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Textiles from the Tomb of St. Wenceslaus at Prague Castle (Czech Republic)

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Abstract

The collections of Prague Castle contain a valuable assemblage of textiles from the tomb of St. Wenceslaus (died in 935). The remains of the prince were brought from Stará Boleslav to Prague Castle several years after his death and deposited in the south apse of the St. Vitus Rotunda. The grave was still in the same place centuries later, and in the Middle Ages an above-ground tomb and altar were built and subsequently modified. The prince's remains and grave inventory, mainly textiles, were exhumed in 1911, both from the altar and from the lead chest below the level of the tomb. A total of 18 different fabrics were restored in 2002–2003 and a textile-technological study was conducted; the specimens were evaluated in 2018 and 2019.

The fabrics come from a broad period of time, i.e. from the 11th–12th century up to the 15th century. The greatest number date to the 13th–14th century. The areas where they were manufactured are located in all of the silk production centres of the period – in northern China, central Asia, the Near East, Egypt, Sicily, Spain and Italy.

With the exception of the earliest fabric, which was woven using the weft-faced compound twill (samite) technique, the others are lampas weaves. Unpatterned textiles are in tabby or twill weaves. The fabrics from the tomb of St. Wenceslaus are secondary relics, i.e. artefacts that came into contact with the relics of the saint.

Keywords: Prague Castle, St. Wenceslaus, samite, lampas, secondary relics

18.1 Introduction

The collections of Prague Castle contain a valuable assemblage of textiles from the Tomb of St. Wenceslaus in St. Vitus Cathedral (inv. no: PHA 2/1); the material was removed from the tomb as early as 1911 (Podlaha 1911). Following a preliminary evaluation (Bažantová 1996), the entire assemblage was conserved in 2002–2003 (Spittel 2002; Otavská 2003), work that culminated in 2018–2019 with detailed research and an interpretation of the textiles (published in the Czech language: Bravermanová et al. 2020).

18.2. Tomb of St. Wenceslaus

Prince Wenceslaus was killed at the hillfort in Stará Boleslav in 935; three years later, his remains were brought to the south apse of the St. Vitus Rotunda at Prague Castle (e.g. Bravermanová 2010). The rotunda was replaced by a basilica in 1060 and a chapel was built around the original grave, although there is no known account of what this space looked like at that time (Frolík et al. 2000: 202). A specific mention dated to 1245, when the altar above the grave was repaired and consecrated (Druhé pokračování Kosmovo: 285).

The Gothic cathedral's foundation stone was laid in 1344, and major modifications around the Tomb of St. Wenceslaus were made in 1346–1348. A lead chest was deposited below the floor; above the floor, a wooden box was set on the altar. Gothic St. Wenceslaus Chapel was added to the cathedral in 1366; the altar built in 1348 was demolished down to the stone slab protecting the underground part of the grave, and a new altar and above-ground tomb were built (Podlaha 1911).

While the fire in 1541 did not impact St. Wenceslaus' remains, the area surrounding the tomb was destroyed. The house-shaped box was then placed in the altar's stone pedestal and covered with a slab. In 1671, Archbishop Matouš Ferdinand Sobek of Bílenberk had the mensa of the original altar panelled with white and red marble, and a new wooden chest holding St. Wenceslaus' relics deposited inside. Also included was a textile pouch with the relics of Sts. Lazarus, Ananius, Clement, and Blaise, which was brought to Prague by Charles IV in 1370. The altar's decoration was sold to the mint in 1806, and a new altar extension was installed in 1881.



Figure 1. St. Wenceslaus Chapel, current condition. (© Prague Castle Administration. Photograph: J. Gloc)

A historical building survey of the entire area was conducted in 1911, and both the aboveground and underground parts of the tomb were opened. The contents, including textiles, were removed and the first anthropological research was conducted on the saints' remains (Podlaha 1911). The new altar, designed by Kamil Hilbert and built in 1912–1913 on the remnants of the Gothic altar mensa and tomb, still exists to this day (Bravermanová 2010; Figure 1).

18.3. Textile technology analysis of the fabrics and their interpretation

The assemblage from the Tomb of St. Wenceslaus is composed of eighteen different textiles preserved in multiple fragments. The basis of the professional processing of textiles was the implementation of research, which included technical analysis, reconstruction of the pattern and detailed documentation. This was followed by an evaluation of the collection of contemporary analogies and the placement of the specimens in the overall framework of period textile production. Relevant historical reports were also incorporated into the final interpretation. An evaluation of the monitored parameters was the basis for determining the date and provenance.

