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Liturgical Vestments of the 16th to 18th Centuries in Austria

Introduction

In addition to architecture, sacred objects, paintings and statues, textiles play an important role in the sign system within rituals in the Catholic Church. They can be consecrated objects serving as official dress of the priests or covering and wrapping sacred objects. The vestments also carry messages that are reflected in specific colours and symbols. During the liturgical year, vestments in different colours have to be used, and they mark specific periods, e.g. the time before Christmas and Easter (Advent and Lent – violet), specific ceremonies (e.g. feast of Our Lord's Passion, feasts of martyred saints – red; Gaudete and Laetare – rose), high festivities of the liturgical year (e.g. Easter and Christmas – white) or mourning (black) (Braun 1907, 728-760; Legg 1882). Especially the design of historical, mainly baroque vestments is strongly orientated towards pictorial and symbolic connotation. The level of meaning distinguishes these special historical textiles from other fabrics of the time. Liturgical vestments in monasteries, churches and museum collections have been the subject of many different approaches. They are a valuable source for researchers with a focus on costume history, textile craft and art history (e.g. Fortescue 1934; Johnstone 2002; Stauffer 2001), but even if detailed descriptions of vestments are published, these descriptions differ from that needed for archaeological inquiry. Usually the cut of the garment, the patterns and iconography of the fabrics used and other details are emphasised, while there is rarely any detailed description of yarn qualities or thread counts. Such technical analysis is, on the other hand, more common when describing archaeological artefacts, but the ideal is of course to use both. The following article focuses on liturgical textiles in Austria of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

Archaeological finds: graves of priests

For many centuries, Catholic priestly burials were equipped with liturgical vestments to emphasise the identity of the deceased. That was not only a common habit of specific parishes or for highly valued persons, but was prescribed in church laws from 1590 (although reaching back to the 9th century) and published by the Vatican as the *Rituale Romanum* in 1620. The formal objectives of the burial, the sequence of events and the gifts of a Catholic funeral are described in detail with a specification for the funeral clothing of a deceased priest:

sacerdos, aut cuiusvis ordinis clericus, defunctus, vestibus suis quotidianis communibus usque ad talarem estem inclusive, tum desuper sacro vestitu sacerdotali, vel clericali, quem ordinis sui ratio deposcit, indui debet; acerdos quidem super talarem vestem amictu, alba, cingulo, manipulo, stola, et casula, seu planeta violacea sit indutus

A deceased priest or cleric of any stage of consecration must be dressed from the inner side in his robe and in his ordinary everyday clothes, above that with the priestly or clerical vestments, which demonstrate his rank. A priest shall above that be robed in the cassock, alb, girdle, maniple, stole and chasuble or violet cope [*pluviale*] (*Rituale Romanum* VI, 1.12-16).

This general Vatican law had to be followed from the early modern period until the middle of the 20th century. It was replaced in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) containing new regulations.



Fig. 1. Zwettl, grave of a priest with chalice, paten and textile fragments (photo: Verein Archäologie Service).

Excavation, preservation and analysis

Catholic priestly graves can often be identified in archaeological excavations in early modern churchyards, Catholic cemeteries and crypts as a result of finding cloth fragments from chasubles, stoles and maniples (e.g. Bravermanová 2010; Cybulska et al. 2013, Fig. 1; Grupa 2015; Mittelstrass 2003, 138). Such archaeological contexts can have a variety of preservation conditions. The organic finds in graves buried in the soil in a graveyard are usually very fragmented. Parts of garments usually only survive when attached to metal objects. The analysis of such finds follows the general mode of textile analysis from archaeological contexts using microscopy analysis and Scanning Electron Microscopy for fibre identification, description of microstratigraphy and the like.

Compared to finds from the soil, burials in churches (in a sarcophagus, crypt etc.) display much better preservation conditions. Sometimes, even complete garments survive under dry conditions. Nevertheless, such finds are brittle and their conservation is a challenge.

Recent examples from the Czech Republic and Poland (Bravermanová 2010; Grupa 2010; 2015) have given good overviews of the conservation processes of finds from crypts and the possibilities of making them accessible to the public. Attempts were also made to make virtual reconstructions of such garments by means of computer graphics (e.g. Cybulska et al. 2013). Two priests' graves from Austria have recently been excavated that serve as examples for what can be achieved by analysing liturgical textiles from an archaeological approach: Zwettl and Hollenburg.

