

THE MELK CHASUBLE, AN OPUS ANGLICANUM

BY HANNA KRONBERGER-FRENTZEN



F late years the great artistic and technical merit of early English embroidery and its widespread diffusion in various parts of Europe, has been demonstrated again and again. Thus the oldest chasuble [PLATES A and B] of Melk Cathedral, hitherto regarded as an unknown piece of embroidery, must now be recognized as Opus Anglicanum. Professor Tietze¹ mentions this chasuble as an iconographically interesting specimen of the early fourteenth century, without stating its origin. In spite of every effort, it has proved impossible to trace how the chasuble found its way to the Treasury of the Cathedral. Perhaps we may assume a certain connexion with the cope, which until lately belonged to the Cathedral of Salzburg and which was known for certain to be Opus Anglicanum.

Unfortunately the Melk Chasuble is so worn that little of its former splendour is left. It may be regarded as a slight compensation that the original form of this vestment has been preserved without vital alteration, a very rare occurrence, as chasubles of this shape, the bell-shaped chasubles, have nearly always been transformed into the later and more practical form with separate front and back. In most cases this naturally meant a considerable loss of valuable material. The Melk Chasuble has only been altered by the cutting of armholes, which destroys no important part of the design. The connoisseur of early embroidery sees at once that—faded and threadbare though this specimen may be—it is a very unusual piece of work. It differs from all hitherto known vestments worked in the period of Opus Anglicanum in so far as it represents one scene only, repeated back and front: the *Crucifixion*. Its figures are on so large a scale and of such monumental conception that no other specimen of early English embroidery can be compared with it. The close connexion with works of contemporary English painting is evident. It reminds one of the *Crucifixion with Saints* (1250-1300) in the church at Newport, Essex,² of the *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John* (1290-1300), Bapchild Church, Kent,³ and, above all, of the same subject in the Chapel of St. Faith (1270-1300) in Westminster Abbey.⁴ Something of the severe grandeur of these

¹ "Oesterreichische Kunsttopographie Bd. III Bezirk Melk bearbeitet von Dr. Hans Tietze," p. 269, pl. xii, xiii.

² Tancred Borenius and T. W. Tristram: "English Medieval Painting," pl. 25.

³ E. T. Long: "Some recently discovered English Wall-paintings," THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, Vol. LVI (1930), p. 225, pl. IIA.

⁴ Tancred Borenius and T. W. Tristram: "English Medieval Painting," pl. 20.

paintings is also to be found in the beautiful needlework of the Melk Chasuble.

The subject of the crucifixion is often used in English embroidery. It is to be met with in nearly all the famous series of designs with which vestments are usually decorated. But there it always formed part of all the other scenes, except that it is placed in the centre in order to emphasize its significance. Thus we find it—to mention only a few—on the famous Syon cope in the Victoria and Albert Museum and on those in the Vatican,⁵ also on that in the Museo Civico in Bologna, and on that in Ascoli-Piceno (the latter being the gift of Pope Nicholas IV). In the rare cases where the Crucifixion occurs alone, it is on a very small scale. It may be seen on the front of a burse (T. 45) in the Victoria and Albert Museum with simple squat figures, surrounded by a flat quarterfoil. It might almost have been intended for one of the panels of a cope which was later turned into an almsburse. Only in one case do we find a crucifixion alone, a composition designed for this special purpose: on one side of the embroidered cover of a Latin Psalter in the British Museum (MS. written at the end of C. 13). The embroidery is very threadbare, but still recognizable as a masterpiece. Since Lethaby⁶ states that one of the most famous wall paintings of Westminster Abbey is the prototype of the *Annunciation* depicted on the other side of the cover, we may take it for granted that the crucifixion also had some famous model.

The Melk *Crucifixion* has a certain similarity with the one on this book cover, especially as regards the figure of Christ. But there are also points of similarity to be found with figures on some of the famous copes above mentioned. In every case, however, the figures on the Melk Chasuble appear to be more rigid and more hieratic. This may be due to its large size, which involved an unusual amount of work to the embroiderers of that time.

