

# Researchers reconstruct the veneration of saints from 4th-century tunics

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Archaeologists from the University of Bonn, working with restorers, are preserving and studying 4th-century tunics ascribed to St. Ambrose. In the course of examining these valuable silk garments, they have made surprising scholarly discoveries regarding the development of early relic worship. In a few days they will return to Milan with a mobile lab to continue the project at the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio.

Saint Ambrose is the patron saint of grocers, beekeepers, and gingerbread bakers. He is also the patron saint of study, which explains why his attributes include the book and the flagellum, in addition to the beehive. What is more, Ambrose (339-397) is also the patron saint of Milan, where his bones rest in the Basilica that bears his name, Sant'Ambrogio. Born in Trier, Germany, he began his career as a politician, becoming elected, in 374, the influential Bishop of the emperor's residence of Milan. He enacted relic worship, and would become frequently quoted in the catechism. The Ambrosian chants are associated with him, and he is honored as a Doctor of the Church. Surprisingly though, the tunics at Sant'Ambrogio, which are associated with the saint and worshipped as relics, are little known.

"These are marvelously beautiful vestments of sumptuous silk that have been ascribed to the saint," says Professor Dr. Sabine Schrenk of the department of Christian Archaeology at the University of Bonn. One of them has intricate depictions of hunting scenes with trees and leopards, while the other valuable textile is kept rather simple. There is yet no conclusive proof that these tunics date to the late 4th century, though

they certainly cannot be dated very much later. Hence they are very significant testimony for the Late Antique and Early Christian periods.

In the course of many centuries, time took its toll on these famous textiles. "If these fragile silk threads are to be preserved for a long time to come, it is critical to remove harmful layers of dust," says Cologne textile restorer Ulrike Reichert, who has headed her own restoration workshop in the Dellbrück neighborhood for many years, specializing in preserving early silk textiles. The cloth is painstakingly cleaned with a tiny vacuum cleaner and delicate brushes. "For this we have had to carefully free the material from the protective glass that had been laid over it," says Professor Schrenk's colleague Katharina Neuser.

## **Rescue Project: The Mobile Lab**

Professor Schrenk and the team of restorers have taken their [mobile lab](#) to Milan several times in the last two years, with support from the Gielen-Leyendecker Foundation, to learn more about the origin and history of these textiles beyond the restoration works. "These pieces were revered as the tunics of St. Ambrose probably by the 11th century," says Professor Schrenk. Aribert, the Archbishop of Milan, arranged for the placement of a textile band on the site where the tunics were kept. "It's a kind of woven museum label indicating the significance of the relics," says the Bonn scholar. Presumably, however, a red cross had already been sewn onto one of the vestments much earlier, as an indicator of their significance for the Church.

These tunics have been kept and exhibited in various ways over the centuries. For a while they were stored packed in a chest, sandwich-like, between two other layers of fabric. Until the Second World War, the relics were kept in a frame mounted to an altar in the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio; they then got new glass frames in the Basilica's museum, where they remained until a few years ago. To protect them from the

light they were then placed in storage drawers. "The pressure of heavy glass plates only aggravated the effect of many centuries of deterioration," says Professor Schrenk. So the decision to have these valuable silks restored was made.

While the project's researchers and restorers have already made tremendous progress, they will still have their hands full in the coming years. "Based on the textiles, the Ambrose project reveals the evolution of early relic worship in a surprising way," says Professor Schrenk. The project will also shed new light on the economic history of Late Antiquity. It is well known that silk was not yet produced in 4th-century Europe and Asia Minor; the expensive thread was imported from China. However, Professor Schrenk is skeptical about the scholarly consensus that all silks of the time were woven in the eastern Mediterranean, primarily in Syria. "Milan at the time, being the emperor's residence, had access to ample patronage, and used silk in grand fashion. I would be very surprised if there had not been silk workshops there at the time," says the archaeologist.

Provided by University of Bonn

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