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## Holy Hands: Ceremonial Knitted Gloves for Elite Churchmen in Europe from the Twelfth to Nineteenth Centuries

Lesley O'Connell Edwards

### Abstract

Knitted liturgical gloves are finely worked ornamental symbols of high ecclesiastical office, dating from the Medieval period onwards. There are many examples in collections in Europe and the United States. The *Holy Hands* research project is the first systematic study of them. It defined what constituted a knitted liturgical glove and, using archival and artefactual evidence, investigated their historical and liturgical context from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. The project also outlined the limited previous work on liturgical gloves and examined the reasons for their survival, and the dearth of evidence for their dating and provenance. *Holy Hands* undertook detailed analysis of the gloves by drawing on its new database to compare and contrast their construction including materials, colours, techniques, shaping details, and patterning. The knitters of these items and the likely skills required for creating them were also considered.

## Introduction

Liturgical gloves are finely worked ornamental symbols of high ecclesiastical office, used from the Late Medieval period onwards.<sup>1</sup> These gloves have been found across Europe: from the Iberian peninsula in the west to the Czech Republic in the east; from Sweden in the north to Italy in the south. There are examples in museums across Europe and the United States, but these gloves have been little studied, and even less attempt has been made to analyse their construction and heritage: although some were created by looping or from woven fabric, most of the extant gloves are knitted. The *Holy Hands* project<sup>2</sup> examined these knitted gloves, both as artefacts and through literature, developed a protocol for examining them, and a database of surviving whole gloves and partial examples. This is the first time these artefacts have been systematically studied—the quantity and quality of data traced for each glove is variable: only 14 artefacts were examined in person, so much of the data is drawn from museum information and photographs, and literature by other authors, because the research was carried out in the period of Covid-19 lockdowns which prevented visits.<sup>3</sup> This has nevertheless produced quantifiable data. Some of this data is used to illustrate what the archaeological evidence reveals about the gloves. Although this data provides useful information, the relatively small number of surviving artefacts advises caution in assessing the significance of the data.

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<sup>1</sup> This article considers the Late Medieval period to be from the twelfth century onwards.

<sup>2</sup> The *Holy Hands* project was led by Dr. Angharad Thomas, assisted by Lesley O’Connell Edwards, with contributions from Sylvie Odstrčilová, and mentored by Dr. Jane Malcolm-Davies. It was supported by a Janet Arnold Award from the Society of Antiquaries of London. The project was a systematic study of knitted liturgical gloves. The project had four aspects: to locate as many knitted liturgical gloves as possible, and compile the available information on these into a database, to review the available literature, to develop a protocol for the examination of these gloves, and to examine the feasibility of a citizen science reconstruction project.

For additional information, see:

Knitting in Early Modern Europe, [www.kemererearch.com](http://www.kemererearch.com), Accessed 26 September 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The research for this article coincided with the coronavirus pandemic, 2020–2021, which prevented visits to archives and museums due to travel restrictions.

## What Constitutes a Glove?

Gloves have been known since Egyptian times. Gloves are hand coverings with individual sections for the fingers and the thumbs, unlike mittens where there is usually one section to cover four fingers.<sup>4</sup> There are three areas to a glove: the finger and thumb, the hand which covers the palm and the back of the hand, and a cuff or a gauntlet that covers from the wrist to the lower arm. These areas are visible in all the photographs accompanying this article: Figure 1 and Figure 3 show a trapezoid gauntlet, whilst the others show a straight one.

## Definition of a Knitted Liturgical Glove

Knitted liturgical gloves were used by senior prelates of the rank of bishop and above in rituals in the western church from the twelfth century onwards, until Vatican II in 1968.<sup>5</sup> They were part of the “pontifical insignia” that senior churchmen, such as bishops, cardinals, and some abbots by special permission of the Pope, were allowed to wear. Other regalia included the mitre, the pallium [a type of stole] and stockings, sandals and buskins [boots].

These gloves were used in sacred rituals, and from at least the sixteenth century, their main colour was often one of the main liturgical colours: red, white, purple (or violet), and green. Black was not used. Each glove or pair of gloves is unique, but they do share common features—most are finely crafted and richly ornamented including the use of religious symbols, sometimes with knitted patterns, sometimes embroidered; and often embellished with braid, lace, and fringing. The gloves of William Warham (1456?–1532) Archbishop of Canterbury during 1504–1532, held in New College, University of Oxford, England (Figure 1) show many of these features: densely patterned trapezoid gauntlets, IHS<sup>6</sup> in a circle

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<sup>4</sup> Annemarike Willemsen, “The Geoff Egan Memorial Lecture 2013: Taking Up the Glove: Finds, Uses and Meanings of Gloves, Mittens and Gauntlets in Western Europe, c. A.D. 1300–1700,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, London, England, Volume 49, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Tuuk Stam, “Gebreide Bisschopshandschonen [Knitted Bishops’ Gloves],” in *Gebreid Goed: Replica’s*, [Knitted Goods, Replicas] Stitching Textielcommissie Nederland [Netherlands Stitching Textile Commission], Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2001, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> IHS might be a contraction of the Latinised version of the name Jesus, or it could be the initial letters of *I[es]us hominum salvator*; the earliest use of this phrase has been traced to the mid fifteenth century.

