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Pious vanity: Two pairs of 18th century abbesses' knitted gloves

Abstract

Two pairs of silk knitted gloves from the graves of abbesses of St George's convent in Prague Castle, Czech Republic, were compared. Both pairs are decorated with similar knitted-in patterns in metallic yarn, but they differ significantly in the knitting methods used and the skills of their creators. The gloves of Abbess Isidora Konstancie Roudnická (died 1731) were shaped by irregular increases and decreases using various methods and uneven yarn tension which resulted in a variety of loop sizes. In contrast, the gloves of Abbess Aloisie Theresie von Widmann (died 1735) were shaped only with right decreases and left raised increases placed in neat lines producing knitted fabric which is dense and even. The most interesting features of the gloves are the slits in the thumbs and the first two fingers of Abbess Isidora's gloves.

Keywords: knitting, religious, gloves, 18th century

Introduction

St George's convent in Prague Castle (founded in 973 or 976) was the first convent established in the territory of the present-day Czech Republic. It even predates the oldest monastery in the country by 20 years. Since its beginning, this convent of Benedictine nuns was closely connected to the oldest Czech ruling dynasty, the Přemyslids. Mlada, daughter of Prince Boleslav I, travelled to Rome to obtain permission to establish this convent from the pope, and she became its first abbess. During the next three and a half centuries, the convent was the place where the young Přemyslid daughters were educated (together with the daughters of other noble families) and two more princesses of the Přemyslid blood became its abbesses.

Even after the end of the Přemyslid dynasty, the convent maintained its prestige and importance. Documentary evidence confirms that at least from the 15th century, St George's abbesses were elevated to the rank of princess, and for official ceremonies wore crowns over their veils. According to the coronation

rules written in the 14th century, the abbess of St George's convent accompanied the queen of Bohemia during the coronation ceremony. In later centuries, the abbesses assisted the archbishops during the queens' coronations and Abbess Isidora (whose gloves are discussed in this paper) put the crown on a queen's head herself (Pacovský 2016).

Until the convent's abolition by Emperor Joseph II in 1782, the nuns and abbesses were buried in St George's basilica and cloisters. More than 120 graves were discovered during the archaeological work between 1959 and 1963 (Borkovský 1975). Due to limited space, some graves were located one above another or their contents were moved to another location. For these reasons, most of the medieval graves were damaged and very little of their contents was preserved. Nevertheless, a varied collection of objects was recovered from the graves from the 16th to 18th centuries, especially from the graves of abbesses, which contained crowns and crosiers (wooden copies of the insignia of their office), rings, pectoral crosses,

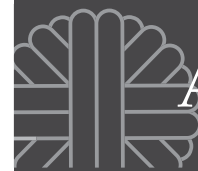


Fig. 1: Abbess Isidora's gloves: a) overall view, palm; b) back of the left glove (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová, © Prague Castle Administration)

rosaries and clothes in various states of preservation (Bravermanová 2005). Since excavation and basic treatment, many of these objects are still waiting for conservation and research.

This paper deals with two previously unpublished pairs of knitted gloves found in the graves of Abbess Isidora Konstancie Roudnická z Březnice (1671?-1731, in office from 1722), and her successor Aloisie Theresie von Widmann (1677?-1735). Besides providing information about knitting in the 18th century, the gloves also offer a rare glimpse of life inside the convent walls.

Both pairs of gloves are kept in Prague Castle's collection. The gloves of Abbess Isidora (fig. 1) are on display in the permanent exhibition *The Story of Prague Castle* and were therefore available for examination only during a brief period when annual cleaning and control work required the display case to be opened. Most of the research on them was based

on high resolution photographs taken during access to the gloves. Those of Abbess Aloisie (fig. 2) are not on display and were repeatedly studied by naked eye, under a USB-microscope, and in high resolution photographs. The research followed the protocol and terminology suggested by Malcolm-Davies et al. (2018).