Textiles from the Zwettl graveyard (c. AD 1500)

An archaeological rescue excavation took place at Zwettl in Austria in a graveyard that was used between AD 1500 and 1850. Graves of men and women were identified by means of metal dress elements such as eyelets and hooklets attached to textile layers containing coarse linen fabrics as well as fine silk taffeta and damask (Grömer 2015). It is, however, not easy to decide to which garments they belonged as a result of the degree of fragmentation.

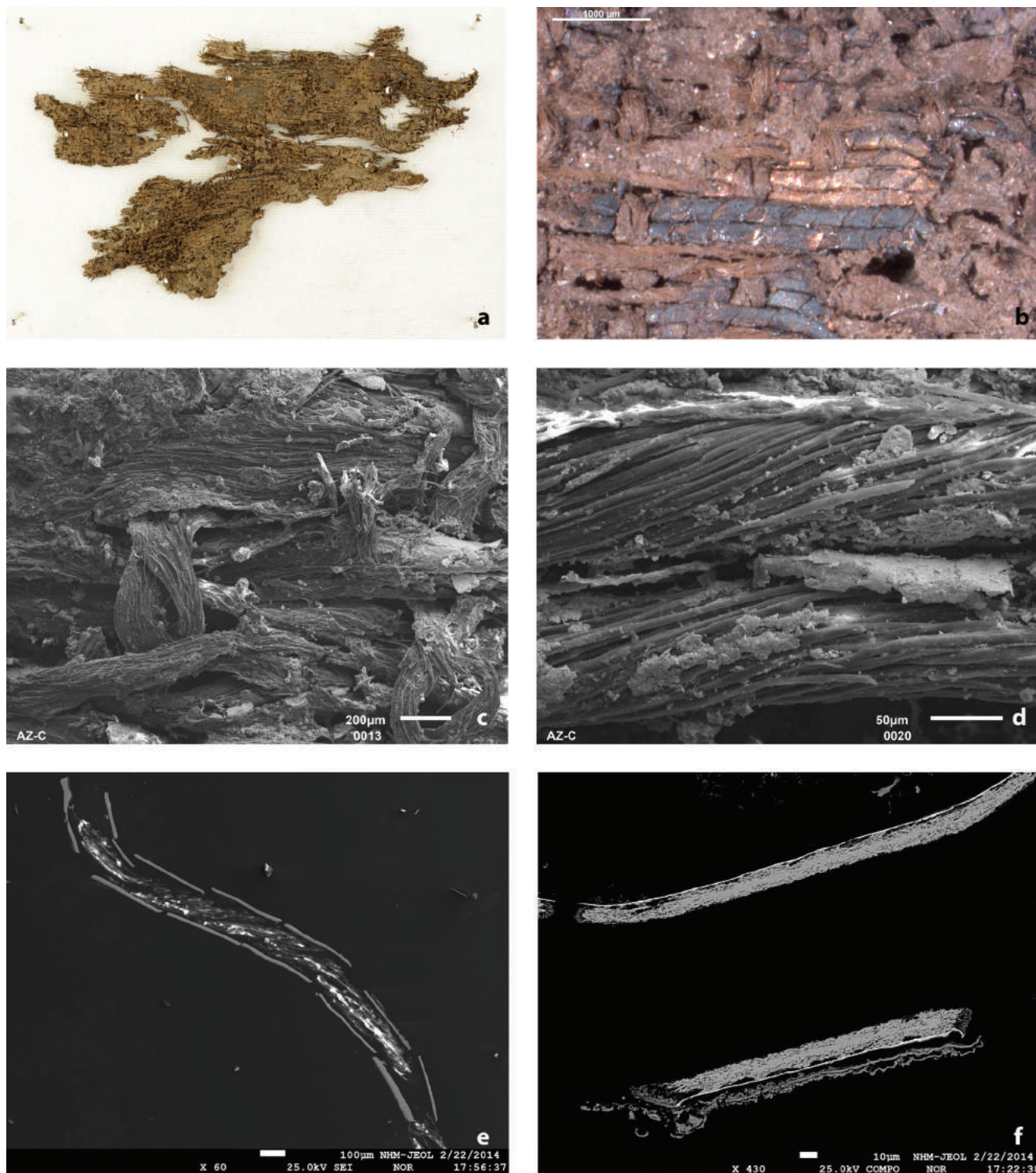


Fig. 2. Zwettl, grave of a priest: a-b) fabric of silk and gold threads; c-d) SEM pictures of weave and silk fibres; e-f) cut through gold thread (photos: A. Schumacher, A. Kroh and D. Topa).



