heart-shaped motif of the medallion border can be compared with parallel examples both in Byzantine textiles and manuscript illumination.¹³ On the other hand, the technique used of the metal threads is underside couching.¹⁴

10. SCHUETTE & MÜLLER-CHRISTENSEN, 1963, p. 31, no. 99; FLURY-LEMBERG, 1988, p. 107.

11. MÜLLER-CHRISTENSEN, KUBACH & STEIN, 1972, p. 959-960; LALLI, 2006, p. 117; TEKAMPE, 2011, p. 196. Speyer, Domschatzkammer im Historischen Museum der Pfalz, inv. Nr. D 332.

12. Since the restoration campaign of 1960, the embroideries have been protected under gauze (TEKAMPE, 2011, p. 197).

13. A similar motif occurs in the borders of the medallion of a silk lampas sewn as the "curtain" over a miniature in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M. 709, fol. 78r (SCHORTA, 2001, p. 276, cat. no. 144). Compare also the border motif on the miniature of the Evangelist Mark in an early 13th century Greek Book of Gospels in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, MS Tapou 60, fol. 77v (VOCOTOPOULOS, 2002, p. 56, Fig. 22).

14. HERGET *et al.*, 2011, p. 224.

FIGURE 4. EMBROIDERED ROUNDELS FROM MANTLE OF PHILIP OF SWABIA, ATTRIB. BYZANTIUM OR SICILY, LAST QUARTER OF THE 12TH CENTURY

Domschatz, Historisches Museum zu Pfalz, Speyer, Inv. no. D 332

Image: Historisches Museum zu Pfalz, Speyer. Photographer: Peter Haag-Kirchner.

These stylistic parallels were sufficient for Schuette and Müller-Christensen to attribute the embroideries to Byzantium, ca. 1200, following the conclusions of Schramm and Mutherich.¹⁵ Leonie von Wilckens, on the other hand, rejected a Byzantine attribution for these roundels, citing the use of the underside couching technique, otherwise unknown in Byzantine embroideries. She connected them, instead, with the several pieces of the coronation regalia from Palermo that feature underside couching.¹⁶ The same opinion is followed by Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gail Owen-Crocker in their recent publication, where they note the supposedly un-Byzantine characteristic of underside couching in the haloes, draperies, and in the ornament of the medallions' borders.¹⁷ Others, again based on the shared use

15. SCHUETTE & MÜLLER-CHRISTENSEN, 1963, p. 29; SCHRAMM & MÜTHERICH, 1962, p. 185-187.

16. VON WILCKENS, 1991, p. 184; 1995, p. 279. In her 1995 article, p. 282, von Wilckens attributes a second group of embroideries with underside couching to central Italy, although this thesis is contested by Rotraud BAUER (2006, p. 399, cat. no. VI.12).

17. COATSWORTH & OWEN-CROCKER, 2018, p. 91-92.

of underside couching, have compared the embroideries on the mantle of Philip of Swabia with the more highly stylized figures executed in the same technique on the Mantle of Otto IV in Braunschweig, although they have only a rather tenuous stylistic connection.¹⁸ Thus the majority of recent scholarship rejects a Byzantine attribution for the embroideries despite Philip of Swabia's strong Byzantine connections. Philip was married to Irina Angelina, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Isaac II Angelos (r. 1185-1195, 1203-1204). When his brother-in-law, the future Alexios IV, fled to Philip's court, he unwittingly set in motion the chain of events that would lead to the Fourth Crusade's diversion to Constantinople and the overthrow of Byzantine rule in the capital.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the consensus of recent publications has been that the embroideries must be attributed to Sicily on technical grounds, again, because underside couching is unknown among embroideries from Byzantium. There are some justifications for a Sicilian attribution in the biography of Irina Angelina, who reportedly met Philip of Swabia in Sicily.²⁰ If, on the other hand, examples existed of underside couching from Eastern contexts, the simplest solution would surely be to attribute the embroideries on the mantle of Philip of Swabia to a Byzantine workshop.

New Evidence of Underside Couching in the East

As it happens, recent publications have brought to light examples of underside couching in embroideries of Byzantine style from the Slavic world. Zvezdana Dode and Arseniy Petrov have authored detailed studies on the remains of an embroidered textile with the Ascension of Christ depicted according to Byzantine iconographic conventions.²¹ The textile was discovered in a 1978 excavation in Kalmykia, within the Russian North Caucasus. The embroidery, probably originally an altar frontal or a *podea* for an icon, was cut into irregular pieces and used to adorn a set of Mongol trousers.²² Although the inscriptions are now very fragmentary, it is possible to determine that they were in Church Slavonic rather than Greek. Petrov has noted that these fragments show the use of underside couching, which is indicated by the loops raised on the back side of the silk tabby ground fabric (Fig. 5a-b).