Description of the gloves

The two pairs of gloves share some common features. The gloves are about 40 cm long (elbow-length). Their original colours are unknown; the current colour is "archaeological brown" (Ringgaard and Scharff 2010). Both pairs were knitted from silk in a very fine gauge (Abbess Isidora's gloves have 90 wales and 130 courses per 10 cm; Abbess Aloisie's gloves have 100 wales and 150 courses per 10 cm) and are decorated with knitted-in patterns in metallic thread. The patterns in both pairs comprise three floral ornaments on the

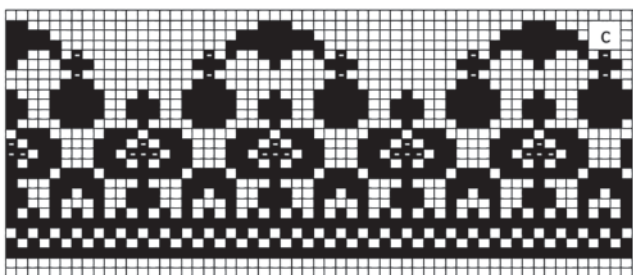
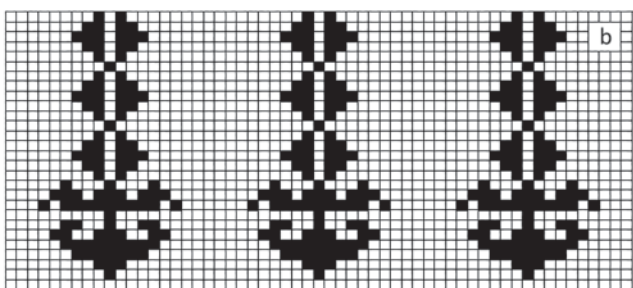
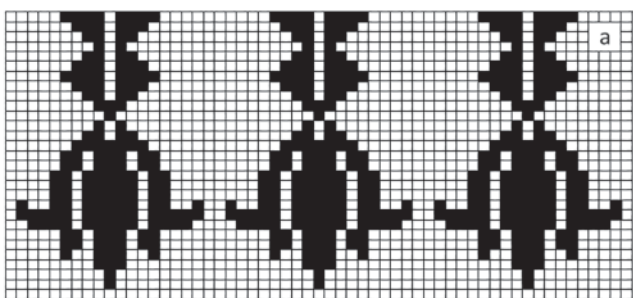


Fig. 2: Abbess Aloisie's gloves: a) overall view, palm; b) back of the left glove (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová, © Prague Castle Administration)

backs of the hands (fig. 3a and fig. 3b) from which run two lines of small triangles (parallel in Aloisie's gloves and slightly diverging in Isidora's gloves) to the tips of the fingers, with similar ornamentation below the thumb from which run two diverging lines of triangles along the under-thumb gusset to the tip of the thumb. Another double line of triangles (reduced to a single line of lozenges by the omission of the space between both lines in Isidora's gloves) runs from the bottom edge of the gloves to the tip of the little finger. The metallic thread in these patterns consists of a strip of metal wound around a silk core of a slightly different colour than the silk in the main parts of the gloves. Two of these metallic threads were held together as they were knitted.

Gloves of Isidora Konstancie Roudnická z Březnice (inventory number PHA 39/10)

The main silk yarn consists of two parallel yarns, each of which is 2-ply with an S-twist. The spin direction of

Fig. 3: Knitted patterns: a) on the back of Abbess Isidora's gloves; b) on the back of Abbess Aloisie's gloves; c) along the bottom edge of Abbess Aloisie's gloves. (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová)



Fig. 4: Openings in Abbess Isidora's gloves (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová, © Prague Castle Administration)

the singles was not identifiable. Noticeable features of these gloves are the openings on the palm sides of the thumb and the first two fingers of both gloves (fig. 4). The bottom edge of the left glove has the spiral effect typical of a half-hitch cast on (Hiatt Hemmonds 2012, 44), whereas the bottom edge of the right glove is formed by the chain of loops usually associated with casting off. Next to the bottom edge, there are four bands of reverse loops. They are five to six courses in depth and are separated by two courses of face loops. The outermost reverse-loop courses of each band as well as the face-loop courses between them were knitted in the main silk yarn. The other reverse-loop courses were knitted in metallic yarn. Apart from these bands, the gloves are in simple knit. The shaping of the gloves was achieved by irregularly placed decreases and increases (fig. 5). In contrast to the majority of recorded extant knitted objects from the Early Modern era, most of the decreases lean to the left. Right-leaning decreases occur only in some of the fingers. Three types of increases are observable, although in some cases, the type of increase could not