Among the graves were also one of a priest, and although most organic material was decomposed, his identity and status is clear from the liturgical objects in the grave: a chalice and a paten. The man was between 30 and 50 years old when he died. The shape of a vessel that covered and protected the chalice can be dated to c. AD 1500. Textile remains with gold threads were found lying in the region of the right forearm, and especially under this, which was detected during the excavation when radius and ulna were removed (Fig. 1/right). The fabric belongs to a precious silk cloth (a composite weave with yarns 0.2 mm in diameter), patterned with small and larger lozenges. Due to the small size of the fragments, and the change of the colour to various shades of brown, an identification of the pattern is not possible (Fig. 2 a-b). In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, mainly Italian luxury silks, most likely from Florence, were exported all over Europe. The Italian silks are distinguishable on account of their imaginative patterns of flora and fauna (Geijer 1979, 141-153; Stolleis 2001, 20). Unfortunately, detailed statements on the provenance of the silk textiles from Zwettl cannot be made, since the fragments are too small and damaged.

The decorative gold threads were made on a still-existing thread wrapped with fine gold wire (see Barker 1980, 5-8; also Wincott Hockett 2015, Fig. 23.3). High-resolution SEM images indicate that it was made of a streaky-cut, thin, gold-coated silver metal (silver: 20 μm , gold: 5 μm) (Fig. 2 e-f). The gold wire was wound in S-direction around the silk carrier threads. Due to the corrosion of the silver the threads now appear dark (Fig. 2b).

It is not entirely clear to which part of the liturgical vestments (maniple, stole, chasuble or cope) the silk-gold textile fragments once belonged. The position of the fabric in the abdominal region under the arms indicate a chasuble. It is, however, interesting why so few pieces have survived. Comparable chasubles of such silk damask with gold threads would not be limited to such a small area, asymmetrical on the body, but would be spread throughout the whole area of the garment. Even if the silk had not survived, the gold threads should have been present in the grave, especially at the back of the body which represents the visible side of the garment and was usually designed more magnificently than the front (Stolleis 2001, 16-17). As the silk-gold textile was found at the right arm, it might thus derive from a maniple (a decorated band of silk or similar fabric that when worn, hangs from the left arm, Fig. 8b). Maniples are only used within the context of Holy Mass and are of the same liturgical colour as the other vestments.

Textiles from Hollenburg church (c. AD 1700)

During renovation works in a small church in Hollenburg, rescue excavations had to be carried out (Leib 2007). Under the floor of the *presbyterium* the graves of two priests were found, along with other burials. From the early Modern until the Baroque period, it was a privilege of the clergy and rich elites to be buried within the church. Laypeople had to be buried outside the church in the graveyard. Grave 2 (Fig. 3), dated to c. 1700, is the burial of an adult male. Since the bones are poorly preserved, the exact age cannot be determined. A wooden coffin grave was dug into the soil instead of being placed in a sarcophagus, so the garments are also in this case in a very bad condition. Nevertheless, the Hollenburg archaeological textile evidence is much clearer than the small fragments from Zwettl, and larger parts of the various garments are still visible. As the specific layers of the vestments of a Catholic priest are well known (compare Fig. 8b; Braun 1907; Fortescue 1934), it was easy to identify a cassock, an alb, a cingulum, a chasuble, a stole and a maniple in the grave.



Fig. 3. Hollenburg, priest's grave found in church (photo: ASINOE).

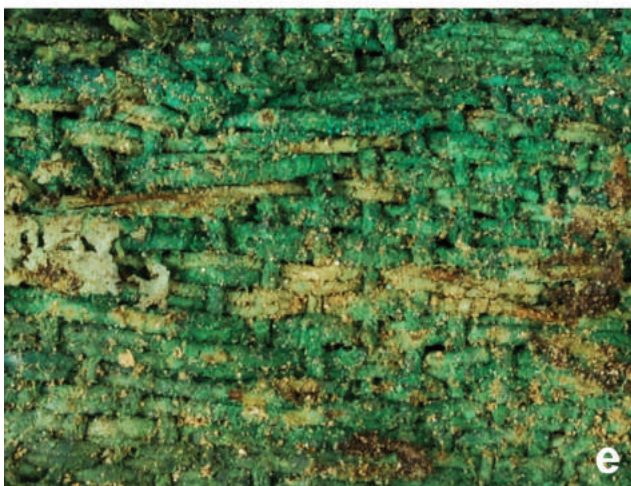


Fig. 4. Hollenburg, fabrics found in priest's grave: a) knitted stockings; b) linen tabby of the alb; c) woollen twill cassock; d) silk of the maniple; e) metal lace; f) silk of the chasuble; all samples are 2 cm wide (photos: A. Schumacher).

