De opere Anglicano, “de l’ouvrage” or “à la façon d’Angleterre,” “de obra Anglaterra”—of English workmanship—appears again and again in descriptions of embroidered vestments found in continental inventories of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the period when English embroidery reached its greatest height. The term opus anglicanum as used today is more general—it can now refer to English embroidery of the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. There is ample evidence that this English work was in great demand at the very top of the church hierarchy. In the Vatican inventory of 1295, opus anglicanum is mentioned 113 times; it is also frequently found in the 1361 Vatican inventory and in fourteenth-century inventories of the rival papal court at Avignon. The thirteenth-century English chronicler Matthew of Paris tells this anecdote concerning Innocent IV’s greed for such work:

About the same time [1246] my Lord Pope, having noticed that the ecclesiastical ornaments of certain English priests, such as choral copes and mitres, were embroidered in gold thread after a most desirable fashion, asked whence came this work? From England, they told him. Then exclaimed the pope, “England is for us surely a garden of delights, truly an inexhaustible well; and from there where so many things abound, many may be extorted.” Thereupon the same Lord Pope, allured by the desire of the eye, sent letters, blessed and sealed, to well-nigh all the Abbots of the Cistercian order established in England, desiring that they should send to him without delay, these embroideries of gold which he preferred above all others, and with which he wished to decorate his chasubles and choral copes, as if these acquisitions would cost him nothing. This command of my Lord Pope did not please the London merchants who traded in these embroideries and sold them at their own price.

In 1317, Isabella, queen of Edward II of England, purchased from Rose, wife of John de Bureford, citizen and merchant of London, a cope to be presented to Pope John XXII, and this fortunate pontiff also received precious and sumptuously embroidered copes from the Bishop of Ely and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

A record referring to payments and labor in connection with the execution of a famous embroidered frontal made for the high altar of Westminster Abbey around 1271 (now lost) gives us not only a description of the piece but also some idea of how time-consuming the work involved in

Opus Anglicanum

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opus anglicanum was: it took four women almost four years to complete the frontal.

Opus anglicanum was so often adorned with gold thread and jewels that it really can be considered a form of goldsmith’s art. William of Gloucester, goldsmith to Henry III, was paid twenty marks in 1258 for working “a certain precious cloth for the altar of the Blessed Edward” in Westminster, and somewhat earlier Joseph the Goldsmith had been paid for a miter he made for the king. Gold thread, pearls, and other jewels prominently figure in various inventory listings, some of which were fairly simple, such as “a cope of red velvet with gold and pearls of English work,” or “an English cope, the entire field in gold thread, with many images and figures of birds and beasts with pearls”; other listings were longer and more explicit.

One of the most beautiful vestments in the current Cloisters exhibition is a splendid example of opus anglicanum. Its description in a medieval inventory might have read something like this: A chasuble of crimson velvet of English work, all embroidered in gold with the Annunciation, the Three Kings, and the Coronation of Our Lady, and

1. St. James, one of the large apostles seated on tald-stools, on the front of the Chichester-Constable chasuble. He wears the pilgrim’s hat and carries the pilgrim’s staff. On his pouch is his badge, the cockleshell

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2. The Chichester-Constable chasuble, front view. English, 1330-1350. Silk and metallic threads (in underside couching, split stitch, laid and couched work, and raised work) on velvet, greatest width 30 inches. Fletcher Fund, 27.162.1. At the top, parts of Sts. John the Evangelist and John the Baptist can be seen. John the Evangelist sits on a folding chair that has heads of his symbol, the eagle, rather than heads of dogs as handles. In the middle are Sts. Peter and Paul, and at the bottom Sts. Andrew and James the Greater. In the fragments added to the right side can be seen St. Catherine’s wheel and part of St. Lawrence with his grill.

3. The Chichester-Constable chasuble, back view. The three scenes – embroidered directly on the velvet field – are, from the bottom: the Annunciation, Adoration of the Magi, and Coronation of the Virgin. Underneath the shoulder seams can be seen the tails of what were originally parakeets (see Figure 17). To the left of the Coronation, part of St. Stephen holding the stones with which he was martyred is visible.