The style of the Melk Chasuble indicates that it dates about 1300. The figures show the characteristic curve of that period, which is recognizable even in the frontal attitude of the figure of St. John. They also have the wide open eyes with the archaic sidelong glance. Although the scenes on both sides of the vestment are almost identical, they show various

⁵ Andreas Lindbloem: "An English Embroidery in the Vatican," THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, Vol. XXXIX (1921), p. 121, pl. I-III.

⁶ W. R. Lethaby: "English Primitives: London Painters and Opus Anglicanum," THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, Vol. LIII (1928), p. 173, pl. A, B.

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degrees of expression. On the front the whole group is more ecstatic. The Virgin stretches her arms up towards the cross with an expression of deep despair. St. John turns his head away in anguish [PLATE A]. The representation on the other side gives an impression of greater resignation. The head of Christ is sunk lower and appears more lifeless. The head of the Virgin is bent above her crossed hands in pious submission. St. John also seems to be calmer as he turns to comfort her [PLATE B]. This difference of expression suffices to prove the artistic delicacy of this masterpiece of early needlework.

The composition and the colouring of the groups are magnificent and, in spite of the wealth of the surrounding detail, the figures stand out with perfect clearness. The cross is placed in the centre. Each of its plain beams, shaded green, ends in a circle containing one of the emblems of the four Evangelists. Above the crossbeam the sun and moon are depicted with clearly drawn human faces. Similarly we find them in the spandrels of architectural ornamentation surrounding *Christ Enthroned* on a panel of embroidered silk in the Victoria and Albert Museum (T. 337, 1921). In the circle at the top of the cross the eagle of St. John is depicted. Christ's body, strongly curved with crossed feet, is fixed to the cross with three nails. The anatomy of the naked body is accurately modelled by the stitches. The loincloth as well as the garments of the Virgin and St. John are edged with narrow coloured borders. The halos are decorated in the same way. Alternate dark and light silks denote the wavy lines of the hair. The under and upper garments are always of different colours. In many places the fur lining is suggested by the heraldic pattern. The background behind the cross is ornamented with the well-known heraldic fleur de lis, a favourite motive in English embroidery. The remaining part of the background is covered with connected quarterfoils in which roses and foliage alternate. The ten-petalled roses are embroidered in pale pink and outlined in gold. Of the four crossed vine leaves, two are red and two green. The same scheme of ornamental background is to be seen embroidered in gold thread on a panel of needlework in the British Museum (given by Mr. Franks).⁷ We also find it on the golden background of the famous coronation chair in Westminster Abbey, which is regarded as the work of Master

Thomas, chief painter of Henry III and Edward I.⁸

As far as the technique of the Melk Chasuble goes, it shows all the characteristics of Opus Anglicanum. This specimen belongs to the group in which a coloured silk is used as background, whereas in the other group the ground is linen entirely covered with embroidery. In the Melk Chasuble a very fine thin silk of dark plum red has been used for the background. Its violet-purple colour, as well as its diagonal texture, reminds one of late antique materials. The silk is backed with coarse linen through which all the stitches are sewn. This underlay comes through in many places and holds the embroidery together, although the silk is worn away. Silk and metal thread have been used, the latter being very well preserved. Its material is Cyprian gold around fine linen thread. There is also some silver thread to be found, darkened by age. The metal threads are closely sewn down with small silk stitches and always laid in the same direction. The rows of stitches sometimes form a zig-zag diaper. The colours of the silk threads are chiefly red, yellow, green, blue and pale pink, all very much faded. Black stitching often forms the outlines and adds emphasis to the drawing. The closely worked chain and split stitches follow the lines of the drawing. They model without finer gradations of shade. In the faces and on the figure of Christ the stitches are laid in spirals, an infallible sign of Opus Anglicanum. The contraction caused by these stitches forms those characteristic little hollows in which the embroidery remains intact long after the surrounding work is worn away.