The priest was placed on a mattress covered with a medium-quality twill fabric (0.3-0.4 mm z-yarn; 18-20 threads per cm) and filled with wood shavings. He wore knitted stockings of a now brownish hue (Fig. 4a). Closest to the body the remains of a cassock were identified, made of a wool 2/2 twill of medium quality (0.3 mm z-yarn; 22 threads per cm) (Fig. 4c). Over the cassock the priest wore an alb, as prescribed. This consisted of a medium fine linen tabby (0.4-0.6 mm z-yarn; 20 threads per cm) of even and dense structure (Fig. 4b).

The maniple was made from a fine patterned silk with about 70 threads per cm; the visible colour is still purplish-brown (Fig. 4d). The decoration consists of stripes or zones with a stylised floral pattern (lancé on taffeta). The maniple was also decorated with metal lace braids (Fig. 4e) that form a cross and frame the ends of the maniple in a trapezoidal shape. To make the ends of the maniple stiff, it was lined with a very coarse and stiff open-weave tabby made of plant material (0.3 mm z-yarn, 10 threads per cm), which was glued onto the silk. Woollen tabby was used as an additional lining for the maniple.

The arrangement of the metal lace braids can be clearly identified as linings and trimmings of a chasuble of the 'fiddleback' shape (compare Fig. 3 and Fig. 8b), which was developed in the late 1500s when heavy material

and ornate embroidery made the chasuble very stiff. To accommodate the priest's movement, the front was cut away from the arms giving it the distinct fiddle-like appearance (for the development of the chasuble, see Braun 1907, 149-239). The same lace was also used to decorate the maniple (cross and frame). The fabric used for the chasuble (the sample was taken from the shoulder region) is a fine silk of purplish-brown colour and striped floral decoration (lancé on taffeta) (Fig. 4f). It does not exactly match the fabric of the maniple, so two different silks were used for these two items.

The threads of the laces consist of a metal filament wound around a silk core. SEM analysis and Energy Dispersive X-ray (EDX) analysis proved that it was copper (Fig. 5), and no traces of silver or gold could be found. For the Baroque style, silver or gold laces were common for vestments with the liturgical colours violet and black, but copper laces are not (see e.g. Sporbeck 2001, 112). The coloured appearance of the metal threads is now greenish due to the high content of copper, which changed by corrosion to the elements phosphorus, potassium and calcium (Fig. 5 right).

All of the fabrics now appear more or less brownish or blackish due to the decomposition of the human remains, and maybe also the degradation of the natural dyestuffs used for the silks. Due to church regulations we know that the alb must have been

