



Milena Bravermanová and Helena Březinová

Further Textile Artefacts from the Royal Crypt at Prague Castle (CZ)

A Tablet-Woven Silk Band and Fragments of a Child's Funeral Tunic

Introduction

A unique collection of medieval textiles recovered from archaeological excavations is housed in Prague Castle. It consists principally of the remains of funerary garments and accessories belonging to Czech rulers, their relatives, church dignitaries and patrons. Two textile fragments have recently been the subject of study: a child's funeral tunic in which one of Charles IV's children was buried, and a tablet-woven silk band with gold and silk pattern wefts, likely to have been part of the bodice of a dress belonging to Queen Anna Falcká (†1353).

The tablet-woven band

Find context

Four wives of the Czech king and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV – Blanka z Valois (†1348), Anna Falcká (†1353), Anna Svídnická (†1362) and Eliška Pomořanská († 1393) – were buried in the Old Royal Crypt situated in the choir of St. Vitus at Prague Castle. Their remains, together with the remains of other Czech rulers, were transferred in 1590 to the newly-built Renaissance New Royal Crypt. The Czech queens named above originally had single coffins, but in the 17th century their remains were collected together in a common coffin. In 1928 the funerary equipment was removed from the crypt, and since then it has gradually been conserved and studied (Bravermanová and Lutovský 2007). The remains of a woman's dress, made from silk lampas decorated with birds and trifoliate leaves was conserved in 2009. Only the front

and back pieces of the bodice survive; the sleeves and the skirt have not been preserved (Fig. 1). The dress is thought to have belonged to the second wife, Anna Falcká, although this attribution is not certain. Based on the evaluation of archival sources, a tablet-woven band that was also found could also have belonged to the dress. Most likely it was originally attached to the shoulder.

Description

One large and three smaller fragments of the tablet-woven band are preserved. The fragments are 2.4–2.5 cm wide, with a length of 31.5, 23, 29, and 4 cm respectively (Fig. 2). All the fragments have selvages on both sides. Neither the beginning nor the end of the band is preserved, rendering a determination of the original length and the finishing method impossible. The band was produced using 45 four-hole tablets.

Its basic structure consists of 180 warp yarns and a heavy and regularly interwoven weft, decorated on the front side with two types of added pattern wefts – a gold weft covering the entire surface of the band and a silk weft, originally of a different colour, used to create a geometric pattern. The gold weft is preserved in the form of small black particles visible on the surface of the band (Fig. 3), and was originally created by narrow strips of gilded leather: several very tiny fragments with a width of 400 µm are preserved among the threads of the silk pattern weft. The remains of the pattern created by the gold weft can be discerned by looking at the fabric sideways



Fig. 1. Bodice of the dress which was probably originally decorated with a band. Condition after conservation (Photo: Prague Castle Administration , J. Gloc).

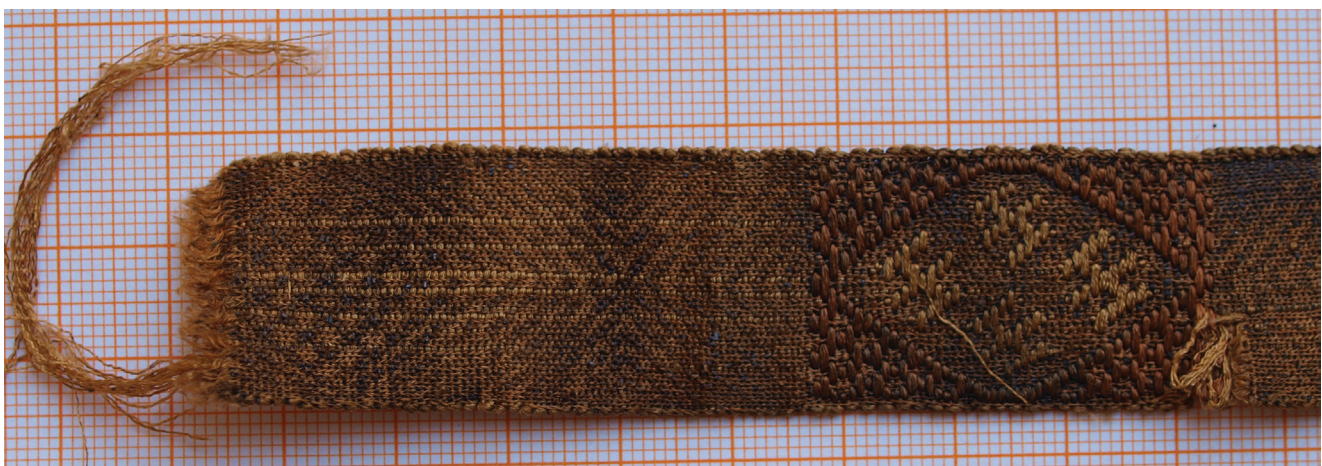


Fig. 2. Detail of the largest band fragment with a width of 2.4 cm and a length of 31.5 cm. (Photo: Helena Březinová).