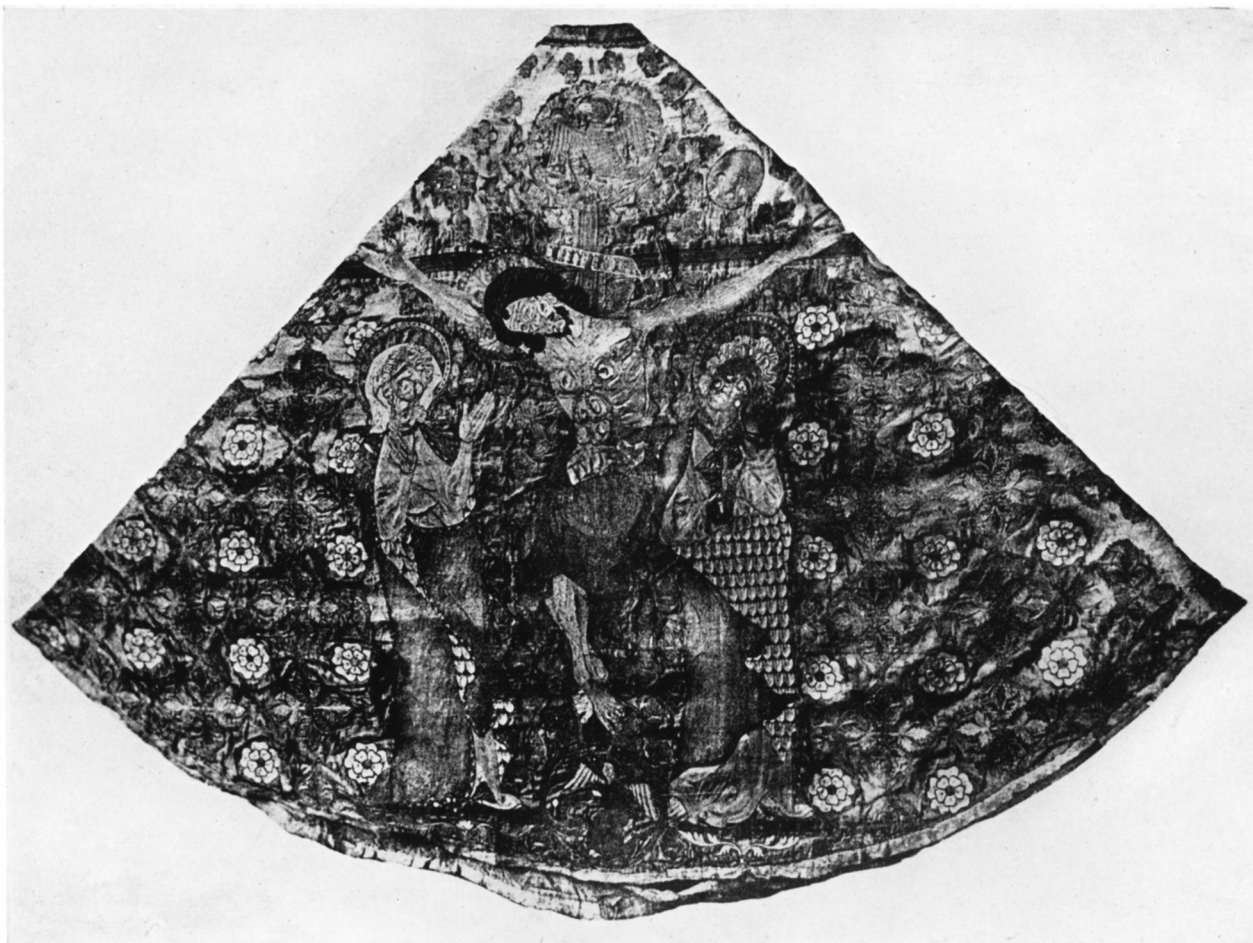
At the throat, the edge of the vestment is bordered by a rather narrow woven orphrey with geometrical ornaments. Very little of the semi circular outline of the chasuble seems to be cut away. The border is sewn on to the linen underlay, which is visible all round, so we may take it for granted that at a later period a small orphrey had been cut off.

In spite of the great difficulty of getting an adequate reproduction of so worn and faded a specimen of artistic needlework, it is to be hoped that the chief characteristics of this early masterpiece are still here recognizable. Although little remains of its former splendour, this early English chasuble still impresses one by its austere beauty in contrast to all the glittering and pompous vestments of later times displayed in the vestry of Melk Cathedral.