18.3.1 Fabric with knotwork, palmettes, pearl roundel and animals (no. 1)

Fabric no. 1 is preserved in eighteen fragments, the largest of which has a height of 12.8 cm and a width of 28.5 cm (Figure 2). The fabric is a silk samite (weft-faced compound twill). The main warp

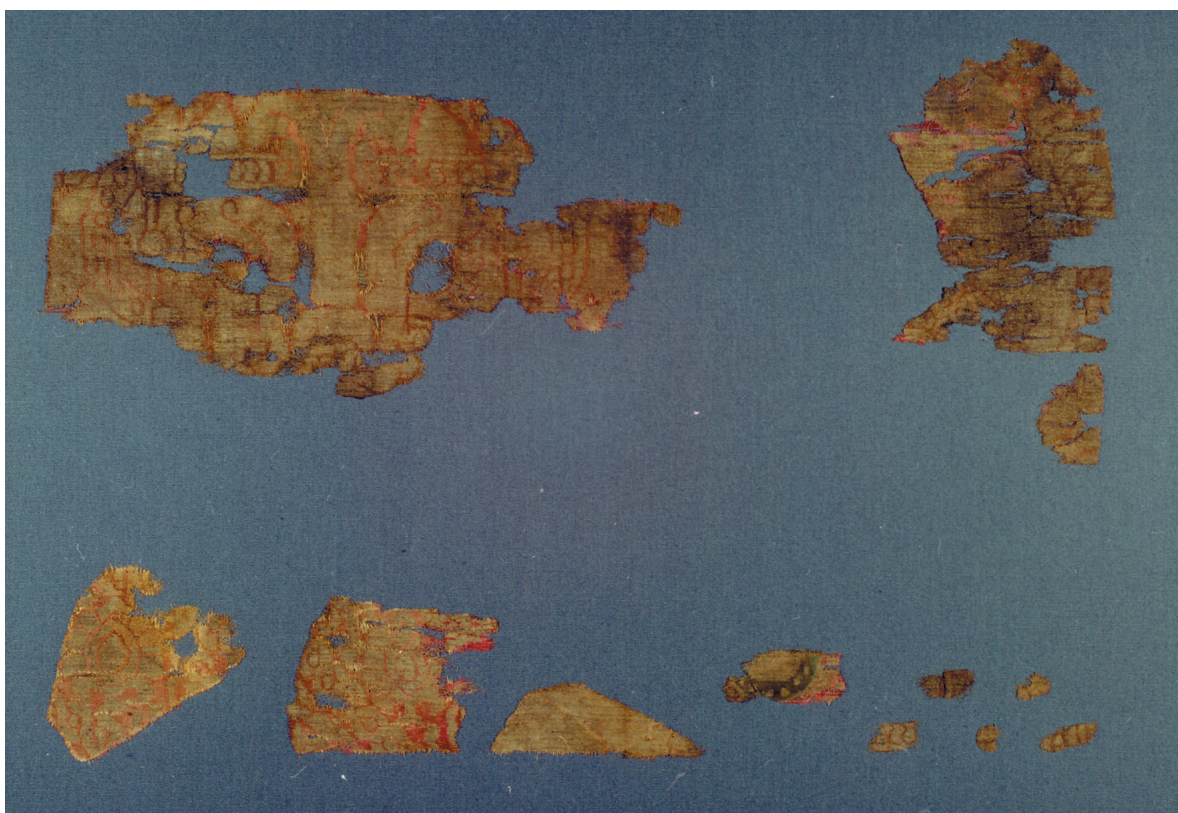


Figure 2. Fabric with knotwork, palmettes, pearl roundel and animals (no. 1). (© Prague Castle Administration. Photograph: J. Gloc)

threads lie between layers of wefts and the binding warp interlaces *par passée* in a 1/2 Z twill weave. The pattern is created using by four systems of wefts: the first is a silk *lancé*, the second is metal *lancé* (plated strip of an animal substrate Z-wound around a silk core), the third and fourth are silk *broché*.

Although the pattern cannot be entirely determined due to the fragmented condition, the rapport was larger. The background of the pattern is red-brown,¹ and preserved details from a metal *lancé* weft resemble a pair of harnessed animals (maybe elephants) facing one another, along with palmettes and knotwork. Green and brown *broché* wefts are woven along part of the perimeter of the round medallion with pearl roundel and a small spherical form (maybe eye).

Selected analogies to fabric no. 1: A parallel to the samite with a *broché* weft is a fabric with a medallion with a two-headed eagle found in the reliquary grave of St. Amandus from the Basilica of St. Peter in Salzburg. It is identified as West Asian/Seljukian from the 11th to the beginning of the 12th century (Otavský and Wardwell 2011: 163–167, no. 52). A pair of elephants in a medallion framed by two lines of knotwork and by pearl roundel are found on fabric identified as East Iranian from the 10th century (Trésor de Liège, Liège; Pirenne-Hulin 1989: 94). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 1 can be identified as Middle Eastern from the 11th–12th century.