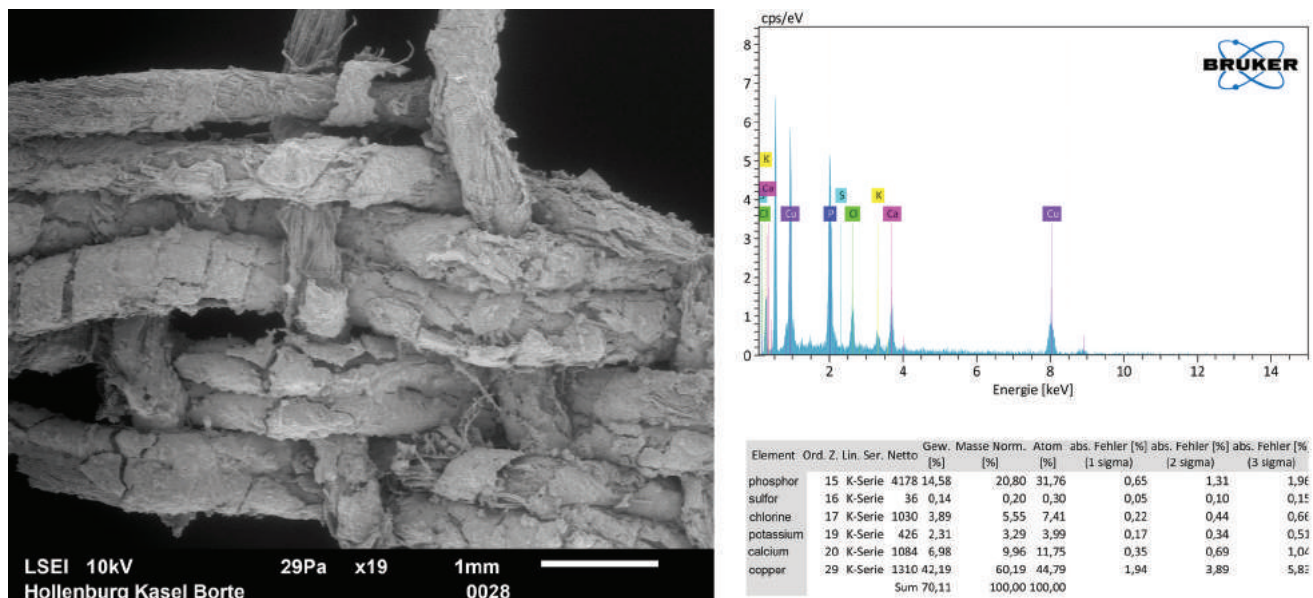


Fig. 5. Hollenburg, detail of metal lace, copper filament wound around a silk core (SEM pictures and EDX analysis: D. Topa).



Fig. 6. Storage facilities for liturgical vestments in Göttweig monastery (photos: K. Grömer).

white in its original state (*albus* – white), a garment that symbolised cleanness and purity. The chasuble, stole and maniple were all violet, as prescribed in the *Rituale Romanum* (note the dye analysis of chasubles and stoles from Gniew in Poland: Grupa 2015, 194).

After examination and sample-taking, all remains from the grave, including the vestments, were reburied according to the wishes of the parish.

Historical liturgical vestments in Austria

Austria is a Catholic country with a rich Catholic tradition. Most of the churches founded before 1900 own different sets of historical vestments. After the 1960s and the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the Second Vatican Council), a modernisation of how the Holy Mass took place and the style of liturgical vestments began. Today it is the choice of the priest whether to wear modern vestments or the old, historical ones. In the Catholic Church the paraments also belong to the holy inventory of the church, along with chalices, holy statues etc. Since the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* it has also been forbidden to throw away liturgical vestments, even if they are not used anymore (SC 126). This is why historical liturgical vestments are still stored in churches.

As liturgical vestments are ritually important but also fragile objects, there is in the churches a special focus on their conservation and restoration (Jägers 1998). As most garments are brittle, they should under ideal circumstances be stored in a horizontal position in a

dark drawer. Many churches have such facilities in the sacristies (Fig. 6) for chasubles or stoles. Larger items such as mantles (*pluviali*, copes) are usually stored hanging in cupboards, which in a long term perspective can cause great damage.

In most Catholic churches in Austria the priests today use modern liturgical garments, but especially for High Festivities in cathedrals and in monasteries the historical vestments are often still in use. For example, the Gothic St. Stephan's Cathedral in Vienna (the main cathedral in Austria) has a parament treasure consisting of c. 2500 individual items. The oldest objects date to the 16th century while most are from the Baroque period (17th and 18th centuries) (Inventory St. Stephan 2003). A valuable vestment is the so-called 'Kleiner Breuner Ornat' (Catalogue St. Stephan 1997, 218-220), consisting of a chasuble, stole, maniple and dalmatic. The precious fabric of the outer coat is red silk damask from Italy dating to between 1500 and 1540. In 1647 new vestments were made, using these 'old' fabrics. Such a 'reuse' of valuable textiles, which were given to the church, is a well-known phenomenon. Particularly female members of royal families and the elite donated precious textiles to be made into liturgical vestments. Some chasubles are stored in St. Stephan's which were made from the wedding gowns of different members of the Habsburg family (e.g. Eleonorenkassel) (Catalogue St. Stephan 1997, 238 and 253). These precious vestments are exhibited (Fig. 7), but are taken out of the displays and worn for one

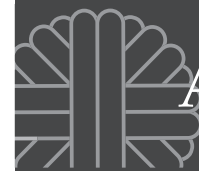


Fig. 7. St. Stephen's Cathedral, exhibition of the cope from the 'Großer Breunerornat' (photo: K. Grömer 2015, courtesy of St. Stephen's Cathedral).

specific Holy Mass a year before they are placed into the exhibition again. Other vestments from the 17th-19th centuries stored in the sacristy of St. Stephen's are also worn. Usually this happens for specific High Festivities once a year (e.g. Eleonorenkasel on December 8th or Kleiner Breunerornat on December 26th in St. Stephen's).