F.R. Webber, *Church Symbolism*, Kessinger, Whitefish, Montana, United States, 2010, p. 94.

of flames in the backs of the hands, colour patterning on the fingers and thumbs, and braid trim along the lower edge.



Figure 1:  
*Episcopal Gloves of William Warham,*  
Back of Right Hand and Palm of Left Hand,  
New College, University of Oxford, England,  
Maker Unknown, Early Sixteenth Century,  
Photographed by Lesley O'Connell Edwards, 18 July 2019,  
© Warden & Scholars, New College, Oxford, England, Chattels 1755.

The gloves in St. Gertrudiskathedraal, Utrecht, Netherlands (Figure 2) are embroidered on the hands and the fingers, and have wide bands of lace on their gauntlets.



Figure 2:  
*Right Glove, Back of Hand,*  
St. Gertrudiskathedraal, Utrecht, Netherlands,  
Maker Unknown, circa 1650-1699,  
Photographed by Anique de Kruijf, 9 November 2006, © Anique de Kruijf.

These liturgical gloves (Figure 1 and Figure 2) were not for ordinary secular wear or for use by the laity. Some museum catalogues, such as that of the Glove Collection Trust, London, use the category of ecclesiastical gloves for liturgical gloves, and also include in it gloves that would be used by worshippers. These can include gloves with slits in the fingers, such as a pair in the Glove Collection Trust,<sup>7</sup> but these are very different in style to liturgical gloves,<sup>8</sup> and are not included in this study. By the nineteenth century, a prelate in the Roman Catholic church was allowed to wear official gloves in the style of those used by laymen, when they were at secular ceremonies, but only in the colour that his rank allowed him to wear, such as red for a bishop,<sup>9</sup> and these were not included in the study, either.

## Literature Review

The nineteenth century saw a growing interest in the history of church vestments, and Barbier de Montault published serious studies of liturgical gloves.<sup>10</sup> In 1907, Braun wrote about them in detail.<sup>11</sup> Both men approached the gloves from the perspective of their use and symbolism, not as knitted artefacts. Little has been written since on liturgical gloves: a recent exception is Warr's article written from

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<sup>7</sup> *Pair of Ecclesiastical Gloves*, Glove Collection Trust, London, England, Inventory Number GCT 23401, <https://theglovecollection.uk/gloves/gct-23401>, Accessed 7 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvie Odstrčilová, "Pious Vanity: Two Pairs of 18th Century Knitted Abbesses' Gloves," in *Archaeological Textiles Review*, Centre for Textile Research, The University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, Number 62, 2020, pp. 144-151.

<sup>9</sup> John A.F.P. Nainfa, *Costume of the Prelates of the Catholic Church*, New Edition, John Murphy, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, 1926, pp. 128-129.

<sup>10</sup> The most detailed is:

Xavier Barbier de Montault, "Les Gants Pontificaux" [Pontifical Gloves], *Bulletin Monumental* [Monumental Bulletin], Société Française d'Archéologie [French Archaeological Society], Musée des Monuments Français [French Monuments Museum], Paris, France, 5th Series, Volume 4, Number 42, 1876, pp. 401-467, pp. 649-675 (note: pp. 650-675 mis-numbered pp. 550-575), pp. 777-809; 5th Series, Volume 5, Number 43, 1877, pp. 5-62.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Braun, *Die Liturgische Gewandung im Occident und Orient nach Ursprung und Entwicklung, Verwendung und Symbolik* [The Liturgical Garment in Occident and Orient according to Origin and Development, Use and Symbolism], Hedersche Verlagschandlung, Freiburg, Germany, 1907.

an anthropological perspective.<sup>12</sup> Rutt<sup>13</sup> and Turnau<sup>14</sup> touched on these gloves in their studies of knitting history, and the last 30 years have produced a few studies of a specific knitted glove or gloves, including those by Cardon,<sup>15</sup> Coatsworth and Owen-Crocker,<sup>16</sup> and Odstrčilová.<sup>17</sup>

## Methodology

The data on the gloves was gathered using a combination of personal examination, and published and unpublished literature, such as conservation reports, including photographs. A total of 14 of the gloves in institutions in England were examined in person, using a USB microscope for those in The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, and at New College, Oxford, but the constraints of Covid-19 lockdowns meant visits to those in the Glove Collection Trust to carry out a microscopic analysis could not happen. The information gleaned from these personal visits was also supplemented by data from the institutions holding these artefacts. Data on the remaining 82 artefacts was gathered from published and unpublished material from the institutions holding them, including photographs, and also literature published by other authors. The gloves were examined following the protocol and vocabulary laid down by Malcolm-Davies, Gilbert, and Lervad.<sup>18</sup> Some characteristics required by the protocol were relatively easy to obtain from photographs but others such as gauge (loop counts), were not always easy to see

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<sup>12</sup> Cordelia Warr, "In Persona Christi: Liturgical Gloves and the Construction of Public Religious Identity," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, England, Volume 95, 2019, pp. 135-156.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting*, Batsford, London, England, 1987, pp. 56-58.