18.3.2 Fabric with eight-sided stars and small stars (no. 2)

Fabric no. 2 is preserved in fourteen fragments, the largest of which has a height of 27.4 cm and a width of 23 cm (Figure 3). The fabric is a silk lampas. The main warp interlaces with the ground weft in a 2/1 S twill weave in the ground. The pattern is woven with two patterning silk *lancé* wefts, which interlace with the binding warp in a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in the pattern *par passée*.

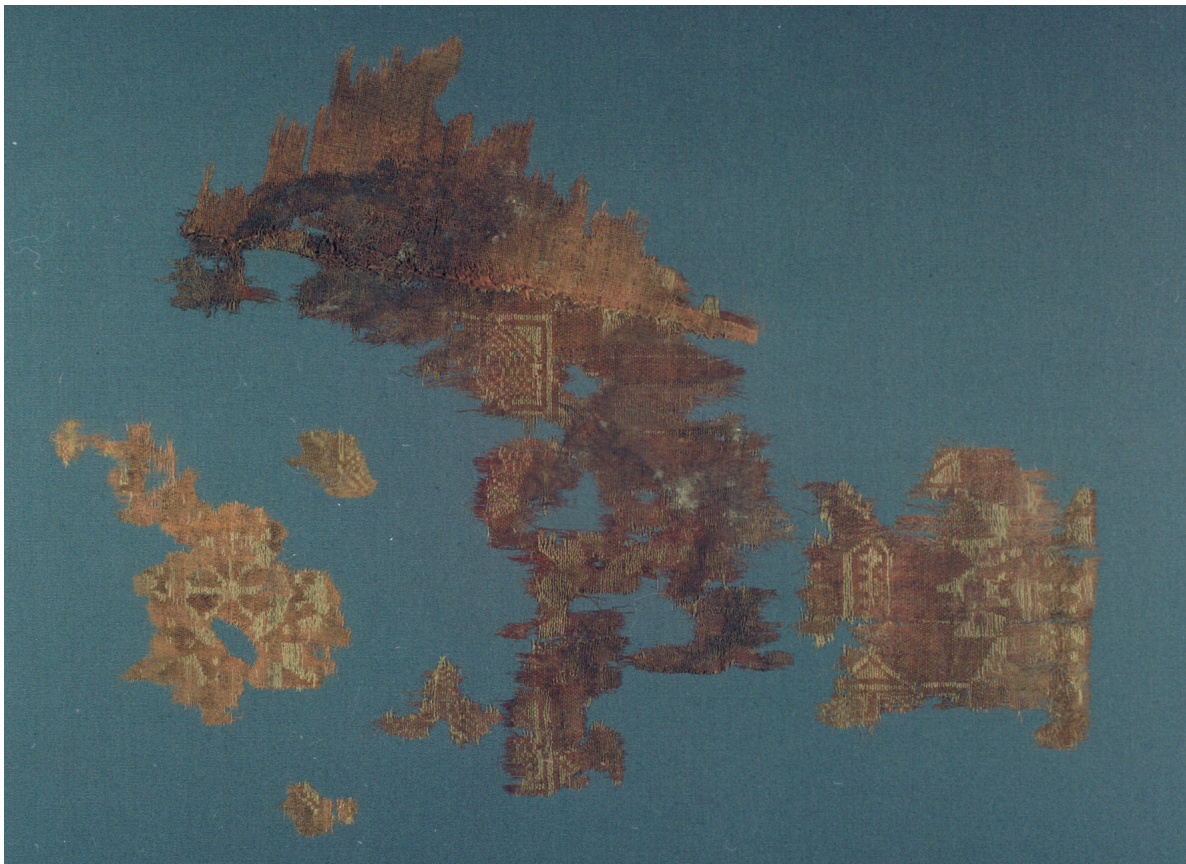


Figure 3. Fabric with eight-sided stars and small stars (no. 2). (© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)

¹ The colour stated for individual systems of threads reflects the preserved colour (as it appears today), which, however, typically does not correspond to the original colour.

