

# Conference Report

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## Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle Ages (Bard Graduate Center, 28-29 April 2022)

### *Conference Organizers:*

Ittai Weinryb (Bard Graduate Center)  
Elizabeth Dospel Williams (Dumbarton Oaks)

### *Report by:*

Ellen Enderle  
(Bard Graduate Center and  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The practice of adorning, protecting, and covering the body has long been fundamental to humankind, with recent archaeological discoveries yielding wearable ornaments dating to the Middle Pleistocene era.<sup>1</sup> The wearable is both highly representational and undeniably intimate; it communicates individual, social, and cultural identities, while being worn on the body and sometimes holding complex personal meaning or even performing protective functions for the wearer. Addressing an extensive range of adornments found in the Byzantine, Eurasian, Islamic, and Western-European medieval traditions, ranging from textiles and jewelry to body modifications such as cosmetics and tattoos, the symposium *Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle*

*Ages* sought to expand our understanding of the wearable in the Middle Ages. The two-day collaborative event, which took place at Bard Graduate Center in New York City, was organized by Ittai Weinryb, Associate Professor at Bard Graduate Center, and Elizabeth Dospel Williams, Associate Curator of the Byzantine Collection at Dumbarton Oaks. On the first morning of the symposium, participants attended a workshop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted by Christine Brennan (Research Scholar and Collections Manager, Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters), Kathrin Colburn (Conservator, Textile Conservation), Melanie Holcomb (Curator and Manager of Collection Strategy, Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters), and Andrew Winslow

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1. E. M. Sehassseh, P. Fernandez, S. Kuhn, M. Stiner, S. Mentzer, D. Colarossi, A. Clark, F. Lanoe, M. Pailles, D. Hoffmann, A. Benson, E. Rhodes, M. Benmansour, A. Laissaoui, I. Ziani, P. Matutano, J. Morales, Y. Djellal, B. Longet, J.-J. Hublin, M. Mouhiddine, F.-Z. Rafi, K.B. Worthey, I. Sanchez-Morales, N. Ghayati, and A. Bouzouggar, "Early Middle Stone Age personal ornaments from Bizmoune Cave, Morocco," *Science Advances*, 7 (2021).

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(Principal Departmental Technician). In this object-focused session, the organizers and presenters viewed, analyzed, and discussed an array of wearable objects of the Middle Ages, spanning different media, periods, geographies, and specializations. The jewelry and metalwork consisted of a gold earring from early Byzantine Egypt (25.2.13); a gold necklace with an emerald and agate-intaglio pendant made between the sixth and eighth centuries (58.43); a pendant and a locket, both fourteenth-century French silver-gilt and basse-taille enamel (17.190.916, 17.190.964); a fifteenth-century French reliquary pendant (17.190.983); and a gold and cloisonné enamel reliquary finial made in ninth- or tenth-century Byzantium (1972.58). The textiles included a British orphrey made of metal, silk, and linen (2009.300.2750) and two Italian silk textiles brocaded with metal thread (09.50.967, 46.156.45), all dated to the fourteenth century; an Egyptian wool textile fragment depicting a mythological creature produced sometime between the seventh and ninth centuries (2018.913.5); an early Byzantine Coptic wool and linen fragment displaying confronted roosters and dogs (2011.363); and an Egyptian textile fragment of woven wool displaying a geometric pattern made between the sixth and ninth centuries. This shared exercise of reconsidering familiar objects and encountering new ones stimulated many constructive conversations that bridged media and specializations to reveal the interrelatedness of wearable objects—setting the tone for the conference to come. Following a brief intermission, the participants reconvened at the Bard Graduate Center for the first session