18. BLOCHER, 2011, p. 126.

19. Robert de CLARI, 1969, p. 45-46.

20. WELLER, 2010, p. 100-101.

21. DODE, 2014, no. 1, p. 54-66; PETROV, 2014, no. 1, p. 67-74.

22. DODE, 2014, p. 55-56.

FIGURE 5. FRAGMENT OF EMBROIDERY OF THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST, OBVERSE (A) AND REVERSE (B), ATTRIB. KYIVAN RUS' (?), 12TH OR EARLY 13TH CENTURY

From grave Guva 2 (Mongol period, late 13th early 14th century), in Kalmykia, Russian Federation. Image: Zvezdana Dode.

Petrov attributes the piece to the period prior to the Mongol invasion of the region, that is, to the twelfth century or beginning of the thirteenth century.²³ This object is surely not the only example of underside couching to survive from pre-Mongol Rus'. A small fragment (about 4 cm long) with underside-couched gold threads made of silver-gilt foil wrapped around a reddish silk core, is preserved among the twelfth-century objects from the Kylv' Treasure of 1889, now in the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.²⁴

Other examples of underside couching have come to light through archaeological investigation. The 1981 excavations at the Chungul Kurgan in southern Ukraine revealed an extraordinary trove of embroidered garments in

23. PETROV, 2014, p. 72.

24. KONDAKOV, 1896, p. 139; KORZUKHINA, 1954, p. 118-119. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum, inv. no. БК-2763G. The present author had the opportunity to examine the textile fragment in person in November 2007.

the burial of a steppe nomadic ruler.²⁵ The deceased was dressed for his burial in both an inner and an outer caftan, and several other robes were placed in the grave with him for his use in the afterlife. The outer caftan on the body itself bore an elaborate band of embroidery extending down the front of the garment and around the shoulders and cuffs (Fig. 6).

This band was divided into panels separated by rows of metallic braid created from twisted pairs of metallic threads sewn down side-by-side to create a plait-like effect. This same braid, together with pearl stringing, was looped around silver-gilt plaques to create intricate, quatrefoil-shaped knots. Between these, roundels approximately 4 cm in diameter contain individual embroidered faces against a gold background. Examination of the reverse side of the embroidery shows that, while the braid and the pearl stringing were surface couched, the roundels' background of gold threads was executed with underside couching.²⁶ On the obverse side, the couching stitches are spaced 3 mm apart and are offset by half of their length from one row to the next (Fig. 7).

FIGURE 6. DETAIL OF EMBROIDERED DECORATION ON BURIAL CAFTAN, ATTRIB. BYZANTIUM OR NEIGHBORING POLITY, LATE 12TH EARLY 13TH CENTURY

From 13th century burial at the Chungul Kurgan, near Zamozhne, Ukraine. Image: © Chungul Kurgan Project. Photographer Yuriy Rassamakin.

25. WOODFIN, RASSAMAKIN & HOLOD, 2010. Other archaeological finds of underside couching from the Gródek on the Bug River in Eastern Poland, excavated in 1952-1955 have been recently published in CYBULSKA, MARCINIAK & SIELSKI, 2018.

26. The silver-gilt foil of the gold threads is wrapped Z on a single S-twisted thread. The whole assembled thread measures 12 mm in diameter, and there are 8 twists of the gold foil per mm. For comparison, see JÁRO, 2006, p. 163-169.

FIGURE 7. DETAIL OF EMBROIDERED
ROUNDELS ON BURIAL CAFTAN
FROM THE CHUNGUL KURGAN

© Chungul Kurgan Project.
Photographer Dmytro Klochko.

The precise spacing of the couching stitches evidently results from the counting of the threads of the base textile, and the couching threads pull the gold completely through to the back of the textile, making this an example of underside couching. The couching thread consists of a double ply of silk, Z-twisted, its two strands plied S (Fig. 8).

FIGURE 8. DETAIL OF REVERSE
SIDE OF EMBROIDERED
ROUNDELS ON BURIAL CAFTAN
FROM THE CHUNGUL KURGAN

© Chungul Kurgan Project.
Photographer Dmytro Klochko.

This stands in contrast to the linen thread normally used for underside couching in *opus anglicanum* and seen in other, non-English examples, including the Mantle of Philip of Swabia.

Another of the garments buried with the “prince” from the Chungul Kurgan was ornamented with a complex pattern of interlaced quatrefoils with an embroidered palmette motif at the center of each, alternating with canted and foliated square motifs with a bird at the center (Fig. 9).

As with the embroideries on the burial caftan, the gold threads are underside couched to the unpatterned samite supporting textile. The general program of embroidered decoration, with its linked medallions resembling repeating motifs in a figured woven textile, recalls the yellow silk dossal from the basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, another work that features the underside couching technique (Fig. 10).²⁷

FIGURE 10. EMBROIDERED
DECORATION OF YELLOW
DOSSAL FROM TREASURY OF
SAN FRANCESCO, ASSISI

Image: © Archivio fotografico del Sacro
Convento di S. Francesco in Assisi, Italia.