The pattern is composed of two eight-sided stars with a rosette in their centre, on a red-brown background. Both motifs were created with a beige patterning weft arranged in rows shifted by half a rapport. The connection of these motifs produces a hexagon with pearl roundel created with a green-beige patterning weft.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 2: A similar technique occurs on a fabric with a cross-star motif from the Middle East or Spain from the 14th century (Otavsky and Abbās Muhhammad Salīm 1995: 224–225, no. 128). The eight-sided star motif is found on the fabric of the “St. Wenceslaus” casula from the second half of the 13th century – first half of the 14th century; it was made in the Middle East, in Egypt or the Islamic part of Spain (Metropolitní kapitula u sv. Víta, St. Vitus Treasury, Prague, Bravermanová 2012: no. 7). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 2 can be dated to the 13th–14th century from the Near East, Egypt or the Islamic part of Spain.

18.3.3 Fabric with an ogival framework and Arabic inscription (no. 3)

Fabric no. 3 is preserved in twenty fragments, the largest of which has a height of eight cm and a width of 10.5 cm (Figure 4). The fabric is a silk lampas. The ground is a 4/1 satin weave (*décochement* 3) composed of the main warp and ground weft. The pattern is created by one patterning silk *lancé* weft interlaced with the binding warp in a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in the pattern *par passée*.

The pattern on a green-blue background is created by a yellow-white patterning weft. The ogival framework is based on laurel leaves; round disks with a pseudo-Arabic inscription are inside the ovals.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 3: A similar weave is found on a fabric with a pair of hares in an ogival framework from Egypt or Syria from the 14th century (Otavsky and ‘Abbās Muhhammad Salīm 1995: 214–217, no. 124). A similar composition is found on a fabric with ogival framework and lotus blossoms from Egypt or Syria from the 14th century (Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin; von Wilckens 1992: 60, no. 99). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 3 can be identified as Syrian or Egyptian from the 14th century.



Figure 4. Fabric with ogival framework and Arabic inscription (no. 3; back side). (© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)



Figure 5. Fabric with vertical stripes with palmettes, rosettes and heart-shaped motifs (no. 4).
(© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)



Figure 6. Fabric with lanceolate leaves and medallions (no. 5).
(© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)

18.3.4 Fabric with vertical stripes with palmettes, rosettes and heart-shaped motifs (no. 4)

Fabric no. 4 is preserved in four fragments, the largest of which has a height of 12.5 cm and a width of 31.8 cm (Figure 5). The fabric is a silk lampas. The ground is a 4/1 satin weave (*décochement 3*) composed of a main warp of two colours and a ground *liseré* weft. The pattern is created by two weft effects; the first is the *liseré* ground weft, which interlaces with the binding warp in a tabby weave; the second is the *lancé* patterning metal weft (plated strip of an animal substrate), which interlaces with the binding warp in a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in both pattern weft effects in a tabby weave *par passée*.

The fabric is compositionally divided into stripes. The beige-green stripes are filled with heart motifs created by a patterning metal weft. The beige stripes have either palmettes or rosettes created partially with a *liseré* weft and partially with a patterning metal weft.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 4: The same technique and a pattern composed in vertical strips are found on the fabric of the so-called “Saint Himerius toga”, which is identified as Turkestani from the 14th century (Kloster, Mariastein; Schmedding 1978: 149–151, no. 119).

Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 4 can be identified as Central Asian from the first half of the 14th century.

18.3.5 Fabric with lanceolate leaves and medallions (no. 5)

Fabric no. 5 is preserved in two fragments, one with a height of 26.3 cm and a width of 13.5 cm, the other with a height of 25.6 cm and a width of fourteen cm (Figure 6). The fabric is a silk lampas. The ground is a 3/1 S twill weave from the main warp and ground weft. The pattern is created by two weft effects; the *lancé* patterning silk weft and the *lancé* patterning metal weft (plated strip of an animal substrate) interlaced with the binding warp in a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in the pattern *par passée*.

The pattern background is green-grey, and the gold and beige-grey pattern is arranged in rows shifted by half a rapport. Two motifs alternate: lanceolate leaves beneath a round medallion with a motif partially reminiscent of a stylised Chinese symbol of longevity, and a lotus blossom. A larger part of the pattern is created by a patterning metal weft, while a patterning silk weft creates only the contours of individual elements.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 5: A very similar technique is found on a fabric with a plant pattern used to sew a maniple. The fabric is interpreted as Central Asian from the first half of the 14th century (Kulturhistorisches Museum der Hansestadt Stralsund, Stralsund; Fircks 2008: 92–95, no. 2). Some of the elements of this pattern appear on a fabric interpreted as Persian or from the western part of Central Asia from the end of the 13th century and the first half of the 14th century (Otavský and Wardwell 2011: 250–251, no. 94). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 5 can be identified as a product of Central Asia, possibly North China, from the first half of the 14th century.