4. Detail of Figure 3, showing an acorn with most of the remaining pearls on the chasuble.

5. Stole and maniple composed of fragments cut from the Chichester-Constable chasuble when it was reshaped. Length of stole 8 feet 1 inch; maniple 3 feet 4/4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 27.162.2.
on the front six large seated saints with numerous other smaller saints and kings in niches, and angels holding stars, animal heads, and intertwining oak branches with acorns, the crowns, stars, animal heads, and acorns all done in pearls (Figures 2, 3). Although almost all the pearls are missing today (Figure 4), the velvet background of the chasuble is still a rich red in tone, and the gold embroidery is almost completely intact, but some of the original smaller figures were cut off or cut apart during a later remodeling.

A cope in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is extremely close both in style and subject matter to the Metropolitan’s chasuble, is believed to have come from the same set (or chapel) of vestments as the Museum’s piece (Figures 6, 10, 14, 17). Two fragments, now sewn together, though not as close, have also been connected with the cope and chasuble (Figure 7).

The cope and chasuble are thought on stylistic grounds to have been made between 1330 and 1350. Although there are no documents tracing the early history of these vestments, the chasuble, from at least the sixteenth century, is believed to have belonged to the Chichester-Constable family of Burton Constable in Yorkshire, while the cope belonged to another important Catholic family, the Butler-Bowdons of nearby Derbyshire, for generations. For many years each vestment has been known by the name of the family that formerly owned it.

The chasuble was reshaped, sometime after the early sixteenth century, when chasuble shapes changed (see page 307), and some of the pieces that were cut away were used in remodeling the shoulders and extending the edges and to form the stole and maniple that came to the Museum with the chasuble (Figure 5). The cut-off areas include a series of saints that are smaller than the main figures on the front and back. Three of these are identifiable: a fragment of St. Stephen holding the rocks with which he was martyred (Figure 3), a hand of St. Catherine with her wheel, and part of St. Lawrence with his grill (Figure 2). All these saints are also found in the cope. Among the fragments in the stole can be found a bishop, a seated saint, a king (Figure 9), and part of another king’s head. These royal personages may have been Edward the Confessor and St. Edmund of Bury, both

6. St. Catherine and St. Lawrence from the Butler-Bowdon cope. English, 1330-1350. Silk and metallic threads on velvet, 5 feet 6 inches x 11 feet 4 inches overall. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The cope's former owner, Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon, suggested that the vestment may originally have been commissioned by a religious institution

of whom appear on the cope (Figure 10). The cope was completely cut up at some time to make a chasuble, stole, maniple, and altar frontal. Although it has been reassembled, some portions are still missing.

Certain features of the cope and chasuble are unusual: no other existing opus anglicanum has isolated saints that are as large as those on the front of the chasuble, nor do the folding chairs on which the apostles and angels sit have such importance (Figure 1). (These chairs, called faldstools, were a form of ecclesiastical furniture reserved for bishops or kings.) Another unusual feature is the fact that the angels hold star-shaped objects; rarely does one find a vestment of opus anglicanum without some member of the celestial hierarchy, but they either hold nothing, like the seraphs standing on wheels on another vestment (Figure 8), or they appear with such objects as censers or musical instruments.

8. Left: Angel from the Chichester-Constable chasuble. Right: Seraph standing on a wheel from an opus anglicanum cope, a traditional motif that has been found in embroidery dated as early as the thirteenth century. English, early XVI century. Silk and metallic threads on velvet, height of seraph about 11 inches. The Cloisters Collection, 53.63.1

While the particular combination and order of the three scenes on the back of our chasuble, which are repeated on the back of the cope, do not appear in any other existing opus anglicanum, they are known to have occurred in at least two other opus of the period: acope of crimson velvet listed in the Duke of Berry’s 1402 inventory and a cope of red camaca described in a 1399 inventory of the Cathedral of St. Albans. The St. Albans cope was said to have fretwork of gold, canopied niches with likenesses of saints, and — on the back, from the bottom up — the Annunciation, the Adoration, and the Coronation. Eileen Roberts recently suggested that this description might refer to the Victoria and Albert cope, but such an identification is open to question. Although the word camaca — one of those elusive terms used in the Middle Ages to describe textiles — could refer to velvet, one would expect instead one of the names more usually used: vellutim, velvetto, or, as in the Duke of Berry’s list, velua. Furthermore, one would expect to find a mention of pearls, particularly since materials used in this cope were noted in the inventory: “orphrey of this cope is in fact gold, and the figures indeed of silk.”