FIGURE 9. EMBROIDERED
QUATREFOIL DECORATION FROM
CAFTAN FOUND NEXT TO THE
BODY IN THE CHUNGUL KURGAN
BURIAL

Image: © Chungul Kurgan Project.
Photographer Yuriy Rassamakin.

The oldest inventory that lists this dossal, drawn up in 1338, lists it as the gift of the “Imperator graecorum” – possibly referring to the Latin Emperor of Constantinople, Baldwin II (1228-1261).²⁸ This hint at an eastern Mediterranean provenance for the dossal supports the possibility that it was

27. D’ARCHANGELO, 2006. The pattern can be compared with the “Griffin and panther” patterns frequently seen in textiles of the eleventh century, such as the vestments from the grave of Pope Clement II. See SCHORTA, 2001, p. 104-119.

28. Von WILCKENS, 1995, p. 281.

embroidered not in Sicily – as its similarities to the Norman coronation regalia have led others to suggest – but in Constantinople during its Crusader interregnum.

Conclusions

What emerges from this survey of twelfth and thirteenth-century embroideries is that technique was variable from workshop to workshop and even within workshops. While several of the gold embroideries associated with the Norman court of Palermo utilize underside couching, not all do. Similarly, we have a number of Byzantine embroideries that have survived either in Western European church treasuries (the Halberstadt aeres, the orphrey of the Eichstätt chasuble, etc.) or in archaeological contexts (the bishop's vestments from Khardzhali in Bulgaria) that do not feature underside couching, but several embroideries of Byzantine or Kyivan Rus' origin have recently come to light that reveal knowledge of this technique. We cannot, therefore, assume the consistent use of either surface or underside couching as an identifying feature for the production of any given center. One of the insights that came across in the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2016 *Opus Anglicanum* exhibition was that surface couching was often used for more time-sensitive (generally secular) commissions, even by the English embroiders who most excelled at underside couching. Similarly, Márta Járó has noted the coexistence of two types of metallic threads among the embroideries of the Norman royal regalia: some with foil wrapping and others with a leather substrate in imitation of Central Asian examples.²⁹ In other words, expecting total consistency of technique from a single center of production may be a mistake.

Leonie von Wilckens has identified as the oldest surviving example of underside couching the embroidery of the reverse side of a reliquary pouch, once in the collection of the bishop of Hildesheim, now in the Germanisches National Museum in Nuremberg (Fig. 11).³⁰

Although the reliquary pouch has been previously published as a Byzantine work of the eleventh or twelfth century,³¹ Von Wilckens reattributed it to Ottonian Trier, ca. 993, linking its appliqued gold decoration to the settings of the gems on the shrine of St. Egbert at Trier;³² this is now the attribution and dating used

29. JÁRÓ, 2006, p. 596-599.

30. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, KG 562. Von WILCKENS, 1986, 1991b; 1995, p. 383.

31. CHATZIDAKIS *et al.*, 1964, p. 474; SCHUETTE & MÜLLER-CHRISTENSEN, 1963, p. 30.

32. Von WILCKENS, 1986, p. 22-23.

by the German National Museum in its guidebook.³³ Von Wilckens pointed out that there are no other reliquary pouches attributed to Byzantium, and the presence of the Greek abbreviation IC XC for Jesus Christ on the reverse side in no way guarantees a Byzantine provenance.

On the other hand, much about the reliquary's embroidery remains strikingly Byzantine in appearance. In particular, the obverse side's decoration, consisting of braids and knot motifs made from strands of twined gold threads combined with pearls and silver-gilt plaques, bears a striking similarity to the applied ornaments of the burial caftan from the Chungul Kurgan. Testing of the gold threads used on the pouch show them to be gilded silver, which would make them of the very few known examples of silver-gilt embroidery threads from a piece dated to the first millennium CE.³⁴ It is well worth considering, then, whether rather than being a precocious example of underside couching in tenth century Germany, the pouch from Hildesheim might have originated as a product of Byzantine or even Latin-ruled Constantinople in the twelfth or thirteenth century.³⁵ Although the evidence is scattered and fragmentary, it now seems that we can assert that Byzantium was indeed acquainted with underside couching, however brief its moment of experimentation with the technique may have been.

FIGURE 11. RELIQUARY POUCH, ATTRIB. TRIER, CA. 993. GILDED SILVER THREAD EMBROIDERY WITH SILVER-GILT PLAQUES, PEARLS, AND GEMS ON SILK TWILL TEXTILE GROUND

Germanisches Nationalmuseum,
Nuremberg, Inv. no. KG 562. Image:
Germanisches National Museum.

33. MAUÉ & KUPPER, 1997, p. 29.

34. JÁRÓ, TÓTH & GONDÁR, 1990, p. 301.

35. A number of Eastern Mediterranean silks dated to the twelfth century survive in Hildesheim. See SCHORTA, 2001, p. 234-246, cat. nos. 96, 101, 103, 104, 107.

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