18.3.6 Fabric with poppy heads, ducks and lions (no. 6)

Fabric no. 6 is preserved in two fragments, one with a height of twenty cm and a width of thirteen cm, the other with a height of 11.7 cm and a width of 28.7 cm (Figure 7). The fabric is a silk lampas (double weave in the ground; *lampas à fond double étoffe*). In the ground, the main warp interlaces with the ground weft in a 2/1 S twill, beneath which is a separate layer in a 1/2 S twill weave composed of the binding warp and two patterning *lancé* wefts. The pattern is created using three weft effects; the first two are the *lancé* patterning silk wefts, which interlace in strips (*interrompu*) in the 1/2 S twill weave; the third is the *broché* metal weft (plated strip of an animal substrate S-wound around a flax core) which interlaces with the binding warp in a 1/2 S twill weave. The binding warp passes beneath the ground weft and, on the back, interlaces with the non-patterning silk wefts.

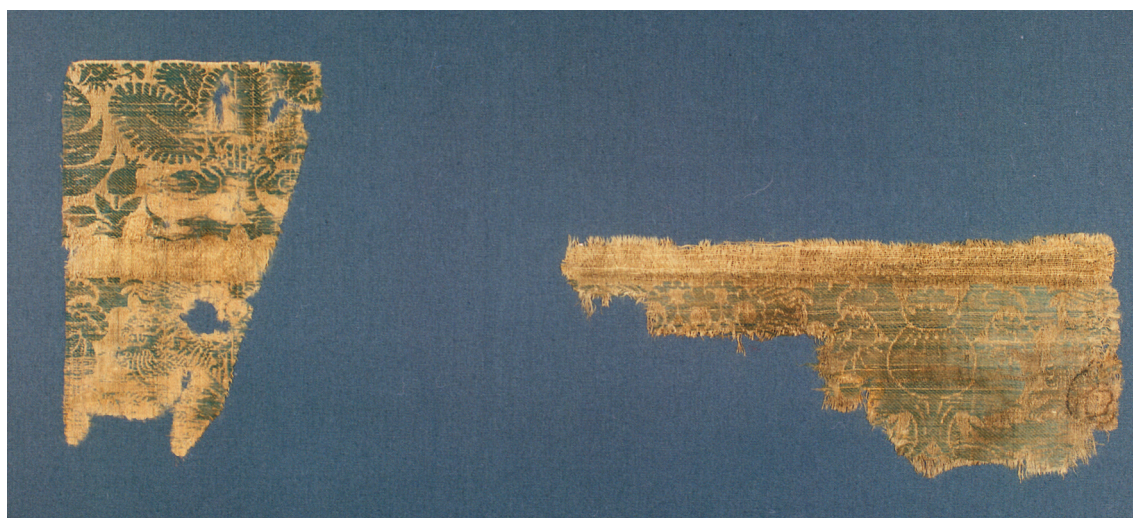


Figure 7. Fabric with poppy heads, ducks and lions (no. 6). (© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)

The grey-blue and gold pattern is composed in vertical rows on the ochre background. One has poppy heads and lions, the other ducks on waves, with a bunch of leaves overhead. A large part of the pattern is created by patterning silk weft. The rows are divided from each other by a strip in which a metal *broché* weft creates an apparently small pattern whose details are not known.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 6: An identical binding technique is found on a fabric with jumping lions and birds interpreted as Italian from the final third of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century (Otavský and Wardwell 2011: 278–280, no. 106). A similar pattern arranged in vertical rows is found on a fabric interpreted as Italian from the period around 1400 (Uměleckoprůmyslové muzeum, Prague; Zeminová 1986: 47–48, no. 404). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 6 can be identified as Italian from the final third of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century.

18.3.7 Fabric with palmettes (no. 7)

Fabric no. 7 is preserved in 36 fragments, the largest of which has a height of 21.4 cm and a width of twenty cm (Figure 8). The fabric is a silk lampas. The ground is a 2/1 S twill weave composed of the main warp and ground weft. In the pattern, the patterning silk *lancé* weft and binding warp create a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in the pattern *par passée*.

Given the fragmented condition of the fabric, the complete pattern cannot be determined. The beige palmette pattern is composed of regularly repeating rows of larger oval motifs on a red-brown background.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 7: An identical technique is found on a fabric with grape leaves placed in an ogival framework. The fabric is interpreted as Italian from the second half of the 14th century (Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin; von Wilckens 1992: 122–123, no. 249). Fruit surrounded by a rosette is found on the fabric of a casula, dalmatic and tunic dated to the second quarter of the 15th century from Italy (Dom St. Peter und Paul, Brandenburg; Jehle and Wetter 2005: 234–245, nos. C3, D8, D9). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 7 can be identified as Italian or Spanish from the 15th century.