As we have seen, the early history of these vestments is a matter of speculation. In an article written in 1927, when the chasuble first came to the Museum, Frances Morris, then in charge of the Museum’s textile collection, suggested that it might have been part of a set of vestments made for King Edward III (reigned 1327-1377), because of the similarity of the animal heads in the chasuble to those in the border of an illustration showing Edward with his counselors in the Liber de officiis Regnum written for Edward by Walter de Milemete in 1326-1327 (Figure 11). Fantastic masks and animal heads turn up quite frequently in other English embroideries, manuscripts, and architectural decoration of the period, but the head seen in the chasuble, cope, and manuscript definitely appears to be that of the lion passant guardant of the royal arms of England (Figure 12). This heraldic figure, itself, appears in the manuscript illustration and in the orphreys of the Victoria and Albert cope.

Historically, the period in which the cope and chasuble were produced is intriguing. Edward II was deposed by Parliament and shortly thereafter murdered, most probably by the adherents of his wife, Queen Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer. Although Edward III was proclaimed king at that time (1327), he did not take over the throne in his own right until three years later, after he had tired of the rule of his mother and Mortimer and had had Mortimer put to death. At about this time, he claimed the throne of France by right of inheritance through his mother, Isabella, sister of the last monarch in direct line of the house of Capet. He eventually invaded France in support of his claim against that of the house of Valois.

While Edward was fighting the house of Valois during the first half of the Hundred Years’ War, he was also competing with the French in other
ways: he was taking every possible step to establish Edward the Confessor as a rival of St. Louis (King Louis IX of France, 1214-1270) and was rebuilding St. Stephen's chapel in the royal palace in Westminster to compete in splendor with the Ste. Chapelle in Paris built by St. Louis. The construction of St. Stephen's was completed by 1350 and the interior was then lavishly painted with frescoes and decorated with gilded gesso ornament.

Unfortunately, at the time of the Reformation this chapel was given over to serve as the House of Commons, and finally in 1834 was almost entirely burned. From drawings and reconstructions made shortly after, however, we have some idea of the interior's decoration, which includes arches and masks reminiscent of those in the chasuble and cope, and more particularly includes a lion with a head like those in the embroidery and a

9. A king from the stole made up of fragments from the Chichester-Constable chasuble

10. Edward the Confessor holding a model of Westminster Abbey from the Butler-Bowdon cope. It has been suggested that the inclusion of the model might indicate that the cope and chasuble were made for use in the Abbey. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

11. King Edward III with his counselors. From the Liber de officiis Regnum written for Edward in 1326-1327 by Walter de Milemete. 9¾ x 6¼ inches. The Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford, ms 92, fol. 8B

12. Fragment of a heraldic embroidery with the lion passant guardant. English, 1330-1340. Silk and metallic threads on velvet, about 22 inches x 4 feet. Musée de Cluny, Paris. Photograph: Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris. This rare example of secular embroidery is part of what may originally have been a horse trapping, probably made for royal use
The profusion of star-shaped objects like those held by the angels in the chasuble and cope (Figure 15).

The use of this star motif may have been inherited from the period of Henry III (1207-1272), and seems to have been associated with the royal family of England. Lead stars and crescents, once evidently covered with gesso and gilded, have been discovered at the site of one of the numerous palaces remodeled by Henry. Although the star and crescent motif was not exclusively associated with this king, it was one of his badges. It appears in another embroidery in the exhibition, which has the arms of Henry’s son Edward I and his queen, Eleanor of Castile (Figure 16; page 286, Figure 2). Our chasuble is the only known example of opus anglicanum in which this motif occurs in the Coronation of the Virgin scene.

