

Silk, Lace and Pearls: Cataloguing and Interpretation of a 17th Century Mummified Girl’s Burial Ensemble

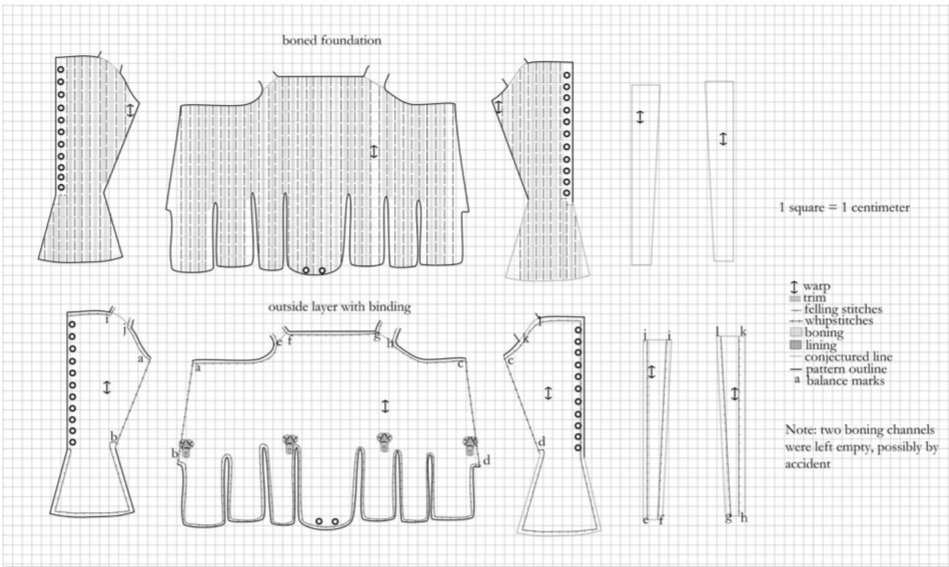


Figure 1 (far left): Image of casket with mummified body
Figure 2 (left): Image of reproduction of clothing
Figure 3 (above): Pattern of stays



Figure 4: Reconstruction of stays

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on the cataloguing and analysis of the clothing of the mummified remains of a 17th century girl currently held in the Musée historique de la ville de Strasbourg (France). The clothing is in exceptionally good condition, providing a rare opportunity to study a complete outfit from around 1630. The Strasbourg mummy is wearing a blue silk boned bodice and a matching smooth covered stomacher and outer petticoat. Her white linen partlet, kerchief, falling band, linen cuffs and wrist rufflers are decorated with white bobbin lace. Underneath her outer petticoat is a second purple and yellow patterned underpetticoat. She is also wearing stays, hemp stockings, a shift, and heeled shoes. This thesis comprises a catalogue that documents all textile elements of this object. It analyses the construction of each object, as well as describing and discussing the mummy’s dress as an ensemble. Study of the clothing presented challenges as it could not be removed from the body. This is to ensure the best possible preservation of both the clothing and the mummy, an obvious choice for such a rare and intact ensemble. Analysis involved visual and sensory observation where possible, and where not possible, CT scans that allowed us to look inside the layers and isolate specific information using contrasts. Finally, a sewn reproduction was used to assess the accuracy of the pattern taking and the construction analysis, and to give insight into construction methods that are not visible for analysis and can act as a useful study piece and possible museum display. Despite the challenges, it was possible to complete a detailed study of the clothing and offer new insights into 17th century French dress.

Historical background

The mummified remains of the girl are currently housed in the Musée historique de la ville de Strasbourg. Previously she had been displayed in the Église Saint Thomas, also in Strasbourg, since at least 1802, when she was discovered.

Primary objectives of the study

The goal of this research is to increase our limited understanding of the construction, patterning, and materials of 17th century western European dress. It does so by performing a detailed examination and analysis of the pattern, construction, materials, and uses of the clothes that make up the funerary outfit of the Strasbourg girl. The thesis first catalogues all textile elements associated with the mummy. Initially, each textile element is presented, with a weave and fibre analysis, and weave diagrams of the complex weave techniques. Second, each object is described, with information on the materials used, its construction, and the pattern of each of the pieces. Finally, a view of the outfit as an ensemble is presented, describing how the separate objects interact, how each is worn, and the layers of clothing. Closures will equally be discussed, as they are crucial to understand the objects connections. This study includes information deriving from a reproduction of all the garments and accessories, sewn by hand, that matched their pattern construction and materiality to the original as closely as possible. The purpose was to better understand the construction, to assess the fidelity of the analysis and cut, and to consider the construction of inaccessible areas of the object. The results of this analysis greatly enrich our current understanding of 17th century western European dress. The precise and in-depth documentation of the objects will be a resource for other researchers about 17th century dress, offering new, closely analysed examples of objects from this period for future studies.

CT imaging

One tool that proved very useful over the course of this master’s thesis is Computed Tomography (CT). CT scanning is used in heritage conservation as it is non-invasive and may offer insights into artifacts that are otherwise inaccessible. In the case of the Strasbourg mummy, the CT scan was a useful imaging resource because the mummy is too fragile for a more invasive examination. The CT permitted a view of inaccessible layers of clothing – of the stays, for example, and indeed of the back of her clothing, as she cannot be turned over.

Conclusion

The ensemble of textiles associated with the Strasbourg mummy offers an extraordinary glimpse into the clothing of a bourgeois girl from around 1630. Their level of preservation and the fact that the objects remain in situ on the body offers a wealth of information for researchers. During the research, it became clear that some of the objects are unusual survivors from this period, making them especially exciting items to add to the body of research about this century. Jenny Tiramani and Sébastien Passot remarked that both petticoats are rare survivors of this period, and demonstrate construction very similar to petticoats of the 18th century, meaning that these petticoats push the dating of these techniques back another 100 years. Equally, the specific shapes and cut of the various linens are like that of other extant accessories, but they are not exactly represented in the literature. Tiramani and Passot also say that the wrist rufflers are the only known example of children’s rufflers with two ruff layers. There are very few examples of stays from the 1630’s and they are often sleeved, so the details of these stays are a new addition to our understanding. Generally, having more examples of various clothing deepens our understanding and appreciation of the art of the tailor and the seamstress, how clothes were cut, and how they were worn. This research offers new extant clothing for future study and comparison. In the future, it would be gratifying to reunite the girl with her name. For now, she remains something of a mystery.