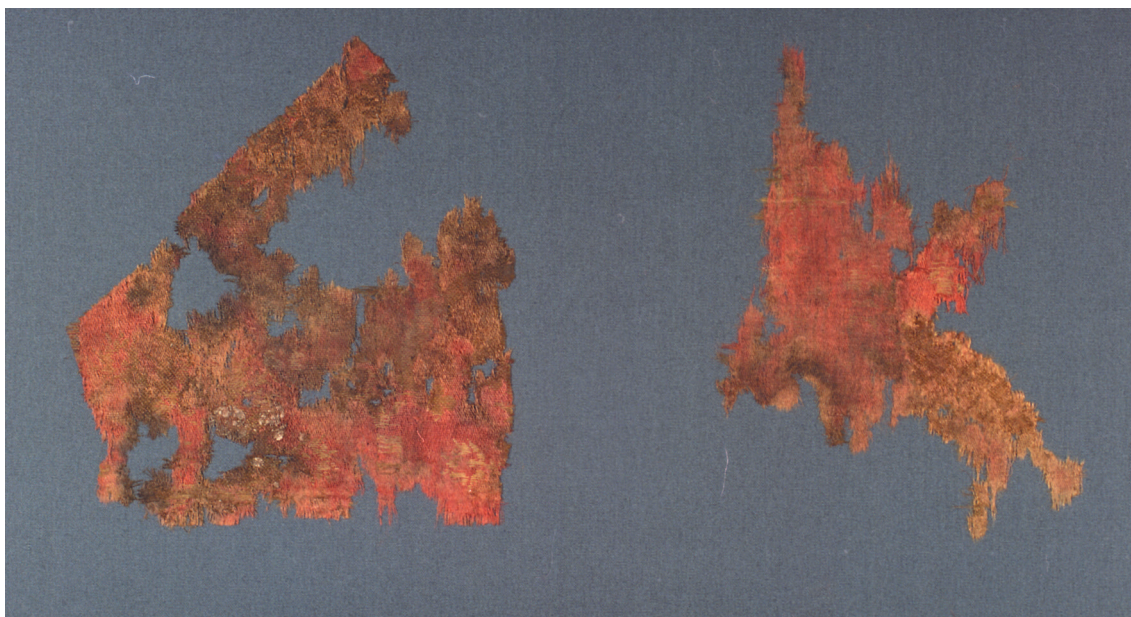


Figure 8. Fabric with palmettes (no. 7). (© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)