<sup>14</sup> Irena Turnau, *History of Knitting Before Mass Production*, Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of the History of Material Culture, Warsaw, Poland, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Dominique Cardon, "Les Gants Liturgiques du Moyen Âge [Liturgical Gloves of the Middle Ages]," in *Trésors Textiles du Moyen Âge en Languedoc-Rousillon* [Textile Treasures of the Middle Ages in Languedoc-Rousillon], Musée des Beaux Arts de Carcassonne [Museum of Fine Arts of Carcassonne], Carcassonne, France, 1993, pp. 29-39.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gale Owen-Crocker, *Clothing the Past: Surviving Garments from Early Medieval to Early Modern Western Europe*, Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 2018, pp. 400-410.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvie Odstrčilová, "The So-called St. Adalbert's Glove from Prague: An Early Example of a Knitted Liturgical Glove," *Piecework*, Interweave, Fort Collins, Colorado, United States, January/February 2016, pp. 8-12.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Malcolm-Davies, Ruth Gilbert, and Susanna Lervad, "Unravelling the Confusions: Defining Concepts to Record Archaeological and Historical Evidence for Knitting," *Archaeological Textiles Review*, Centre for Textile Research, The University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, Number 60, 2018, pp. 10-24.

without magnified photographs, reliable scales, or personal examination. Virtually all of the photographs lacked a scale. Each researcher was responsible for a set of gloves, and discussed any gloves with their co-researchers when they felt a second opinion was needed.

## The Historical Context

Gloves were a late addition to liturgical dress. They were recognised as part of a bishop's regalia by the second half of the twelfth century.<sup>19</sup> After then, they were seen as a sign of episcopal status and authority, and occur in various contemporary documents under the term *chirothecae* [gloves], spelt in different ways. Only one mention of knitted gloves in contemporary literature has come to light so far, in an inventory of Whalley Abbey in Lancashire, England, made in the late 1530s at the time of the Dissolution of the English monasteries.<sup>20</sup> The legends which suggest gloves were used in the first century AD, are actually from a much later period.<sup>21</sup> Some of the tenth century papal bulls [papal decrees], granting the right of *usus chirothecarum* [the right to use gloves], are probably forgeries.<sup>22</sup> Braun considers that the first reliable document granting the *usus chirothecarum* was written in 1088 to Abbot Hugh of Cluny.<sup>23</sup>

Macalister considered that gloves owed their invention to the coldness of the early churches, and were simply invented in order to keep the hands of the wearer warm, but assumed a more sacred character in the ninth century.<sup>24</sup> Braun considers that the explanation of northern European cold is unlikely, as the gloves were used in summer and winter: instead he suggests that from the Carolingian period (800–899) onwards bishops wanted to surround themselves with splendour, and thus started to use gloves, as secular lords did. In addition, their use may have been

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<sup>19</sup> Pauline Johnstone, *High Fashion in the Church: The Place of Church Vestments in the History of Art from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*, Maney, Leeds, England, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> MacKenzie E.C. Walcott, "Inventory of Whalley Abbey," *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Liverpool, England, Volume 19, 1886–1887, p. 107.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries in England occurred during 1536–1540, following Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church earlier in the decade.

<sup>21</sup> Braun, *op cit.*, p. 361.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>24</sup> Robert A.S. Macalister, *Ecclesiastical Vestments: Their Development and History*, Elliot Stock, London, England, 1896, p. 121.

influenced by a practical endeavour to protect the bishop's hands from contamination before the sacrifice of the Mass.<sup>25</sup>

The earliest records of the ceremonial use of liturgical gloves are from the tenth century. The *Missa Illyrica*,<sup>26</sup> compiled around 1080, includes the use of gloves in the Mass, but it is not certain how widespread this practice was. The Apostolic See granted the privilege of pontifical regalia, which include gloves, to abbots from 1175. However, the western Christian church has not been a uniform body with regard to its liturgical practices for most of its existence, and it is not possible to know how widespread the practice of using gloves was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>27</sup>

### The Liturgical and Theological Context

Liturgical gloves were used in church ceremonies by senior churchmen (bishops and above), as part of the ritual of the Mass, and removed at the start of the sacrifice. The bishop did not don his own gloves: the right one was put on by the assisting deacon and the left one by the sub-deacon.<sup>28</sup> Given the bishop did not clothe himself, it is suggested that knitted gloves would be easier for others to put on his hands, as there would be some stretch in the fabric.<sup>29</sup>

Gloves were sometimes worn in important processions in the Medieval era, as recorded at Evesham Abbey.<sup>30</sup> The consecration ritual for a bishop included investing him with gloves, along with other pontifical regalia. Little has been written about the theological justification of liturgical gloves, and most of those who do commentate on these were writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Durandus, whose *Rational Divinorum Officiorum* [Rationale for the Divine

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<sup>25</sup> Braun, op cit., pp. 383-384.

<sup>26</sup> The *Missa Illyrica* was an order for Mass.

"Missa Illyrica," in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, Editors, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Oxfordshire, England, 1977, p. 921.

<sup>27</sup> Braun, op cit., p. 365.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>29</sup> Warr, op cit., p. 145.

<sup>30</sup> Henry A. Wilson, *Officium Ecclesiasticum Abbatum Secundum Usam Eveshamensis* [Ecclesiastical Offices for the Use of the Abbot of Evesham Monastery], Henry Bradshaw Society, London, England, 1893, Column 88.

Offices] was written soon after 1286,<sup>31</sup> is most frequently quoted as a source, but Honorius of Autun (1130?-?-?), Bruno of Segni (1045?-1123), Innocent III (1160-1216), and Sicard (1160-1215) are also quoted as authorities by those writing on liturgical gloves. St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) also touched briefly on liturgical gloves in the sixteenth century.