of the symposium. In her opening remarks, Williams addressed the need to reconsider the medieval wearable beyond the museological framework and the discrete classification system of the museum storeroom, in which the standard taxonomic divisions of medium, production origins, and period often estrange the wearable from its function, greater assemblage, and the body itself. She proposed an alternative approach that considers adornments and textiles holistically, in terms of ensemble and interrelatedness, and also takes into account the complex technical, visual, somatic, cultural, and material contexts in which these artifacts existed. Following Dospel Williams' introduction, Weinryb contextualized the motivation to “rethink” the wearable in the Middle Ages within the framework of recent developments in the fields of the history of science, comparative religion, psychology, anthropology, and the history of disability, as well as the impact of the sociological theory of agency on the study of material culture. From advancements in our understanding of medieval manufacturing technologies to archeological discoveries that have shed light on how objects were used in ritual practices, over the past twenty years scholars have benefited from greater insights into how people envisioned, understood, and interacted with wearables in the Middle Ages, making it an appropriate time for reevaluation. Though the following presentations addressed a diverse array of media, cultural traditions, geographies, and time periods, all of them took new analytical perspectives and methodological approaches to evaluating, contextualizing, and ultimately better understanding the wearable in the Middle Ages.

Alicia Walker (Bryn Mawr College) opened the symposium with her paper entitled, “Christian Bodies Clothed in Pagan Bodies: The Implications of Greco-Roman Mythological Imagery on Early Byzantine Items of Dress and Adornment.” Walker presented multiple examples of late Roman and Byzantine garments, jewelry, and wearable accessories decorated with non-Christian mythological figures—many of which were worn by early Byzantine Christians. She explored how early Christians employed, interpreted, and negotiated the wearing of non-Christian imagery, specifically the “social and spiritual implications” of adorning the Christian body in a manner that linked the wearer with pagan models. Through the examination of several case studies, including an early Byzantine necklace with a gold and lapis lazuli pendant of Aphrodite Anadyomene, a fifth century tunic with woven Dionysian ornament, and a gold marriage belt that intermingled Christian and pagan iconography, Walker proposed that such iconography may have been understood in terms of early Byzantine theories of vision and impression, particularly the notion that a person’s eyes were directly connected to the soul and that the impressions made by imagery directly inspired and shaped selfhood. She further stated that these worn images might have functioned as powerful agents utilized in mimetic operations involving emulation, identification with, and the embodiment of aspirational figures by way of imagery worn on garments and personal adornment. Moreover, such operations were said to be associated with devotional practices and the construction and expression of identity and power, with enhanced efficacy resulting from the

physical intimacy of the wearable with the body. The second speaker was Zvezdana Dode (Nasledie Institute) who virtually presented her paper “Honorary Robes and Belts of Submissiveness in Mongol Imperial Culture.” The focus of this talk was on Mongolian imperial culture and dress, particularly the distinctive qualities of honorific robes and belts. Relying on relevant medieval texts and miniature paintings, as well as a few extant textile fragments, to reconstruct the image of Mongolian imperial costume, Dode explained that these highly symbolic garments of honor were ceremoniously gifted by Mongol khans to their subjects and ambassadors and served as potent symbols of social relations and status. Noting colorful silk robes worn by Persian military leaders and sultans, decorated with elaborate brocades and figural ornament, Dode argued that the garments indicated powerful positions and ultimately served as sartorial manifestations of the centralized power of the ruler as it extended outward to the periphery of the empire. Dode further claimed that honorific belts symbolized the obedient submission of powerful local elites to the Mongol khan and, citing textual sources, also suggested the concept of a belt signifying a willingness to serve was appropriated by the Mongols from Islamic ideology and cultural heritage. Ultimately, Dode concluded that honorary robes and belts of submission materialized the delegation of power and displayed the subordination of the recipient to the imperial authority of the giver, the Mongol khan. These two presentations were followed by a question and answer session with Walker and Dode that included discussions of gender in the reception

of late Antique and early Byzantine jewelry with erotic imagery, concepts of love and romance in medieval Europe and Byzantium, the decline of wearable pagan imagery in the Middle Ages, the significance of the belt in the Eastern and Western traditions, and the visual appearance of honorific belts in Mongol imperial culture.

