CHAPTER FIVE

HOLY WOMEN AND THE NEEDLE ARTS: PIETY, DEVOTION, AND STITCHING THE SACRED, CA. 500–1150

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One of the little explored yet important roles which provided a special visibility for female piety and sanctity was that of embroiderer or patron/commissioner of sacred embroideries.1 Queens, noblewomen,

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Abbesses and nuns, as well as laywomen of the lower classes, were singled out for their noteworthy skills and impressive achievements as needle artists. As acts of piety and devotion, their mainly high-status works took the form of ecclesiastical vestments and decorations for the church and altar: they were made as special gifts for churchmen, favorite saints, and for the adornment of the “supreme spouse” along with the “hall and table of the Lord.” Their needlework thus became an integral part of the liturgy and the Eucharistic celebration. These valuable pieces were recognized by the Church as major donations and were carefully recorded in their detailed inventories. They became part of the ecclesiastical memoria and thus provided these women artists and donors with a certain immortality.

Ecclesiastical embroidery carried out by the mulieres sanctae was also viewed on a higher spiritual level. These marvelously decorated pieces, with their glittering gold and silver threads and precious jewels, were seen to capture something of the brilliance of God’s kingdom on earth. They were also considered as reflections of the virtuous character and pious state of the women who embroidered them. This heavenly activity thus closely associated the artists with their future home in the celestial gynaecuem. Moreover, over time some precious pieces came to be considered as holy relics in their own right: imbued with a special virtus, they were believed to bring about miracles.

Based on a collective study of saints’ lives and miracles, martyrologies, chronicles, correspondence, charters, wills, and inventories of monasteries and churches, this preliminary survey attempts to explore a number of aspects of the important pattern of piety found among women who won recognition for their special expertise in and association with religious needlework. The focus is limited to the early period in the history of embroidery: that is, from approximately the sixth through the mid-twelfth century.

Until quite recently, medieval embroiderers and their work have remained largely unexamined. Embroidery has frequently been dismissed as “mere women’s work”: as a craft or minor/low form of art.

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2 Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin’s Legend of Edith and the Liber confortatorius, eds. Stephanie Hollis with W.R. Barnes, Rebecca Hayward, Kathleen Loncar, and Michael Wright (Turnhout, 2004), ch. 11, p. 38.