Several Medieval theologians used the term *inconsutiles* when referring to liturgical gloves. This has been interpreted as “seamless,” or “interwoven:” writers following Borromeo have interpreted this to mean the gloves must be knitted.<sup>32</sup> However, this is not necessarily the correct interpretation: Medieval writers such as Sicard and Durandus argue that the seamlessness referred to the bishop’s faith, rather than to the nature of the gloves.<sup>33</sup> The bishop’s faith should be the faith of the church: in this period the church was concerned with potential heretical movements that so such “seamlessness,” or conformity, was highly desirable. Knitting as a craft is considered to have developed in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries in Islamic areas of the eastern Mediterranean, and that the skill moved west and north over the following centuries.<sup>34</sup> There are a few surviving seamless gloves created by various simple and complex looping techniques,<sup>35</sup> which can easily be confused with knitting.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Andrea Denny-Brown, “Old Habits Die Hard: Vestimentary Change in William Durandus’s *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* [Rationale for the Divine Offices],” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, United States, Volume 39, 2009, p. 546.

<sup>32</sup> Warr, op cit., p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> Sicard Cremonensis Episcopi, *Mitralis de Officiis*, Edited by Gabor Sarbak and Lorenz Weinrich, Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium, 2008, p. 107 (II, 5 line 296ff).

William Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* [Rationale for the Divine Offices], Translated and Introduced by Timothy M. Thibodeau, University of Scranton Press, Scranton, Pennsylvania, United States, 2010, p. 133.

<sup>34</sup> Rutt, op cit., pp. 32-35.

<sup>35</sup> Sophie Desrosiers, Patricia Dal-Pra, and Isabelle Bédard, “On Medieval Pontifical Gloves and Glove Medallions Found in France,” in Antionette Rast-Eicher and Renata Windler, Editors, *Archaeological Textiles*, North European Symposium of Archaeological Textiles (NESAT) IX, Ragotti & Arioli, Näfels, Switzerland, 2007, p. 159.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Malcolm-Davis, “Sticks, Stones, Fingers and Bones: Nurturing Knitting and Other Non-Wovens,” *Archaeological Textiles Review*, Centre for Textile Research, The University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, Number 60, 2018, p. 4.

Warr's recent work on liturgical gloves attempts to set their use in symbolic and cultural context. Liturgical gloves were used to express spiritual truth through material splendour, as were other vestments, but were distinctive in following the contours of the parts of the body they covered. They were used by bishops and those above to distinguish their rank, they were a "material demonstration of their higher level of spiritual perfection and their connection to the apostles and to Christ."<sup>37</sup>

### Extant Knitted Liturgical Gloves

Some of these gloves were buried with senior churchmen, and found in their tombs that were opened later, such as that of Archbishop de Rada (1170?-1247).<sup>38</sup> Other senior churchmen might bequeath their gloves to institutions, as was the case of the gloves that Archbishop William Warham (1456-1532) gave to New College. Other gloves are still in church treasuries, or have been passed from church ownership to a local museum, such as the fragments of the gloves linked to Guy van Avesnes, Bishop of Utrecht during 1301-1317, held by the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, Netherlands.

However, many of these knitted gloves entered private collections in the last two centuries, with no information on provenance. Since then, the gloves have moved into museums: notable collections are those of Robert Spence (1871-1965), now owned by the Glove Collection Trust and housed in the Fashion Museum in Bath, England, and that donated by Philip Lehman in memory of his wife Carrie to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, United States.

To date, the *Holy Hands* project has located 96 gloves, or partial gloves, in collections throughout Europe and the United States. A total of 79 of these are pairs of gloves, one is a right glove, 11 are left gloves, and five are fragments of gloves. The United Kingdom and the United States have 20 each, and there are 28 in Spain. The gloves are spread across the centuries, as Table 1 shows:

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<sup>37</sup> Warr, op cit., p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Maria Judith Feliciano, "Muslim Shrouds for Christian Kings? A Re-assessment of Andalusí Textiles in Thirteenth Century Castilian Life and Ritual" in Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Roth, Editors, *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 2005, pp. 119-122.

**Table 1:  
Quantity of Gloves (or Fragments) and Probable Dates:  
Total 95**

Century	Pre- 14 <sup>th</sup>	14 <sup>th</sup>	15 <sup>th</sup>	16 <sup>th</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup> or 18 <sup>th</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Quantity of Gloves</b>	5	5	3	20	26	26	21	8
Pairs of gloves have been counted as one. The dates for the gloves are based on those given by their holding institution. One glove is not dated.								

The vast majority of the gloves are dated by their holding institution to the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, but 13 are pre-sixteenth century. However, this pattern of survival should not be seen as indicative of growth and decline in the use of liturgical gloves in general: survival of Medieval artefacts is less likely than those from later centuries.

### Dating Evidence

It is difficult to find much information as to how the date of a specific glove is determined. This work has not uncovered any rationale for dating knitted liturgical gloves: the dealers, who sold them to museums, must have had some reason for the date they applied, but this does not seem to have been recorded.