The second session of presentations delved into themes of political power, identity marking, and the wearable as a performative act. The third speaker of the day was Eiren Shea (Grinnell College) who shared her paper “Clothing the Khatun: Mongol Women’s Dress and Political Power.” This presentation explored sartorial expressions of elite Mongol women’s cultural and political power in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Shea compared the dress of courtly Mongol women of the Yuan dynasty in China to that of their predecessors of the Song, Jin, and Liao dynasties to determine the extent to which they adhered to or departed from these prior modes of dress, and what this might have signified. Examining visual representations, relevant texts, and archeological evidence primarily excavated from tombs, Shea discussed the sartorial differences and affinities of elite women of the Mongol empire from different backgrounds and locales, while noting a marked tendency to appropriate Mongol dress. This “sartorial code switching” was said to have involved the adoption of the distinctive dress of the women of the steppe and Turkic cultures, particularly northern groups who ruled over parts of China between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, such as the Jurchen, Khitan, and Mongols. Shea explained that this distinctive style of dress included a

tall headdress worn by married Mongol women called a *buqta*, often made of birch bark and adorned with gold-woven lampas or red silk, feathers, imported gems, and precious metal ornament, variations of a wide court robe, unbound feet, and earrings. Shea’s analysis revealed that clothing and adornment were significant modes of expression among elite Mongol women and that these sartorial choices conveyed legitimation, political alignment, and power in the Mongol court. The fourth presentation came from Juliane von Fircks (Friedrich Schiller University, Jena) and was entitled “To Adorn the Dead Body: The Representation of the Deceased Prince in and outside the Grave (13th–15th Centuries).” This paper examined the incongruent relationship between the presentation of medieval princely tombs with their monumental memorial sculpture and the material remains deposited within the grave, including textiles, jewelry, and other burial items that adorned and accompanied the corpse. Von Fircks’ first case study, the tomb and monument of the early fourteenth century Italian nobleman, Cangrande Della Scala, in Verona, display a sharp contrast between the appearance of the curiously smiling figure represented on the tomb monument and the remnants inside sarcophagus. This apparent lack of correspondence between the internal referent and external representation was further examined in two additional case studies: the monumental tombs of Philip the Bold and Philip the Good. In the example of Philip the Bold, von Fircks pointed out that the external sculptural monument displays the Duke of Burgundy dressed, simultaneously, in his role as courtier and in knightly armor, while the actual corpse was interred in a Carthusian

monk's habit. This lack of correspondence in the representation of the princely deceased led her to conclude that the symbolic and sartorial decisions made were intentional; the visage and attire of the external monuments were designed to encourage memorialization and prayers for the soul of the deceased, while the criteria for the adorning of the corpse was of a more eschatological nature, styled only for the "eyes of God" so as to secure resurrection at the last judgment. The final presentation of the first day came from Cecily J. Hilsdale (McGill University) who offered a paper on "Crowns and the Situating of Authority." The topic of her discussion was a group of Iberian votive crowns dating to the seventh century. Though made in the tradition of Byzantine votive crowns, Hilsdale pointed out the formal qualities that make these crowns of gold and precious gems distinctive, particularly two examples decorated with dangling inset cloisonné letters that reference their Visigothic donor-king. After examining the formal qualities of the crowns, representations of votive crowns, and medieval texts that expound upon the qualities and virtues of kingship, Hilsdale argued that the regal act of wearing the crown is implied in the disembodied display of the votive crowns. Furthermore, she asserted that the very act of dedication, symbolized by the dangling letters that name and represent the absent ruler, performed the most important of kingly virtues: not the wearing of a crown, but the expression of royal piety. The first day of the symposium concluded with a question and answer session with the last three presenters, with discussion of topics including sartorial expressions of distinction and conformity,

the categorization of votive crowns, and the question of whether funerary clothing and grave goods were used in life.

The second day of the symposium commenced on the morning of April 29<sup>th</sup> with a presentation by Cynthia Hahn (Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY) that was titled, "The Brooch Upon the Chest: Lodestar and Amulet / The Medieval 'Safety' Pin." This discussion focused on the multivalence of the medieval brooch, specifically brooches that were circular in shape--often in the form of disk brooches and annular brooches. Hahn presented some early medieval examples of circular brooches with overlaid cross designs, interlace patterns, and figural representations that were said to express a correspondence to the cosmos and the body, while having the potential to possess many other meanings. She also pointed out the connection between materiality and iconography and the potential apotropaic, medicinal, and amuletic functions of medieval brooches. A major point of discussion was the iconography, meaning, and possible function of the Fuller Brooch, which displays personifications of the five senses in silver and niello. On the brooch, a wide-eyed central figure seems to represent the sense of sight, which the brooch's iconographic program situates as the dominant sense. Referring to multiple contemporary writers who expounded on the topic of the senses, Hahn argued that the symbolism of the Fuller brooch served a practical function: as a reminder to guard the senses against corruption, particularly the eyes, which were regarded as the windows to the soul. The second presenter, Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie (University of Gießen), shared her paper, "Putting the Empress's Neck on