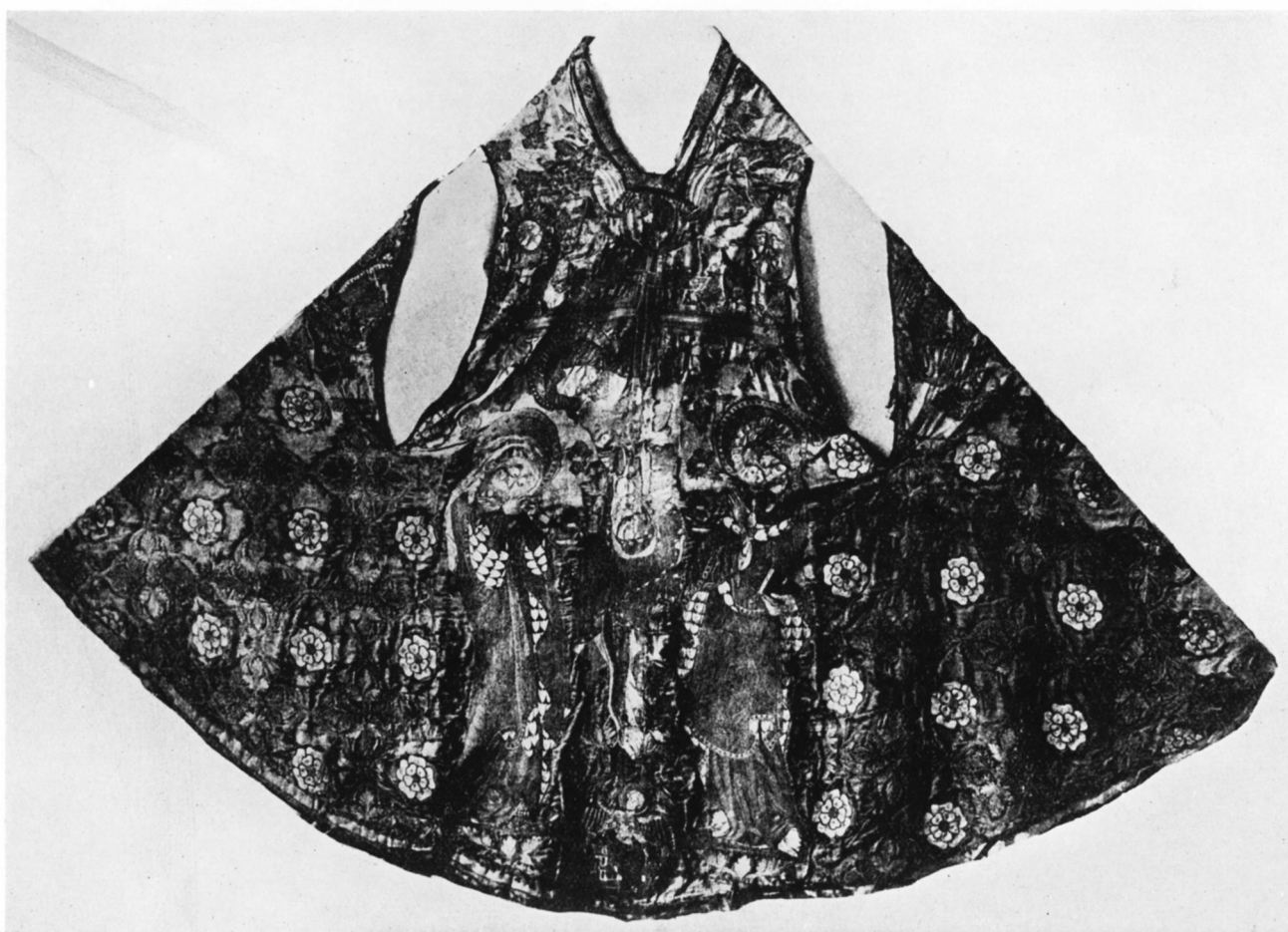
⁷ See W. R. Lethaby, p. 174, fig. 2.

⁸ See W. R. Lethaby, p. 174.

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B—



A (Front). B (Back). Chasuble, representing the Crucifixion, embroidered in coloured silks and metal thread. English. Early fourteenth century. (Melk Cathedral, Austria)

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