The gloves studied by Carbonell are unusual in having the name of the owner knitted into them, and she was able to trace two possible individuals, ultimately suggesting the later one was more likely.<sup>39</sup> De Kruijf dated the gloves in St. Gertrudiskathedraal (Figure 2) to the later seventeenth century by the embroidery.<sup>40</sup> Ashton used the same rationale when he argued that decorations surrounding the

<sup>39</sup> Sylvia Carbonell, “Gauntes Episcopales Con Mensaje” [Episcopal Gloves With a Message], *Datatextil*, Centre de Documentació i Museu Tèxtil [Documentation Centre and Textile Museum], Terrassa, Spain, Number 17, 2007, pp. 82-88.

<sup>40</sup> Anique C. de Kruijf, “‘In Stof Zijt Gij’ Enkele Textiele Vondstein in de Reliekschat van de Utrechtse Gertrudiskathedraal” [In dust thou art: Some Textile Finds in the Reliquary of the Utrecht Gertrudis Cathedral], *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* [Textile Historical Contributions], Veloren, Hilversum, Netherlands, Issue 49, 2009, p. 64.

medallions on the back of the New College gloves date these to the sixteenth century, because the rayed circle is comparable to embroidery on other ecclesiastical artefacts of the period.<sup>41</sup> Bock argued that the red silk gloves taken from Cologne, Germany, by the Bishop of Aachen date to the end of the sixteenth century, as the IHS in the crown of rays is typical of this period.<sup>42</sup> Bažantová dated the glove associated with St. Adalbert in Prague, Czech Republic, to the thirteenth century based on the similarity of the scroll-like colour patterns to Egyptian and Iranian woven fabrics and knitted stockings.<sup>43</sup>

The link between a glove and a specific saint or bishop needs to be treated with caution: the gloves could date from the period when a saint was later beatified or canonised. There was a temptation to attach significant objects to the most prestigious local personality, such as the gloves attributed to St. Remi in the basilica of St. Sernin in Toulouse, France.<sup>44</sup> Barbier de Montault argued that the earliest date for the gloves of Archbishop Peter II of Tarentaise (1102?-1174) is the fifteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

## Places of Manufacture

There is little evidence cited for the attribution of a place of manufacture for knitted gloves. Exceptions to this include the detailed arguments for the possible place of manufacture of the gloves held at New College, provided by Ashton. Their previous attribution to William of Wykeham (1321-1404) has long been rejected, and reasonable evidence links them to William Warham. Ashton posits two possible locations: Spain and Italy, linking both to international political events in which Warham was involved, which might have resulted in the presentation of gloves to him.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Leigh Ashton, "The So-called Gloves of William of Wykeham," *Burlington Magazine*, Burlington Magazine, London, England, Volume LIV, Number 310, January 1929, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Franz Bock, *Geschichte der Liturgischen Gewänder des Mittelalters* [History of the Liturgical Vestments of the Middle Ages], Volume II, Cohen, Bonn, Germany, 1866, p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> Odstrčilová, 2016, op cit., p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Laget, "Vetements Liturgiques" [Liturgical Vestments], *Bulletin Monumental* [Monumental Bulletin], Société Française d'Archéologie [French Archaeological Society], Musée des Monuments Français [French Monuments Museum], Paris, France, Volume 129, 1971, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Barbier de Montault, op cit., 5<sup>th</sup> Series, Volume 5, Number 43, 1877, pp. 13-14.

<sup>46</sup> Ashton, op cit., p. 39.

There is support for the suggestion that some early knitted liturgical gloves were Spanish, created by the Islamic population there, generally referred to as Mudejar work. Stanley argued that the mausoleum cushions at Las Huelgas, Spain were Mudejar work, and that the gloves of Archbishop de Rada, which have been dated to the thirteenth century, were too.<sup>47</sup> Rutt noted that patterning on the small fragments of the gloves of Bishop Seigfried von Westerburg in Bonn is similar to the cushions at Las Huelgas.<sup>48</sup> Feliciano argued that there was a pan-Iberian appreciation of Mudejar textiles in thirteenth century Spain, by both Christian and Islamic rulers.<sup>49</sup> Bažantová considered St. Adlabert's glove was most likely Islamic work, based on the combination of materials used in its construction,<sup>50</sup> whilst the embroidery on the cuff of the glove at Stará Boleslav indicates it was made in northern Italy in the first half of the fourteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

A total of 59 of the gloves located by the *Holy Hands* project have a named country of manufacture. Italy did not become a single country until the nineteenth century, but 24 gloves are described as Italian, or probably Italian, whilst only 15 are described as Spanish or probably Spanish, with a further four linked to Portugal, its Iberian neighbour.

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<sup>47</sup> Montse Stanley, "Mil Anys de Punt. Pluralisme i Interrogants/Mil Años de Punto. Pluralismo e Interrogantes [A Thousand Years of Knitting: Pluralism and Questions]," in Eulalia Morral and Silvia Carbonell, Compilers, *Mil Años de Diseño en Punto/Mil Anys de Diseny en Punt* [A Thousand Years of Design in Knitting], Centre de Documentacio i Museu Textil [Documentation Centre and Textile Museum], Barcelona, Spain, 1997, p. 62.

<sup>48</sup> Rutt, op cit., p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Feliciano, op cit., pp. 104, 117.