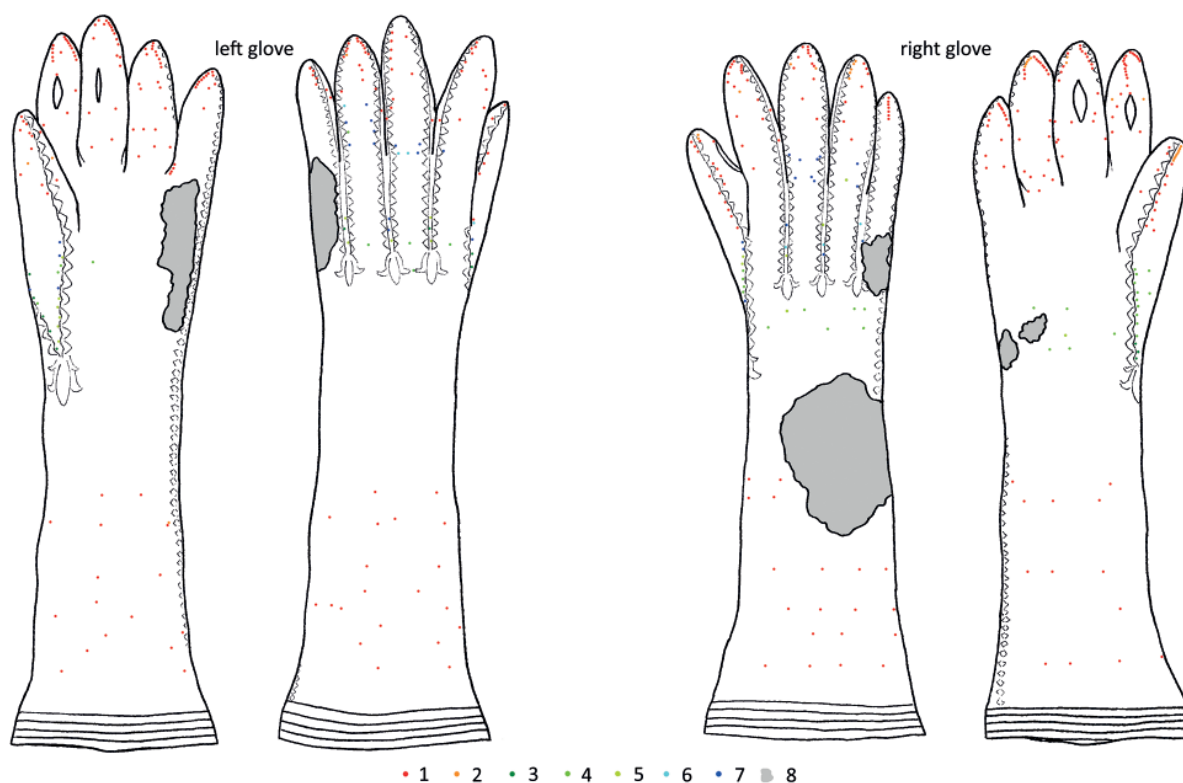


Fig. 5: Schema of shaping in Abbess Isidora's gloves: 1) left decrease; 2) right decrease; 3) raised increase; 4) running thread increase; 5) probably running thread increase (details unrecognisable); 6) split yarn increase; 7) increase in unrecognisable method; 8) destroyed area (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová)

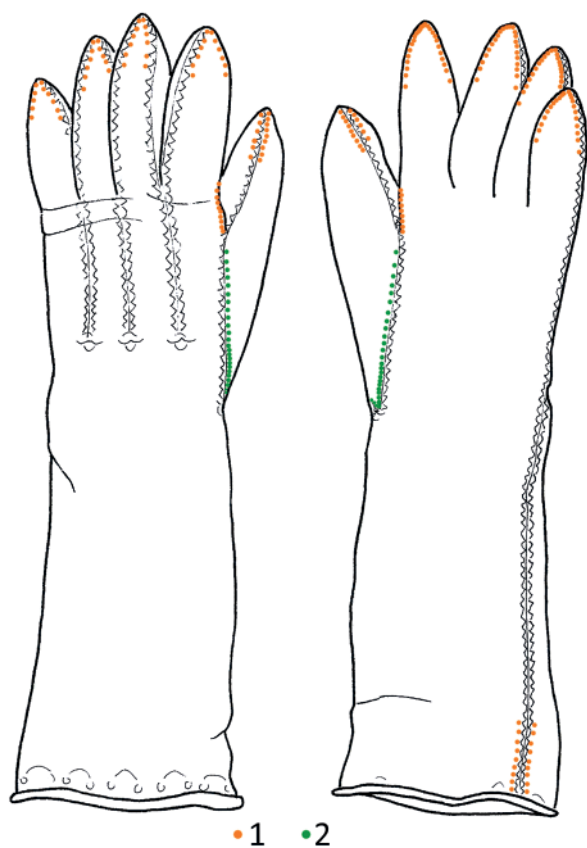


Fig. 6: Schema of shaping of Abbess Aloisie's gloves: 1) right decrease; 2) raised increase (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová)