Fig. 3. Small black particles, remnants of the gold pattern weft, on the obverse of the band (Photo: Helena Březinová).

as an imprint on the ground weft. The pattern is a combination of a regularly repeated broken lines and diamonds.

The silk weft consists of four strands of threads which are not twisted. The geometric pattern consists of a diamond within a rectangle (the rectangle is 3.6 cm in length). Four small motifs reminiscent of a swastika are woven within the diamond. The area of the rectangle outside of the diamond is filled by parallel lines of short stitches. The pattern wefts do not run through the shed like the ground weft, but pass from the front to the back, where they float freely until they are needed for the pattern, and brought to the front again. Two techniques were used for the interlacing of the pattern forming silk wefts: *lancé* and brocade. The diamond within a rectangle is created using the *lancé* technique – the pattern wefts run from one selvage to the other. The small motifs resembling swastikas inside the diamond are created by the brocade technique – the wefts are only used locally to create the motifs, they do not run the entire width of the band.

Dating, provenance and other finds

The fact that the band was found in the Royal Crypt in St. Vitus Cathedral in the coffin with remains of four Czech queens and probably belonged to a woman's dress dating to about 1350 indicates that it should also be dated to this period. However, it is possible that it might be a little older, perhaps going back to the end of the 13th century. In this case, it is likely to have been added to the dress when the funerary clothing of Anna Falcká was hastily assembled. Based on parallels, it is assumed that the band was made in western Europe. Tablet-woven bands with added pattern wefts are



Fig. 4. Detail of the basic structure of the copy of the band with added polychrome silk wefts (Photo: Helena Březinová).

relatively frequently preserved in archaeological and historical collections both within and outside Europe (Spies 2000). They are interpreted as accessories for luxurious robes for the elite (both secular and ecclesiastical). In the Czech Republic they have only been found at Prague Castle, in the graves of church dignitaries (Bravermanová and Otavská 2003, 506-507; Bravermanová 2004, 603) and rulers (Konservierungsbericht 1992). There are many finds documenting the use of similar bands in other European contexts (Spies 2000).

Experimental reconstruction

In addition to studying the band under the microscope to ascertain its structure, a copy of the band was woven in order to try out possible methods of production. The results were then compared to the original. The aim was not to make an exact replica of the band with identical technical parameters, but to confirm that the