<sup>50</sup> Odstrčilová, 2016, op cit., p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

## The Knitters

There is very little evidence as to whom was actually knitting these gloves. The gloves are highly skilled work. The fine gauge of many of these gloves means that knitters would have worked on needles with a diameter of 1.0mm or less. Turnau considers that working five finger gloves required highly developed skills in the use of silk and of fashioning.<sup>52</sup> Knitting with two (and occasionally more) threads<sup>53</sup> is also skilled work, which requires continuous concentration. An experiment for the *Holy Hands* project of a partial reconstruction of the gauntlet patterning on Glove Collection Trust inventory number GCT 23408,<sup>54</sup> using silk but at a coarser gauge, led to an estimate of 27 hours being required to knit the full gauntlet: knitting to a finer gauge would probably take longer. Sometimes there are subtle variations between patterns on the different gloves of a pair, which raises the question as to whether one knitter made both gloves, or if each glove was made by a different knitter. It might even be that different knitters made different sections of a glove, but we simply do not know.

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<sup>52</sup> Irena Turnau, "The Diffusion of Knitting in Medieval Europe," in Negley Harte and Kenneth Ponting, Editors, *Cloth and Clothmaking in Medieval Europe*, Heinemann, London, England, 1982, p. 380.

<sup>53</sup> Most of the gloves were knitted in silk, and this article follows the convention that silk is referred to as thread, rather than yarn.

<sup>54</sup> The original glove is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3:  
*A Pair of Ecclesiastical Gloves,*  
Back of Left Hand and Palm of Right Hand,  
Glove Collection Trust, London, England,  
Maker Unknown, circa 1675-1699,  
© The Trustees of the Glove Collection Trust Fund,  
Inventory Number GCT 23408,  
Reproduction of images is with permission of the Trustees of the Glove  
Collection Trust and the Worshipful Company of Glovers of London.

Turnau states that the majority of gloves were produced in women's convents,<sup>55</sup> but gives no supporting source for this assertion. Johnstone mentions that a large number of luxurious vestments were produced in sixteenth century Spain, many in secular workshops.<sup>56</sup> She gives no source of reference for this, but if there were a tradition of secular workshops producing liturgical items, it is possible these included liturgical glove knitters. Stam suggests that the Maagden van den Hoeck in the Netherlands, a non-monastic community of devout women, who created ecclesiastical textile work for the Vicars Apostolic during 1614–1663, might have knitted liturgical gloves, but the quotations she provides from their records do not give any direct evidence of this.<sup>57</sup>

### Findings: Detailed Observations of the Gloves

Length measurements exist for 105 individual gloves: left and right gloves of a pair are not always the same length. The lengths range from 20cm to 39cm, but the majority (84%) are in the range 23cm to 31cm. Sixty-three of the gloves located were hand knitted and 18, possibly 19, were machine knitted. However, one of the machine knit gloves is dated to the later sixteenth century, which is a very questionable attribution as the knitting frame was only invented towards the end of that century. Two of the remainder are seventeenth or eighteenth century, but the rest are eighteenth and nineteenth century, and these attributions seem viable.

Durandus, writing in the late 1280s, is the only Medieval author to mention colour and he only mentions white.<sup>58</sup> Most writers on liturgical gloves hold the view that gloves were usually white until the sixteenth century, after which they may be in any of the four liturgical colours.<sup>59</sup> Braun suggests that Borromeo was the first to suggest liturgical colours should apply to gloves, and other authors seem to have followed him, but the written source Braun quotes for this is erroneous.<sup>60</sup> The original background colour can be identified in many of the gloves located in the *Holy Hands* research. Forty-two have red as the main colour, 29 white, seven green, and

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<sup>55</sup> Turnau, op cit., p. 377.

<sup>56</sup> Johnstone, op cit., p. 81.

<sup>57</sup> Stam, op cit., p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> Durandus, op cit., p. 186.

<sup>59</sup> The four standard liturgical colours are purple (or violet) for seasons of preparation, i.e. Advent and Lent; white for festivals; red for celebrations of saints and martyrs; and green for the other periods in the church calendar. Other colours were sometimes used, especially in the Medieval period, such as blue for the Virgin Mary.

<sup>60</sup> Braun, op cit., p. 380.

six purple. Rutt commented that white was the most common colour used for solemn episcopal functions, and then red,<sup>61</sup> which may explain why not many green or purple gloves have survived, although possibly there should be more white gloves.

Researchers agree that most of the gloves were knitted from silk. The trade in silk with the Near East was expanding in the Late Medieval period (1200–1400) and in addition the spread of silk manufacture in northern Italy provided an increased supply of European fibre.<sup>62</sup> The main thread in all the gloves located by the project has been identified by their holding institutions, and in the case of 91 out of the 96, this is silk. The five exceptions are three made from wool, one from linen, and one from cotton. There are 45 gloves with one or more contrasting threads, and in 36 cases the contrasting thread is a metallic one. In three instances, the contrasting thread is not metallic, and in a further five cases both metallic threads and non-metallic threads have been used: the contrasting thread has not been identified in the other instance. Little work has been done on analysing the structure of the threads used for the gloves, nor much dye analysis. A few metallic threads have been examined by their institutions, and they are usually described as fine metal wrapped around a silk core, usually yellow or white, and the metal is usually silver or silver-gilt.

Most of these gloves are knitted to a very fine gauge, suggesting the use of small diameter needles. About a quarter of the gloves located have data on either wale (stitch) counts or course (row/round) count, or both. A wales per cm count was only available for 23 items, and within those, there is a wide range of values, from five to 11. The average is eight wales per cm, with a median value of nine: this equates to 21 and 23 wales per inch, respectively. However, within the 23 items, 13 (56 per cent) have a gauge of more than eight wales per cm, and the average of these is nine wales, although this includes two gloves that are machine knitted. The sample is not representative enough to analyse by date, and pre-1500 gloves have a range of counts, including six, seven, and nine wales per cm.