Monasteries also possess and use historical garments, even of fur. The Premonstratensian monastery at Schlägl in Upper Austria was founded in c. 1200 and it holds a treasure of hundreds of liturgical vestments. Due to fire catastrophes in the 17th century the medieval inventory is very sparse; the oldest still existing chasuble was made before 1576 (Pichler 1978). At Schlägl, the capes of the traditional Premonstratensian monks are made of squirrel fur. Some of them were made c. 1750 and are still in use (see Fig. 8a).

Smaller churches like Vienna-Oberlaa also still possess old vestments. More than 20 historic chasubles in different colours from c. 1700 to 1900 are stored there together with the associated stoles, copes (*pluviali*) and maniples (Inventory Oberlaa 2013). The oldest garment still in use is a green chasuble with corresponding stole and maniple, dated to 1706 (Inventory Oberlaa 2013). These items were worn once a year until 2014 (Fig. 8b). The decision to use or not to use old vestments rests with the priests but it also depends on the traditions of the church and the parish. In cathedrals and monasteries the vestments are usually used to emphasise a long and rich tradition, and especially

monasteries have a strong semiotic system of referring to history and traditions. Therefore, if an old vestment is used, it is also handled with particular care. A chasuble is never worn directly on the skin, and linen and cotton undergarments such as the long-sleeved albs are used, while the stoles are protected with a narrow linen strap around the neck (Fig. 9a). The use of such garments in Holy Mass lasts about 1.5 to 2 hours, including taking it on and off. Nevertheless, there are problems of preservation involved in the use of old and sometimes brittle textiles. In particular, movements by the priest may harm the objects, and when the priest leans against the altar or if he sits down, the chasuble can be damaged. In some churches specific seats were installed to overcome these problems and to protect the valuable historic garments during their use. For instance, at St. Stephen's the *kathedra* of the bishop has a slit between the seat and seat back, so that the chasuble can hang freely without the priest sitting on it (Fig. 9b).

Conclusion

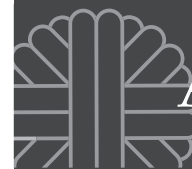
In archaeological excavations carried out in early modern graveyards and churches sometimes graves of Catholic priests can be identified. In cases of good preservation the liturgical garments in which the priest was buried can be identified. Ecclesiastical textiles (*vestes sacrae*) play an important role in textile history and our understanding of the history of Catholicism in Europe. It is important to describe



Fig. 8. Liturgical garments in use: a) Schlägl monastery, rose vestments and squirrel cape from 1730-1750; b) Oberlaa, chasuble, stole and maniple from 1706 (photos: K. Grömer 2014, courtesy of Oberlaa Church and Schlägl monastery).



Fig. 9. Protection of historical vestments during use in St. Stephan's Cathedral: a) Priest wearing a stole and chasuble from 1740; b) seat of the bishop (photos: K. Grömer 2015, courtesy of St. Stephan's Cathedral).



new finds, and there are still old paraments from the 16th–18th centuries stored in the sacristies of Austrian houses of worship, from small village churches to cathedrals and monasteries, that still need to be recorded. In some cases, historical textiles are still in use – not only garments from the 19th century, but also numerous Baroque paraments and even items from earlier periods.

An important aspect concerning the dating of objects found in graves has to be addressed here. As historical paraments are still in use in Catholic churches, at least in Austria, a discussion is needed about which garments have been selected for the burial of a priest: i.e. were they ‘new’ garments or ones that were already hundreds years old, no longer suitable for daily service and therefore chosen to serve as funeral garments? This has implications for archaeological dating practice, as archaeologists tend to date graves according to the date of grave goods and clothing found within. It means that in some cases the dating of the grave (if there is a tombstone) and the dating of the liturgical garment found in it might differ. Finally, it is important to note that practice in the contemporary world is different: since the Second Vatican Council it has been forbidden to bury historical liturgical vestments in graves.

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