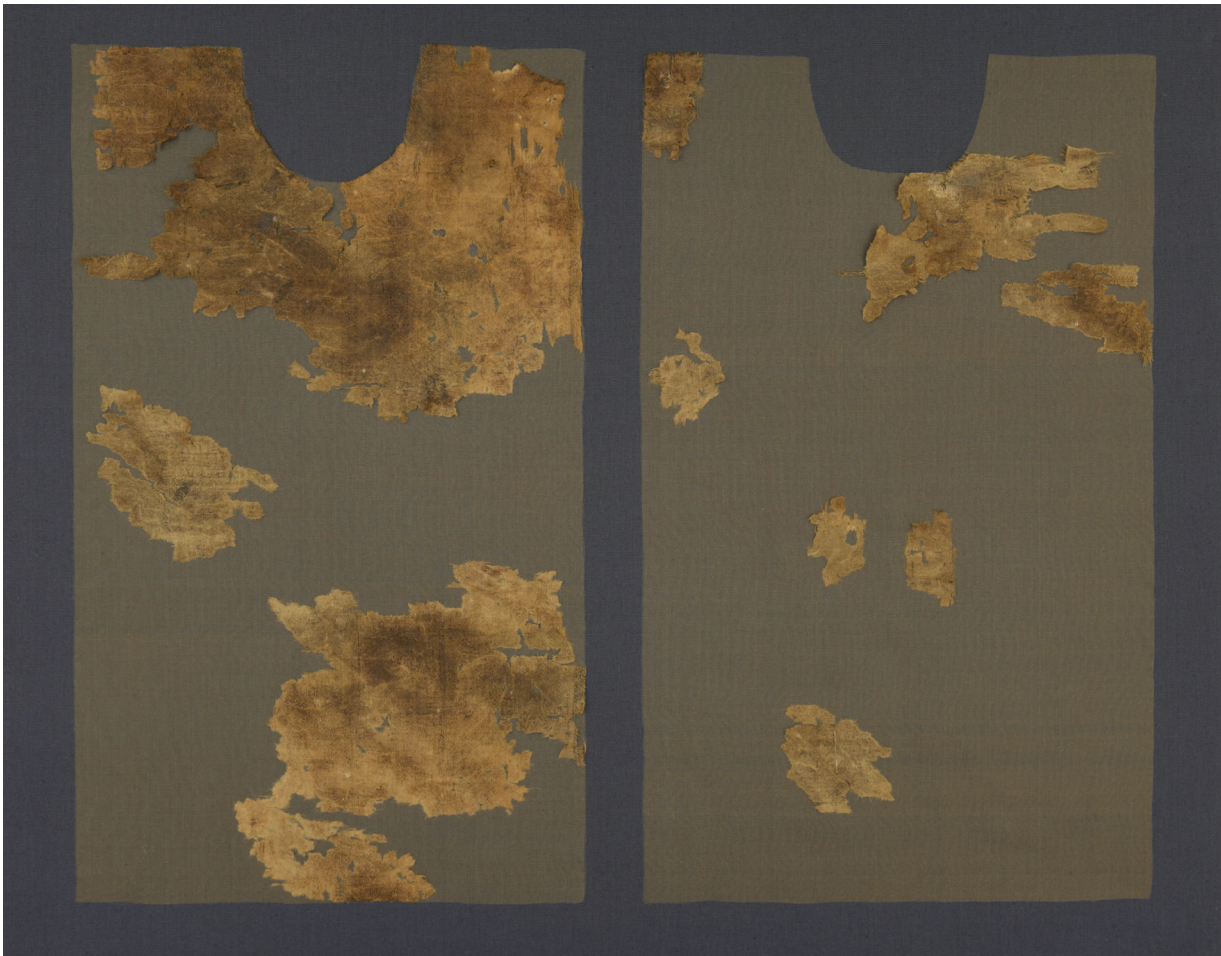


Fig. 5. Child's tunic following restoration (Photo: Prague Castle Administration, J. Gloc).

weaving technique was tablet weaving and to test the possibilities of making patterns with various types of wefts (Fig. 4).

The child's tunic

Find context

Several children's graves were identified in the Royal Crypt. These are connected with the children of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV: Wenceslaus (+1351), Charles (+1373), Heinrich (+1378) and a neonate of unknown name (? +1362). The fate of their remains is complicated as they were relocated several times after their interment, without appropriate identification and with a gradual separation of the funerary equipment. Thus, it is not possible today to assign the textile remains to clothes worn by a particular individual (Bravermanová and Lutovský 2007; Bravermanová 2012).

Description

In total, eight fragments of various shapes and sizes are preserved from the tunic (Fig. 5). Most important for the reconstruction of this item is a fragment with the distinct shape of an upper neck part. Around the neck are holes from stitches and traces of turning; the right side ends in a selvedge, while the left side is cut straight off. Part of the second half of the neck was also identified, again with punctures and traces of fitting. The sleeves of the tunic are not preserved.

Following the reconstruction of the shape of the tunic, its dimensions are: length 61 cm, width of front and back piece 35.5 cm, shoulder length 12 cm, width of neck opening 9.5 cm. The shape is very simple, with a curved neckline and straight front and back pieces that are not divided by means of gussets. Almost no tailoring details are preserved: the holes made by the needle during stitching are visible, but the stitches themselves have not survived.



Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the original appearance of the cloth pattern of the child's tunic. The yellow colour indicates areas created by gold wefts, the grey colour by silver wefts (Drawing: T. Brabcová).

The tunic is made of a 3/1 warp-faced twill made of a silk main warp and a ground weft, which today is ochre in colour. The pattern is created by two different *lancé* wefts. Of the first *lancé* weft almost nothing is preserved; only fragments of gold are visible. This weft was apparently composed of gilded leather wound around a flax core (weft I). The second *lancé* weft, composed of silver-plated leather wound around a silk core, was used as an interrupted weft (*interrompue*) (weft II). Similar textiles have been found among the fabrics of tunicellas and dalmatic tunics at St. Nikolai in Stralsund, Germany dated to the second half of the 14th century (Fircks 2008, 127-133, 137-143)



Fig. 7. Detail of the child's tunic under the microscope, with remnants of gold pattern weft (Photo: Prague Castle Administration, A. Prajzlerová).

where gold threads (gilded leather with a flax core) create the first *lancé* weft in both cases, and a second weft (*interrompue*) is interwoven with silk threads.