A courses per cm count was only available for 22 items, and, again, there was a wide range of values from seven to 16 courses per cm. The overall average (and median) is 11 courses: this equates to 28 courses per inch. A total of 60 per cent of the items have a course count of 10 or more, and the average of these is 12 courses per cm, although this includes two gloves that are machine knitted. As with the wale

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<sup>61</sup> Rutt, *op cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>62</sup> Johnstone, *op cit.*, p. 21.

count, the sample is not representative enough to analyse by date, and pre-1500 gloves have a range of counts, including eight, nine, and 11 courses.

The yarn diameters for the main thread of the three gloves held by the V&A, London and that in New College, Oxford are the only ones so far recorded and they range from 0.49 mm to 0.65 mm. The diameter of the contrast threads was also recorded for the two gloves in the V&A which have knitted patterning, and the New College one: the metallic thread varied between 0.29 mm and 0.57 mm, and the one contrast silk thread had an average diameter of 0.5 mm. The plans to measure yarn diameters on other gloves, especially those in the Glove Collection Trust, had to be abandoned with Covid-19 lockdowns. This paucity of data is insufficient for statistical analysis; and, for the same reasons, nor can numerical comparisons using yarn diameter and gauge be made on the density of the finished fabric of most gloves.

Most of the gloves (74) are simple knit fabric with face loops on the outside. A few gloves have marker ribs in reverse loops, or reverse loops in ridges or damask patterning. Two gloves include eyelets. There are 45 gloves with knitted patterns. Of these, 19 have patterning on the fingers, hand, and gauntlet; 20 on the hand and the gauntlet, four only on the gauntlet, one only on the fingers, and the last is a fragment, and its position in the glove is unclear. Most gloves have only one contrasting colour, but seven have two or more contrasting colours, as is the case in William Warham's gloves (Figure 1), and one in the Glove Collection Trust (Figure 3). There is no obvious link between where the patterning appears and the date of the item.

The patterns on the gauntlets can be very ornate: some are quite small patterns, such as the pair in the Glove Collection Trust, (Inventory Number GCT 2007.25), shown in Figure 4, which has a repeat of six, 12, and 14 wales, with a very small repeat of four stitches along the outer edge. A pair in the V&A (Inventory Number 876&A-1897), have other small patterns.<sup>63</sup> Others are large repeats, such as that of the gloves in the Whitworth, Manchester University, England, whose central pattern has a wale repeat of around 60 stitches.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Pair of Gloves*, The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, England, Inventory Number 876&A-1897, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129530/pair-of-gloves-unknown>, Accessed 30 April 2021.

<sup>64</sup> *Pair of Liturgical Knitted Gloves*, The Whitworth, Manchester University, Manchester, England, Inventory Number T8240, <http://gallerysearch.ds.man.ac.uk/Detail/20537>, Accessed 22 May 2021.



Figure 4:

*A Pair of Ecclesiastical Gloves,*<sup>65</sup>

Back of Left Hand and Palm of Right Hand,

Glove Collection Trust, London, England,

Maker Unknown, circa 1600-1699,

© The Trustees of the Glove Collection Trust Fund, Inventory Number GCT

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Glove Collection Trust and the Worshipful Company of Glovers of London.

<sup>65</sup> Note that the IHS is created from right to left on the back of left glove, so that it reads “backwards” to modern European eyes; the back of the right glove has IHS in the same direction.

Many of the glove patterns are geometric, but some are floral. The patterns on the fingers are either simple rings around the fingers in a single course of a contrasting colour, or small two-colour patterns: both are visible on Warham's gloves (Figure 1). Some of the patterns are quite similar: there is a pair of gloves in the Rüstkammer in Dresden, Germany (Inventory Number i.0098/1.01), in which one of the patterns is very similar to that of Warham's gloves,<sup>66</sup> and it could be argued that these came from the same workshop. The pair in the Glove Collection Trust shown in Figure 3 has the same geometric layout, although the colour distribution is different. However, the similarity of patterning may be simply due to their simplicity and universal appeal.

A few gloves have patterns and symbols that cover both the gauntlet and the hand. A pair in the V&A (Inventory Number 437&A-1892) are very well known for the quantity of patterns.<sup>67</sup> There are three gloves that change their pattern colour through the glove, such as the example in the Glove Collection Trust (Inventory Number 23413) shown in Figure 5, or the pair discussed by Carbonell.<sup>68</sup> However, most of the ornamentation on the hands, is a medallion on the back with a religious symbol, surrounded by a circle of flames, as can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 3. The gloves attributed to de Rada have an *agnus dei* [lamb of god] on the back of the hand.<sup>69</sup> Two pairs of gloves have a monogram of the Virgin Mary: these are different, but both contain the letter M.<sup>70</sup> The usual symbol is IHS: sometimes this is "written" in the correct direction (left to right), as in Figure 1 and Figure 3; sometimes reversed, as in Figure 4; occasionally one hand mirrors the other in a pair, as in Figure 5. All these raise the question of the literacy of the knitter, and how the knitter created the pattern: was a chart provided, similar to a cartoon for tapestry weaving? Unlike other gloves, the monograms on those from St. Gertrudiskathedraal read with the fingertips towards the bottom, so that they are correct to a third party facing the wearer rather than the wearer themselves.