possible to distinguish whether they were achieved with running thread increases or another type of increase. On the right side of the columnar metallic patterns, left raised increases (Hemmons Hiatt 2012, 209) were used. Occasionally, a non-standard increase occurred, in which each of two yarns forming one loop was knitted separately, resulting in two loops in the next course. Distribution of these increases in relation to other types of increases shows that sometimes this was done deliberately and sometimes this may have happened by mistake, as suggested by a decrease in the course immediately above one of these split yarn increases.

Gloves of Aloisie Theresie von Widmann (inventory number PHA 52/01)

The main yarn consists of several parallel S-spun strands of silk (fig. 7c). In addition to the knitted-in patterns similar to those in Abbess Isidora's gloves, there is a knitted-in pattern along the bottom edge (fig. 3c and fig. 7d). Except for a few reverse loops incorporated into this pattern, the gloves are in simple knit.

They are shaped less obviously than Abbess Isidora's gloves, and mostly by decreases. Increases occur only in the thumb gussets. All increases and decreases form lines, usually along the borders of the metallic patterns (fig. 6 and fig. 8b). All the shaping was achieved by right decreases and left raised increases.

be determined. Left-twisted running thread increases (Hemmons Hiatt 2012, 211) are located most frequently in the middle of the simple knit silk fabric. To the left of each of the columnar metallic patterns, new loops were added between the existing loops, but it is not



Fig. 7: Comparison of bottom edges: a) cast-on edge of Isidora's left glove; b) cast-off edge of Abbess Isidora's right glove; c & d) rolled edge and patterned band of Abbess Aloisie's gloves (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová, © Prague Castle Administration)



Fig. 8: Comparison of increases in thumb gussets: a) various types of increases in irregular intervals in Abbess Isidora's gloves; b) neat row of raised increases in Abbess Aloisie's gloves (Image: Sylvie Odstrčilová, © Prague Castle Administration)

Interpretation

The absence of seams and the orientation of the loops in the patterns show that Abbess Aloisie's gloves were knitted round from the bottom edge to the fingers. The same can be said about most of Abbess Isidora's gloves, with the exception of the areas around the slits (fig. 4) and the bottom part of the right glove (fig. 7b). Slits in the fingers and thumbs were created by switching from knitting round to knitting back and forth, and then again to knitting round. The different heights of alternate courses suggest that the knitter probably had problems keeping the same tension of yarn when knitting and purling. Even though a chain of loops can also be created with a chained cast on (Hiatt Hemmonds 2012, 68), split yarns and other irregularities in the loops all around the circumference of the right glove just above the reverse-loop bands suggest that the raw loops were picked up here and the bands were knitted in the opposite direction to the main part of the glove. Abbess Isidora's gloves differ slightly in their length. Maybe they originally differed

even more and removing the bottom part of the right glove and re-knitting the bands was an attempt to correct this difference or later damage of the right bottom band was repaired in this way.

Four wales of loose loops, regularly distributed along the circumference in the lower arm section of Abbess Isidora's gloves, provide evidence that five knitting needles were used (four needles to hold the knitwork and one for working), and that the loops were not slipped from one needle to the next to reduce the effect of inadequate yarn tension at the transition between needles, as observed in some knitted baby jackets from the same period, where these slack loops form spirals (Gilbert 2009).

Although the decreases in Abbess Isidora's gloves appear to be placed irregularly at first glance, more detailed scrutiny reveals some regularities. In the left glove, there are four decreases per round in the lower arm area, one per needle, and they are mostly placed in similar positions in relation to individual needles. In the right glove, there seems to have been an intention



to place eight decreases in each decrease round (two per needle) but sometimes the decreases were omitted in the second half of the round. As mentioned above, most of the decreases in Abbess Isidora's gloves are left-leaning decreases. The right-leaning decreases, usually interpreted as "knitting two stitches (loops) together" occur only in two fingertips of Isidora's right glove, where they are symmetrically paired with the left-leaning decreases. Beside them, several right-leaning decreases occur on both sides of the slits. Given their exclusive position in the back-and-forth-knitted sections of the gloves, and the fact that there is usually more than one in the same course, with no left-leaning decrease in the same course, they were probably created by purling two loops together in the reverse course instead of knitting.