the Line: The Materiality of Imperial Neck Ornamentation in Byzantium.” The topic of this talk was Byzantine imperial costume, with a specific focus on the broad necklace-like ornament that adorned the necks of Byzantine empresses, imperial consorts, and female saints. Bosselmann-Ruickbie explored questions of development, terminology, and wearability—particularly whether such ornaments were attached like collars to textiles or worn as a separate piece of jewelry. To do so, she analyzed visual representations of imperial neck ornaments and two primary case study objects: a gold necklace with sapphires from the Assiut Treasure dated to the sixth or seventh century and a tenth century gold and cloisonné enamel necklace from the Preslav Treasure. In attempting to reconstruct the ensembles with which such neck ornaments may have been worn, Bosselmann-Ruickbie further observed that there existed a decidedly harmonious relationship between male and female imperial regalia and touched upon Byzantine ideas about rulership, nudity, and the “immobility” of the empress that were conveyed by this royal attire. A productive question and answer session followed, with the two speakers covering topics such as the relationship between metalwork and textiles, amuletic brooches, gender distinctions and protective agency, as well as the act of metal polishing as a metaphor for cleansing the soul of sin.

The second section of afternoon presentations focused on grave goods, conditions of display, and fragmentation. The first talk of this session was given by Sarah Laursen (Harvard Art Museums) on her paper “Out of Place and Out of Sight: Ornaments from Medieval China

in American Collections.” Laursen began by discussing an array of small gold and silver wearable ornaments that were made in China beginning around the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and interred with their wearers as part of ornate burial assemblages. She further explained that when these tombs were looted, the ornaments became disembodied fragments entirely divorced from the bodies on which they were worn, their greater assemblage, and their archaeological contexts. Using such examples as a jumping-off-point, Laursen opened a discussion that explored exhibition strategies for such objects. Some of the inquiries included questions of how such discrete ornaments should be valued, categorized, and displayed, whether these artifacts should be presented in quantities or analyzed independently as aesthetic objects, if representations of the body should be shown with the artifacts, and to what extent the archaeological context should come into play. This inquiry into how museums might exhibit fragmentary objects continued as Laursen analyzed her main case study objects: a series of men’s belt and cap ornaments of the Six Dynasties period (220–589 CE) and women’s jewelry and garment ornaments of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Ultimately, Laursen prompted scholars and museum professionals to rethink the contextualization, categorization, and display of the wearable in a more holistic manner by incorporating a greater context that might include the way the object was worn on the body, the creator’s intention, and the original function of the artifact. The next speaker was Meredyth Lynn Winter (Colgate University; Philadelphia Museum of Art) who presented her paper “Dressing for Paradise: A Consideration

of Designs & Materials Befitting Islamic Burial Clothing.” The talk began with two early thirteenth-century painted portraits of Badr al-Din Lu’lu’ from a manuscript entitled *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs). In these portraits, Badr al-Din Lu’lu’'s attire appears consistent: a long tailored robe that is crossed over the chest, gathered and tied at the waist, and paired with distinctive *ṭirāz* armbands. Winter then offered a brief overview of the scholarship on the subject of his dress, in which the costume has been referred to as the “vanguard” of this influential Islamic style of dress and associated with military leadership, rulership, and medieval Turkic attire. Turning to questions of materiality, competing modes of garment construction, and the “aspirational aspects” of clothing, Winter then discussed several Islamic garments and fragmentary burial shrouds, including two garments excavated from eleventh-century Seljuk tombs discovered just outside the royal city of Rayy, Iran. Referencing the design similarities between textiles depicted in Byzantine paintings, curvilinear drapery-like patterns on extant silk fragments from thirteenth-fourteenth-century Iran, and the highly-stylized drapery folds depicted in the painted portraits of Badr al-Din Lu’lu’, Winter argued that the unifying factor common to all of these textiles was their silk fabric. She then pointed out how this claim could be seen as controversial, as there are *ḥadīths* that discouraged men from wearing or being buried in pure silk garments; however, she proceeded to challenge the premise that silk was taboo and suggested that this assumption be reconsidered. Returning to the equestrian portrait, she then pointed out that a silk-clad Badr al-Din Lu’lu’ is surrounded