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<sup>66</sup> *Paar Pontifikalhandschuhe* [Pair of Pontifical Gloves], Rüstkammer Museum, Dresden, Germany, Inventory Number i.0098/1.01, <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/283518>, Accessed 30 April 2021.

<sup>67</sup> *Pair of Gloves*, The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, England, Inventory Number 437&A-1897, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O107792/pair-of-gloves-unknown/>, Accessed 30 April 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Carbonell, op cit., pp. 82-88.

<sup>69</sup> Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, *Textile Conservation and Research*, Abegg-Stiftung, Bern, Switzerland, 1988, pp. 66, 246, 247, 468.

<sup>70</sup> de Kruijf, op cit., p. 213.

Christa Mayer-Thurman, *Raiment for the Lord's Service*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States, 1975, p. 213.



Figure 5:  
*A Pair of Ecclesiastical Gloves, Backs of Hands,*  
Glove Collection Trust, London, England,  
Maker Unknown, circa 1675-1699,  
© The Trustees of the Glove Collection Trust Fund,  
Inventory Number GCT 23413,  
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Worshipful Company of Glovers of London.

Gloves that were hand knitted were generally created in the round. However, it has been suggested that if the medallion on the back of the hand was knitted in then this section was knitted back and forth, and then seamed along the side. Black suggests that this was the way that the gloves in the V&A (Inventory Number 876&A-1897) were created.<sup>71</sup> This would certainly economise on the amount of metallic thread used, as it would mean that it would not need to be carried across the plain palms.

All the gloves were fully fashioned to fit the hand with four fingers and a thumb, and a gauntlet that extends above the wrist, as with secular examples. Some gloves have quite short fingers relative to the rest of the hands, as is the case with William Warham's gloves (Figure 1). There are two main types of fingertips: 62 have blunt, rounded tips, whilst 24 gloves have longer pointed tips.

Exceptions to this full fashioning are some of the thumbs. There are 30 with what are referred to today as "peasant thumbs"—that is, created directly from the loops on the palm of the hand. (The modern technique to create these is to put a number of loops on waste thread, and then cast on the same number of loops with the main thread: the waste thread is then removed and the exposed loops picked up and the thumb is created from those.) More than 13 of these date to before the seventeenth century, but this shaping continues through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Gusset shaping is used to create 51 thumbs: these occur throughout the period.

The knitted gauntlets vary in shape: 52 are trapezoid, whilst 13 have straight cuffs. There is no obvious link between the date of the glove and the shaping of the gauntlet. All but two of the 16 gauntlets identified as woven fabric are trapezoid in shape.

Virtually no work has been done on the knitting direction for the construction of the gloves: an exception to this is the so-called St. Adalbert's glove in Prague, for which evidence shows it was created from fingers to gauntlet.<sup>72</sup> To modern glove knitters this is unusual, but this is not the only known instance: the child's mitten in the Museum of London (Inventory Number A1989) is also created from fingertips to wrist, for example.<sup>73</sup> The data collected in the *Holy Hands* project will

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<sup>71</sup> Sandy Black, *Knitting: Fashion, Industry, Craft*, V&A Publishing, London, England, 2012, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Odstrčilová, 2016, op cit., p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Susan Strawn, "A Child's Mitten from Sixteenth-Century London," *Piecework*, Interweave, Loveland, Colorado, United States, January/February 2010, p. 36.

be accessible via the Knitting in Early Modern Europe (KEME) website.<sup>74</sup> This KEME database will be expanded as further gloves and partial gloves are located, and as more work is done on existing items already included, such as a study of thread composition. The full literature review will also be available on the website.

## Conclusion

The *Holy Hands* project demonstrated the feasibility of a detailed analysis of extant examples of liturgical gloves by gathering a comprehensive body of evidence into an easily accessible online reference collection, which can be used by future researchers. It also explored historical and liturgical contexts for the use of liturgical gloves, using both contemporary sources, and studies from more recent writers. *Holy Hands* has brought liturgical gloves out of the shadows and shown that there are sufficient surviving numbers of these to make it possible to provide a quantifiable analysis through which the skills and techniques that went into their production can be assessed. Much of the data was acquired remotely, but the project was nevertheless able to produce clear and informative results. Researchers studying other groups of artefacts may find that it is more time efficient to examine these online, at least initially, to develop a clearer understanding of their research focus.

There is undoubtedly much scope for further research on knitted liturgical gloves. In particular, little study has been done on the thread used to make the gloves: more data is needed on the construction of the thread and its diameter in order to understand the fabric. Scientific analysis of the fibres could provide more definitive dating and provenance: something that is currently lacking, and means that most information on these aspects can only be provisional. The information in the database is incomplete, but the protocol developed by the *Holy Hands* project for examining knitted liturgical gloves provides a common template for future research, enabling researchers work to the same standard and depth. In addition, the protocol could be adapted for the study of other gloves, both knitted, and those created in other ways. The project considers it is likely that there are other knitted liturgical gloves in existence of which it is unaware, which could be added to the database: it would welcome any information about such gloves.

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<sup>74</sup> Visit the Knitting in Early Modern Europe (KEME) website at: [www.kemereresearch.com](http://www.kemereresearch.com)

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