Pattern of the fabric

The pattern of the cloth used for the child's tunic is composed of a rider on a lion, facing right toward a sun (Fig. 6). This motif is repeated in rows that are shifted by half a rapport. The rider is wearing a tunic with a fur (?) collar; both the fur and the rider's hair are wavy. The rider has a weapon tied to his belt, and with his hand he is holding the muzzle of the lion, which has a thick mane. The lion is raising its front paw, with a lotus flower located nearby. The sun is covered by a mask and radiates long rays. The individual motifs are executed so that the rider's face, legs and hands and the mask covering the sun are interwoven by a silver thread (weft II) while the rest of the rider, lion, sun and lotus flower are made in a gold thread (weft I, Fig. 7).

Dating and provenance

The cloth of the child's tunic can be dated to the second half of the 14th century, based primarily on the use of the motif with human and animal figures, as well as a sun covered by a mask. The design is randomly compiled and corresponds to those of similar Italian fabrics. We suggest that the sun covered by a mask alludes to Advent, a Christian season celebrated at the same time of year as ancient pagan festivals associated with the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its minimum declination (represented by the mask). During the long winter nights, demons were believed



to roam abroad. The motif of the rider taming a lion might symbolise the desire to aid the sun's return. The cloth was clearly very luxurious, notably in the use of a decorative design created with gold and silver threads. It was woven in Italy, probably in Lucca. This interpretation is supported by analogies with figurative patterns on other fabrics believed to be of the same origin.

Although a precise parallel for the cloth used for the child's tunic is not known, similar motifs have been found in cloth of Italian provenance from the second half of the 14th century in various European textile collections. A depiction of a lion with a human half-figure holding its mane is found on a lampas preserved in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, Germany which is dated to the second half of the 14th century (Lessing 1900, Pl. 178). Eagles bearing women's heads with wavy hair are seen on another fabric from the same museum (Lessing 1900, Pl. 177), while a half-figure is shown rising out of a rosette on a textile in the Deutsches Textilmuseum in Krefeld, Germany (Tietzel 1984, 304-306). Both textiles are dated to the second half of the 14th century. A figure riding on a lion is seen on a lampas from the Kunstgewerbemuseum also dated to the second half of the 14th century (Lessing 1900, Pl. 156a), and a bird flying by a cloud-covered sun is seen on another textile in the Deutsches Textilmuseum in Krefeld which is dated to the start of the 15th century (Tietzel 1984, 418-419). A sun with beams partly covered by a flower motif is found on a fabric in Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf, Germany dated to the second half of the 14th century (Falke 1913, 746). A mask appears on the roots of a tree on a textile from the Kunstgewerbemuseum dated to the second half of the 14th century (Falke 1913, 380). A fantastical motif is seen on the fabric of a tunic from Stralsund showing a man lifting up a dog, above a band with beams rising up from it. This textile is dated to the end of the 14th century (Fircks 2008, 198-201).

Other finds of children's clothes

The remains of the child's funerary tunic, which can probably be attributed to one of the sons of Charles IV buried in the second half of the 14th century, is one of only a few preserved examples of children's clothing in Europe. A patterned tunic with gold thread was found in the coffin of the four-year old Alonso in Valladolid, Colegio de San Gregorio in Spain (Bertrán 2005, 75-77). A skirt, trousers and surcoat were recovered from the grave of infant Marie (†1235) in Leon, Colegio de San Isidoro, also in Spain (Descalzo 2004). Other examples of children's clothing are fragments of upper garments from the church in Uvdal in Norway dated to the 13th-14th centuries AD (Vedeler 2004, 63)

and three upper garments from the burial ground in Herjolfsæs in Greenland dated to the 14th-15th centuries AD (Østergård 2004, 178-179, 192-195). In the Czech Republic, the late Romanesque baptismal suit for a neonate from the Cathedral of St. Vitus is unique, sewn from an extraordinarily soft fabric and consisting of a tunic with a hood, on which is a gold embroidered cross, and trousers. The carefully made suit has a complicated shape achieved by inserted gussets (Bravermanová 2013, 197-200).

Concluding remarks

Research and conservation work on two medieval textiles from the Royal Crypt of St. Vitus at Prague Castle has brought several new discoveries. The tablet-woven band was most probably stitched onto the dress, the bodice of which was conserved earlier. It was trimmed using two types of added pattern wefts, where the gold is visible only in fragments under a microscope. The textile technique used was verified during an experimental reconstruction of the band, giving evidence of the original gold design. The tunic that has been fragmentally preserved belonged to one of the small sons of Charles IV. It was sewed from a lampas and trimmed by a fantastical design with a rider on a lion and a sun covered by a mask. The design suggests Advent, which partly adopted ancient pagan festivals associated with the winter solstice. This funerary garment is very special because medieval children's garments are very rarely preserved.

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Authors: Milena.Bravermanova@hrad.cz and brezinova@arup.cas.cz