by what appear to be angels or *jinn*, an observation that led Winter to propose that silk may have been regarded as a kind of “vehicle to span liminal spaces.” Continuing her analysis of the burial shrouds, she then asserted that it seems unlikely the textiles in question functioned as worn garments prior to their funerary use, instead suggesting they might have been employed precisely for the material agency of silk, which in a mortuary context were said to have possibly performed a mediating and “aspirational” function. The final portion of the talk centered on the significance of construction, repurposing, and wearability, shedding light on the ways in which medieval Islamic garments were both transformed and transformational. Textiles and metaphor, the ethical concerns involved in contextualizing fragments, and creative exhibition strategies were discussed in the question and answer session that followed.

The final session of *Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle Ages* began with Ashley Elizabeth Jones (University of Florida) who presented her paper, “Wearable Matter.” This talk focused on the ways in which the visual, material, symbolic, and magical aspects of jewelry mediate between the wearer and the world, with particular attention given to how gemstones and jewelry were regarded and represented in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. To elucidate the role of mimesis and materiality in this study, Jones examined late antique and medieval literary descriptions and visual representations of gemstones and precious metals that comprised jewelry, wearable ornaments, and even the bejeweled walls of the biblical Heavenly City of Jerusalem. Reading detailed and vivid

descriptions of gemstones from authors such as Cassiodorus, Bede, and Suger, Jones argued that the abstract, often complex, symbolic meaning of the stones, which would continue to be developed in the textual lapidary tradition, was derived from the concrete reality of their appearance and materiality. The final presentation of the conference was given by Ivan Drpić (University of Pennsylvania), who discussed his paper, “The Burdened Body: Devotional Jewelry and the Weight of the Sacred.” The topic of this paper was medieval devotional jewelry, such as pectoral crosses, reliquary rings, rosaries, and prayer knots—a category of jewelry that, according to Drpić, was not intended to mediate between wearer and the world, but rather was designed to “stage and facilitate an encounter of the self with itself.” In particular, this discussion focused on the psychological, spiritual, and physical aspects of wearing Byzantine devotional neck pendants, or *enkolpia*. Drpić provided an overview of the three main categories of *enkolpia*, explaining that they were worn by all classes of people and varied greatly in form and material, ranging from engraved gems set in precious metal mounts to simple copper alloy crosses. While sharing several examples *enkolpia*, he explained that though they did function as status symbols, these pendants were concealed under garments, and that the primary function of *enkolpia* resided in their perceived ability to protect, support, and sustain the wearer in religious devotion. Referring to the sociological concept of *hexis* proposed

by Pierre Bourdieu, which posits that ideologies are internalized and expressed in bodily gestures and habits, Drpić explained that the somatic experience of wearing *enkolpia* would have involved a constant corporeal reminder to maintain spiritual discipline and, in the case of the larger and sometimes exceedingly heavy copper alloy cross *enkolpia*, a persistent sensation of self-imposed physical burden. Drpić further concluded that the material and corporeal experience of wearing a weighty *enkolpion* was absolutely integral to the ascetic spiritual work performed and prompted by the devotional pendant: to serve as a constant reminder to the wearer to maintain spiritual and mental vigilance, which was believed to advance the devotee on the spiritual path. A question and answer session with Jones and Drpić followed that included brief discussions on the importance of the material properties of magical gemstones, the inclusion of nonstructural lead in *enkolpia*, the technical aspects of coin and coin-like impressions on jewelry, grave goods, reliquaries, the act of concealing and revealing *enkolpia*, and amulets designed for olfactory stimulation, among other topics. Afterward, Williams and Weinryb wrapped up the final day of *Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle Ages* by taking a few more questions and sharing some remarks on inclusive terminology and the scope and possibilities of the project, before concluding with a note on the value of imagination in the work of art historians, curators, and historians of the Middle Ages.