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## Byzantine Textiles: Embroidery

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Byzantine Art History

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### Byzantine Textiles: Embroidery

The textile that I will be discussing is the Embroidered Medallion found in the fifteenth to the sixteenth century Byzantine Empire. This rare example of Byzantine embroidery consists of two medallions, one depicting the eagle of Saint John, the other the angel of Saint Matthew, two of the four evangelists. The original piece is paired with the other medallion, which shows the symbol for Mark and Luke. Since their scale is so small it suggests that they are meant to be attached to an [epitrachelion](#), a stole worn by priests and bishops as a symbol of their priest hood.

In this essay I will discuss how Matthew, John, Mark and Luke are holy figures that are depicted in these embroidered medallions, their significance to this piece of loom, and how elements, such as age, gender, and rank in a liturgical vestment relate to its role in the ritual of the liturgy, how it articulates the role of the priest who wore it, and connects the liturgy and/or the priest to big concepts in Christianity. These saints were a symbol of having an exemplary life and they tell us very important history throughout the history of the church and the meaning that has been created and held behind each. The Medallion itself was made using a traditional technique in decorating colored metal jewelry with thin gold wire creating a vivid image of the Evangelist symbol of John. The importance of silk in Byzantine culture went far beyond the pleasing aesthetic qualities of the material, embedded as it was in the story of

Byzantium's Golden Age under Justinian. Nine centuries later, it still resonated with the idea of Byzantine cultural leadership and supremacy.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire during the fifth century, the Byzantine Empire became the most significant destination for merchants traveling along the **Silk Road** to the west. In Emperor Justinian the first (527-565 AD), Constantinople continued its development into a cosmopolitan city that served as a center of commerce and culture along the Silk Road. This maintained the ancient connection between the Romans and the Chinese. Regardless of strains of this connection, such as Justinian's creation of a domestic silk production industry, conflicts began to arise with the Sassanid Persians intermediaries, and the Justinianic Plague, Constantinople and China maintained an important relationship on the western and eastern ends of the Silk production throughout Justinian's reign. Silk trade dominated the connection between the two civilizations during Justinian's reign, which helped fuel a prosperous commercial enterprise. The Book of the Later Han (**Hou Hanshu**) states that China received gold threaded and multi-colored embroideries, woven gold threaded net, delicate polychrome silks painted with gold, and other products from the Romans.

Embroidery was one of the most important methods the Byzantine used for decorating their clothing. We will define embroidery as the decoration of fabric with patterns of stitching or needlework, in which the thread is pushed through the fabric to make a pattern that is raised from the fabric and tied off in the back. Rich and colorful types of thread made embroiderers work stand out the most. They favored bright colors like purple, golds, blues, reds and yellow especially and they used silk and threads. Embroidery was fully utilized during the time of the Byzantine Empire (476-1453 B.C.E), when embroidered fabric, trim pieces and decorative patches were essential to Byzantine costume. The Byzantines wore plain fabric garments that

would be heavily decorated with embroidery. Geometric patterns, such as diamonds, squares, and circles were on them, including flowers and leaves for ornaments. Birds, such as the one found on this piece of embroidery, or mythical creatures were embroidered within the patterns as well. Nevertheless, embroidery from Byzantine has had a great influence on the embroidery of many clothes throughout the Middle Ages (c. 500-c. 1500 C.E) and beyond Europe and Russia in particular.

Legends have it that at a young age John became an apostle, which was a form of ideas and contributed much to medieval iconography; this was sourced from the “Acts of John”. The Chalice, showcased with a snake emerging from it, was seen as a familiar attribute of John. In accordance to one legend from the Acts of John, he was put up to a challenge to drink from a cup of poison in order to demonstrate the power of his faith. The poison was made harmless, thanks to God's aid. The Last Supper could also be used as an interpretation when referencing the chalice, or to the words of Christ to John, which are “My chalice indeed you shall drink”. Also, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia 1910, some of its authorities believed that this particular symbol was not adopted well until the thirteenth century. There have been many other legends of John, and one of them has it as John was at some stage put into hot oil and boiled, then miraculously preserved. A common attribute is a scroll, which referenced his own writings. Nevertheless, John the Evangelist is symbolically represented by an eagle, which is one of the creatures envisioned by Ezekiel in the Book of Revelations.



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