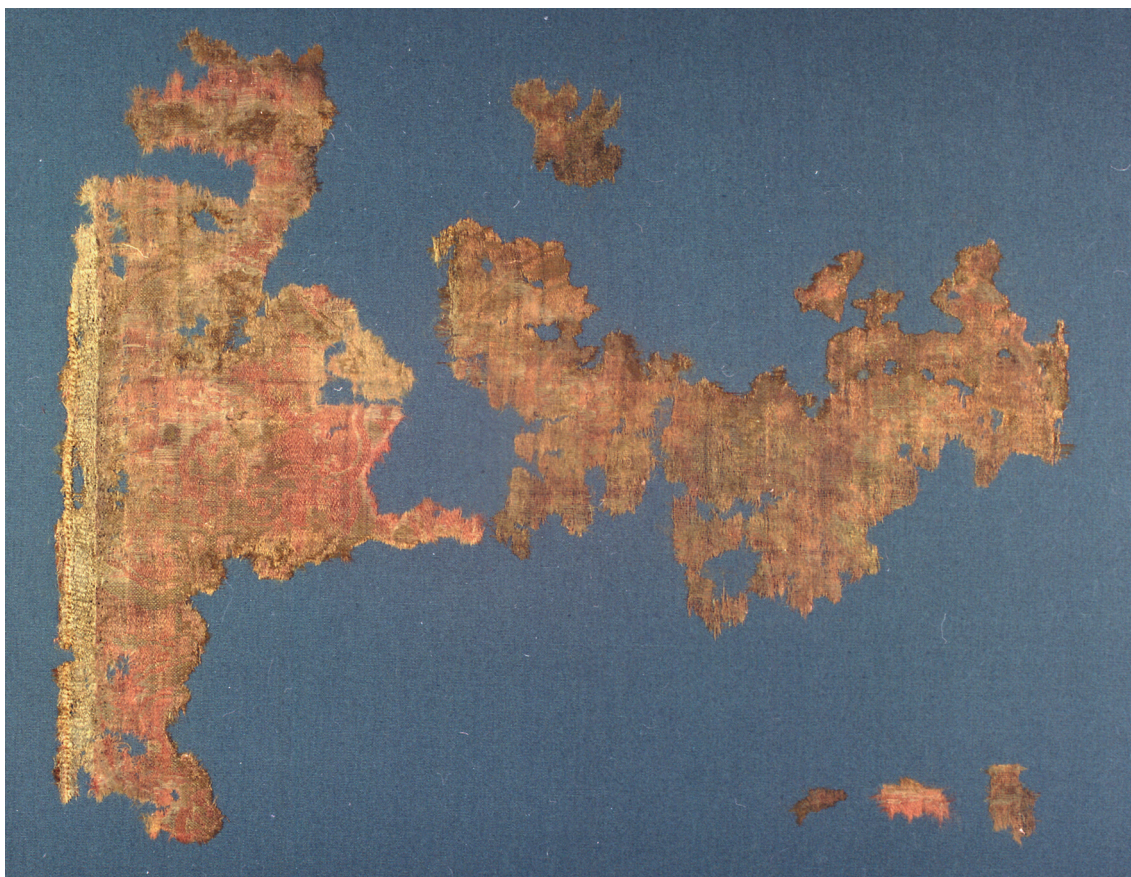


Figure 9. Fabric with palmettes and pomegranates (no. 8). (© Prague Castle Administration, Photograph: J. Gloc)

18.3.8 Fabric with palmettes and pomegranates (no. 8)

Fabric no. 8 is preserved in eight fragments, the largest of which has a height of 38 cm and a width of twenty cm (Figure 9). The fabric is a silk lampas. The ground is a 2/1 S twill weave composed of the main warp and ground weft. In the pattern, the patterning silk *lancé* weft interlaces with the binding warp in a tabby weave. The binding warp interlaces in the ground and in the pattern *par passée*.

Given the fragmented condition of the fabric, the full pattern cannot be determined. The beige palmette pattern is composed in regularly repeating rows of maybe pomegranates on a brown-red background. As the fabric is very similar in its weave and pattern to the fabric with palmettes (see no. 7), the same examples can be used as parallels to the technique and pattern. Hence, it can be interpreted as Italian or Spanish from the 15th century.

18.3.9 Patternless fabrics in a plain weave (nos. 9–12)

The assemblage also contains four various silk fabrics in a tabby weave. Fabric no. 9 was preserved in only one fragment with a height of 39.3 cm and a width of 31 cm. Fabric no. 10 was preserved in 10 fragments, the largest of which has a height of 30 cm and a width of 22 cm. Fabric no. 11 was preserved in 17 fragments, the largest of which has a height of 26 cm and a width of 26 cm. Fabric no. 12 was preserved in sixteen fragments, the largest of which has a height of 13.4 cm and a width of thirteen cm. None of the four fabrics have any signs that could facilitate a more precise dating or help determine where they were produced. It is only possible to state that they were produced in the Middle Ages in one of the silk-production areas in Asia or southern Europe.

18.3.10 Fabric with gold stripes (no. 13)

One fragment of fabric no. 13, has a height of ca. one cm and a width of 25 cm. The silk warp threads interlace with one silk and one metal (plated metal strip S-wound around a silk core) weft in a tabby weave. The two wefts alternate to create stripes. The fabric was cut in the direction of the weft into a strip, the ends of which are tied in a knot to form a loop.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 13: Fragments of fine silk fabrics in a tabby weave with metal wefts were found in graves J 42, J 45, J 57, J 60, J 63 and J 108 in Judendorf-Villach. They are dated to the 13th century, with Spain as their designated origin (St. Martin, Villach; Petrascheck-Heim 1970: 73–77, 111–118, 122–133).

Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 13 can be dated to the 13th–14th century, originating from one of the Mediterranean silk production areas, perhaps Spain.

18.3.11 Patternless fabrics in a twill weave (no. 14)

Fabric no. 14 is preserved in 27 fragments, the largest of which has a height of 13.3 cm and a width of 20.8 cm. The fabric in a 2/1 S twill weave has a warp from plant material (maybe linen) and a weft from wool.

The fabric has no signs that could facilitate a more precise dating or help determine where it was produced. However, it can be assumed that it was produced in the Middle Ages in one of the textile workshops in Europe, perhaps even in the Czech Lands.

18.3.12 Reliquary pouch (no. 15)

The reliquary pouch (Figure 10) was sewn from one rectangular piece of faced fabric with small branches (no. 15a). The upper edge was pulled tight by a flat fingerlooped braided cord made from five silk threads. After passing the cord through the holes, two spherical buttons were sewn to it (made by intertwining a group of five parallel silk threads wound around a plant material core; the possible internal reinforcement of the buttons was not preserved).