The prominence accorded the Adoration of the Magi scene in both the cope and chasuble (Figures 13, 14) may derive from the fact that real kings or princes—who may have imagined descent from the Three Kings—occasionally figure among the Magi in medieval art. In this light, it might be well to consider another suggestion made by Miss Morris in 1927: the old king might represent Edward the Confessor, followed by Edward II and III. This arrangement would have been appropriate at the time, as Edward III had proclaimed his father a martyr and was encouraging the cult that grew up around his tomb in Gloucester Cathedral, and, as mentioned earlier, he wanted Edward the Confessor to be as important to his English subjects as St. Louis was to the French.

If the chasuble and cope were indeed connected with Edward III, they may well have come into the possession of the Chichester-Constable and Butler-
Bowdon families either by gift or inheritance. The earliest known mention of what is probably the Chichester-Constable chasuble is in the will (1559) of Lady Margaret Scrope, wife of Sir John Constable, in which she bequeaths “ye antient vestment” to “ye fair chappelle,” which was among the additions made by her husband about that time to his “goodly manor house of antient building.” Her ancestor Lord Henry Scrope and other members of that family served both Edward II and III in important capacities, and the chasuble might well have been a royal gift.

In a 1945 letter, Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon, who at that time still owned the cope, mentioned another medieval vestment in his possession that had coats of arms referring to the 1398 marriage of the Earl of Stafford to Anne Plantagenet, a granddaughter of Edward III. Since that vestment had come to his family by direct inheritance, it is possible that the Victoria and Albert cope did too.

While we may never be able to establish beyond any doubt for whom the cope and chasuble were made, we can state with reasonable certainty that they were produced in London, the center of opus Anglicanum manufacture from the middle of the thirteenth century on. The age, richness, and sophistication of workmanship make the chasuble the unquestioned star of the Cloisters exhibition.


15. Details from plate 14 of The Architectural Antiquities of the Collegiate Chapel of St. Stephen, Westminster (London, 1844), by Frederick Mackenzie

Notes

Although London was the center of production for *opus anglicanum* from the middle of the thirteenth century on, very little is known about the actual methods of manufacture. Because of the recurrence of certain decorative elements, it seems likely that embroidery workshops may have had collections of designs deriving from a common source, and, through a stroke of good fortune, a pattern book still survives in Magdalen College, Cambridge. It appears to have been in use from the late thirteenth to the late fourteenth century, and it includes a sketch of a long-tailed parakeet like the one in the cope (Figure 17) and chasuble (Figure 3).

The recurrence of design motifs is not, however, limited to embroideries. There are similarities in figure style and architectural and other details to manuscript illumination and painting of the period, suggesting that one designer may have worked in several fields, or that the same sort of pattern books were used by other craftsmen.

Technique

To facilitate embroidering directly onto the velvet of the chasuble, a thin layer of fabric was placed over the velvet to provide a smooth surface on which to trace the pattern. When the embroidery was completed, any fabric not covered with stitching was cut away. For silk threads, the split stitch was used more than any other stitch.

Gold threads (formed of strips of tin covered with gold leaf and wound on yellow silk) were stitched in underside couching, which was widely used during the Middle Ages. In this stitch (see diagrams at left), the gold thread is laid on the surface of the velvet and held taut with the left hand as the linen thread is brought up to encircle it. The linen thread is then returned to the back through the same hole, carrying a loop of gold thread with it. The process is repeated at regular intervals until the surface is covered with a series of closely set lines of gold. In this way the linen couching thread appears not on the surface but in long strands on the back. The durability of the embroidery is increased because the linen securing thread on the reverse is protected from surface wear, and the loops of gold on the back act like a series of little hinges, giving the goldwork the pliability that allowed the finished garment to hang in graceful folds.

*In these diagrams the plain thread represents the gold and the hatched thread is the linen. The surface is shown in A, the back in B, and a cross section in D. At the point marked C in diagram A, the gold thread is about to be looped through the hole made by the linen. Reproduced from Opus Anglicanum: English Medieval Embroidery (London, 1963), with the permission of Clarendon Press, Oxford.*