The dense and even fabric of Abbess Aloisie's gloves and the consistency in the increases and decreases suggest they were the work of an experienced and competent knitter. In comparison, irregularities in Abbess Isidora's gloves suggest the work of less competent knitters. The different distributions of decreases in the lower arm areas and of increases in the wrist areas, paired decreases in only one thumb and one finger, and sections of looser and tighter knitting suggest that these gloves could have been the collective work of several knitters. However, the consistent use of left-leaning increases suggests some similarities in the knitters' technique.

Discussion

Slits in the fingers are unusual but not unique. Three pairs of gloves from the Glove Collection Trust at the Fashion Museum in Bath have them too (inventory numbers 23400+A, 23401+A and 23419+A). Gloves 23419+A have vertical slits in their thumbs and index fingers. The other two pairs have slits (vertical in gloves 23400+A and horizontal in gloves 23401+A) in the first two fingers in both gloves and in one thumb. The other thumb was left open. It has been suggested that the slits were possibly for anointing with holy oil or water. However, this explanation is probable only for the gloves with missing thumb tips. In the gloves which have only slits below the tips, it would be quite difficult to wet the skin without staining the gloves. It is more likely that the openings provided better sensory interaction with the beads of a rosary. The rosaries found in the graves of St George's nuns and abbesses did not have beads for the *Ave Maria* and *Pater noster* prayers distinguished by spaces as in present-day rosaries; they were differentiated by shape. However, slits were not a necessity in the gloves of abbesses, as demonstrated by the example of Abbess Aloisie's

gloves. In fact, as only two pairs of the gloves were available for the examination, it is not possible to say what was the norm in this convent.

One part of the pattern along the bottom edge of Abbess Aloisie's gloves resembles a royal orb and another part can be interpreted as stylised crown. This prompted an investigation into a possible connection between the gloves and coronation ceremonies. Aloisie did not crown a queen but as the prioress of the convent in 1723, she accompanied Abbess Isidora to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth Christina. However, no description of the coronation ceremony mentions gloves. On the contrary, it was recorded that Abbess Isidora took the crown in her bare hands (Pacovský 2016).

No other fragments of knitted fabric, such as gloves or stockings, were found in any graves of other abbesses and nuns. Unfortunately, other well-preserved graves belong only to abbesses who did not participate in coronations. The graves of abbesses or nuns who attended coronations (except abbesses Isidora and Aloisie) were not located or were severely damaged with almost no textile fragments found in them. For these reasons, the question of the gloves' use for coronations remains unresolved.

The portraits of St George's abbesses from the 17th and 18th centuries show women in the traditional black habits of Benedictine nuns with diadems on their veiled heads and crosiers in their hands. None of the abbesses wears gloves, which suggests they were not part of their official attire. In contrast, the portraits of Anna Gertrude Hofner, abbess at Münsterlingen (after 1750) and Eufemia Szaniawska, abbess at Nieśwież (circa 1768) show them wearing gloves. These were the only two portraits (in addition to one 20th century photograph) of abbesses in gloves currently available for study. Most of the convent abbesses (as opposed to abbesses of *Frauenestifts* in secular clothing) were depicted without them. The gloves in the above-mentioned portraits with their wide gauntlets and medallions on the backs of their hands resemble the pontifical gloves of male prelates, whereas the gloves of the two St George's abbesses resemble fashionable women's gloves of the period. Their length corresponds well with the fashion for elbow-length sleeves on women's gowns in the 18th century but they would be inconvenient to wear with long-sleeved nuns' habits. Although the black Benedictine habits had wide sleeves, the portraits of St George's abbesses show the narrow cuffs of the undergarments worn with them.

Most of the nuns in St George's convent were noblewomen by birth and the abbesses were further



elevated to the rank of princess. Even though the black robes found in graves were of a simple loose cut following the rules of Benedictine order, many of them were not of wool but of silk. In the grave of Abbess Isidora, fragments of high-heeled shoes were found, and, in the grave of another abbess, there were pieces of cloth brocaded with gold threads. On entering the convent, the women should have left the vanity of the outer world behind them, yet these luxurious silk gloves and other archaeological finds from their graves paint a very different picture.

Acknowledgements

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