The pouch can be positively linked to the reliquary pouch of St. Lazarus of Bethany, St. Ananius, St. Clement and St. Blaise, mentioned in connection with the inner space of the altar (Podlaha 1911: 18). The relics could originally have been wrapped in small pieces of the white/beige silk and blue linen cloth found in the pouch.



Figure 10. Reliquary pouch (no. 15),
(© Prague Castle Administration.
Photograph: J.Gloc)

18.3.13 Fabric with branches (no. 15a)

Fabric no. 15a is in one piece with a height of eight cm and a width of eleven cm. The fabric is a silk lampas (double weave in the ground; *lampas à fond double étoffe*). The ground is an irregular 5/1 satin weave (*décochement* 5, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3) composed of the main warp and the ground weft, under which there is a separate layer in a 1/3 S twill weave composed of the binding warp and a patterning metal *lancé* weft (plated strip of an animal substrate S-wound around a flax core). In the pattern, the binding warp interlaces with the patterning weft in a 1/3 S twill weave, with the binding warp passing beneath the ground weft. All that is preserved on the brown background is a small part of the gold pattern of stylised branches. A larger plant motif is visible at the point of their convergence.

Selected analogies to fabric no. 15a: A similar technique is found on an Italian fabric with bears, dogs and tendrils from the end of the 14th century or the beginning of the 15th century (Deutsches Textilmuseum, Krefeld; Tietzel 1984: 331–333, no. 103). A similar pattern is found on an Italian fabric with birds and palmettes from the 14th century (Deutsches Textilmuseum, Krefeld; Tietzel 1984: 300–301, no. 90). Based on the textile technology analysis and analogies, fabric no. 15a can be interpreted as Italian from the second half of the 14th century.

18.3.14 Patternless fabrics in a plain weave (nos. 15b, c, d)

Three patternless fabrics in a tabby weave also belong to the pouch. The silk fabric no. 15b has a height of eight cm and a width of eleven cm; this is the lining of the pouch. Small fragments of silk no. 15c and linen fabric no. 15d probably originally served to wrap the relics. The fabrics have no indicators that could facilitate a more precise dating or help determine where they were produced. It is only possible to state that the silk fabrics were produced in the Middle Ages in one of the silk-production areas in Asia or southern Europe, the linen fabric in southern or central Europe.

18.4. Conclusion

The fabrics from the Tomb of St. Wenceslaus date to the broad period from between the 11th and 15th centuries. With only one exception no. 15d, they are silk and were made across the main silk production centres of the period (Central Asia, Middle East, Spain, Italy). The oldest fabric no. 1, a samite, was the only fabric that was not woven using the lampas technique. The fabrics were patterned with geometric, plant and animal motifs (Figure 11). Patternless textiles nos. 9–12, 14, 15b–15d were made in basic weaves – tabby or twill.

The fabrics from the tomb of St. Wenceslaus are secondary relics, i.e., artefacts that came into contact with the relics of the saint and which will therefore be handled in the same way as the parts of the saint's body (Bravermanová 2010: 149). However, it is interesting that no fabric has been preserved from the time of the earliest deposition of the relics of St. Wenceslaus at Prague Castle, i.e., the 10th century.

Nevertheless, with four notable exceptions of fabrics nos. 4, 5, 9, 14, traces of tailoring are preserved on many of the others (stitches, stitch holes, signs of folding), though their original shape and function can no longer be determined today. They could have been older coverings placed over the tomb, altar covers or paraments, parts of which later added to the above-ground and underground parts of the tomb, where some of them apparently covered Wenceslas's remains.

Like similar fabrics from the Tomb of St. Ludmila (Bravermanová 2004), the collection of reliquary fabrics ranks among the rarest treasures in Bohemia, not only from the perspective of the luxurious



Figure 11. Drawings of patterns (repeat h x w in cm): fabric no. 1 (indeterm.); fabric no. 2 (9.6 x 18.4); fabric no. 3 (22.6 x 13.6); fabric no. 4 (w. 13.5–14.5); fabric no. 5 (24.2 x 8.5); fabric no. 6 (w. 11.7); fabric no. 7 (indeterm.); fabric no. 8 (indeterm.); fabric no. 15a (indeterm.); key: white – ground; black – lancé silk patterning weft; horizontal hatching – liseré weft; oblique hatching – lancé patterning metal weft; vertical hatching – broché silk weft; grey – broché metal weft. (© adapted according to Otavská 2003. Graphic editing: K. Vytejková)

nature of the fabrics, but mainly because they were in close contact with the relics of the most prominent saint and patron of the Czech nation.

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