

To the Altar and Beyond Hidden Traces of Women’s Wedding Clothes in the Treasury of the Parish Church in Prčanj

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Abstract:

In Prčanj, a town in Boka Kotorska (Bay of Kotor) on the eastern Adriatic coast (in today’s Montenegro), a custom was recorded during the early modern period that women from the well-off maritime and merchant families offered their wedding clothes to the church to be refashioned as liturgical vestments. The article examines the custom in the context of the local dress history. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, under the rule of the Republic of Venice and with the formation of maritime municipalities, the citizens of Boka prospered and were able to keep up with the fashion trends of developed urban areas in the Mediterranean. Besides jewelry and accessories, seamen brought luxury textiles from their journeys, such as “brocades” used for wedding clothes and suitable for later liturgical re-use.

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Introduction

The article deals with a custom recorded in the small seaside town of Prčanj (Perzagno), where until the early nineteenth century, women from well-off merchant and seamen’s families donated their wedding clothes to the church as votive offerings to be turned into liturgical vestments. Prčanj is situated in Boka Kotorska (Bocche di Cattaro), or the Bay of Kotor, on the eastern Adriatic coast in today’s Montenegro (fig. 1). As part of the Republic of Venice, the town developed in the early modern period and gained the status of a municipality in 1704 (Comunità di Perzagno).

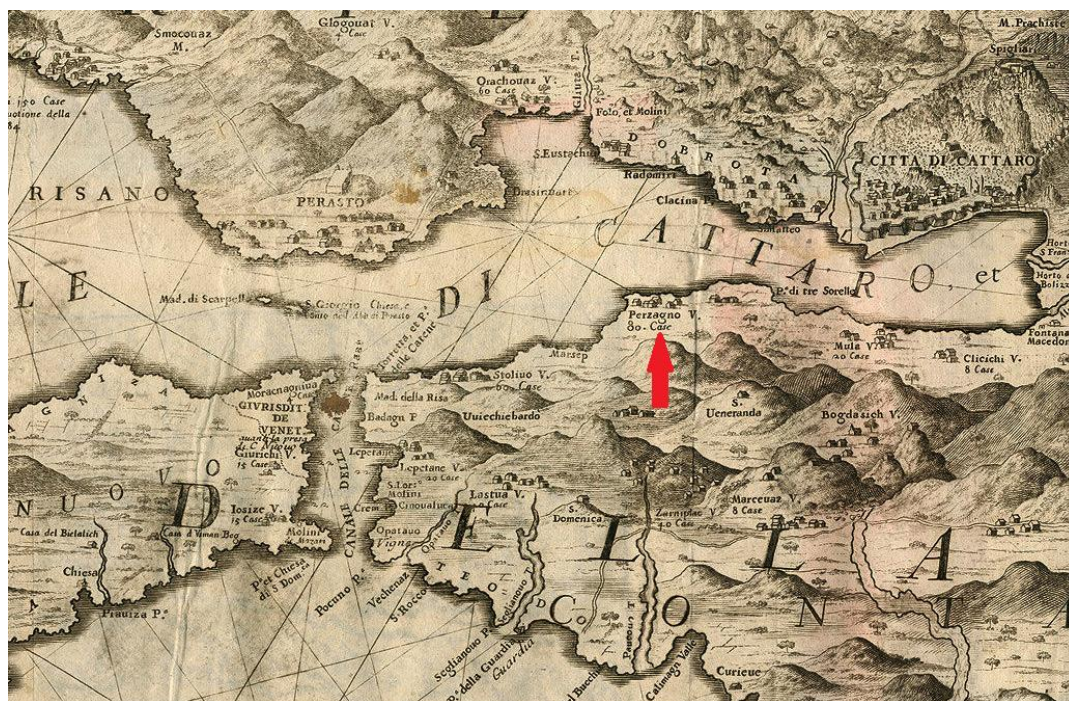


Fig. 1:
Prčanj in Coronelli’s map of Boka from 1688. Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coronelli_Bocche_di_Cattaro_1688.jpg) / Public Domain.

What had formerly been an agricultural settlement on the slopes of Vrmac hill moved during the sixteenth century downhill, to the seacoast. Since the early seventeenth century, official mail was transported by ships belonging to the owners from Prčanj, while in the eighteenth century, the town flourished thanks to its maritime economy. In 1730, the population of the town was 758, and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it was around 1500. Seamen and merchants from Prčanj traded in oil, cheese, tallow candles, dried meat, fish, figs, raisins, pork, wool, hide, and wheat. In the late eighteenth century, the town had a merchant fleet of some thirty ships, which sailed throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (Luković 1937, 14-46; idem 1965, 12-15; Botrić 1972, 79-84).

The town's history reveals a curious textile-related detail: in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the Austro-Hungarian rule, entrepreneurs from Prčanj joined the efforts to develop silk production in Boka. They hired some skilled workers from Friuli, while the local population undertook to breed silkworms. The venture was not profitable in the long run and it was abandoned after a few decades (Luković 1937, 126-7; Botrić 1972, 85; Crnić-Pejović 2003, 133).

The custom of offering women's wedding clothes to the parish church in Prčanj, which is dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was first mentioned in the literature and preliminarily studied in 1937 by Don Niko Luković (1887-1970), a parish priest from Prčanj, theologian, and historian (Luković 1937, 36, 154-5, 312; Luković 1965, 74). During the early 1960s, Bojana Radojković (1924-2006), an art historian and long-time director of the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade, was involved in recording movable heritage in the Roman Catholic churches of Boka in collaboration with the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Montenegro. On this occasion, she documented the custom and the related items (Radojković 1964, 249, 259-60). The custom was also referred to by Jovan Vukmanović and Jelena Ivoš in their articles/chapters on the traditional dress and liturgical vestments of Boka (Vukmanović 1953, 228; Ivoš 2009, 319, 333).

My initial research of the votive vestments from Prčanj focused on the narratives related to women's relationship with their wedding clothes, their roles in the society and the vocabulary of female piety developed in early modern Boka, in connection to a maritime way of life and under the strong influence of the post-Tridentine Marian piety. I argued that wedding clothes had been a suitable personalized offering to the Virgin Mary in the moment of a woman's transition to a new family, where she had taken over the new and important roles of a wife and a future mother (Maskareli 2017).

In this article, I will frame the vestments from Prčanj in the context of the local urban dress history. Keeping in mind that preserved items and visual representations of this region's dress date back mostly to the nineteenth century, the vestments are an important material testimony to the richness of fabrics and fashion influences present in early modern Boka.

Marian Piety and Women in Early Modern Boka

In early modern times, Boka was divided between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire and surrounded by Ottoman territories. For the Catholics in the southern, Venetian part of the bay, who were a mainstream population in the area at the time, Marian piety was a powerful "axis of integration" (Brajović 2015, 127-8; 146-7). There were a significant number of churches, chapels, altars, and icons in Boka dedicated to the Virgin Mary, many of which have been preserved until today.

A miraculous icon of Our Lady of Prčanj (Madonna di Perzagno), first mentioned in 1580, has been worshiped on the main altar of the parish church in Prčanj. In 1910, the icon was transferred from the old parish church, situated on the slope of the Vrmac hill, to the new one (fig. 2) built on the coast from 1789 to 1909 (Luković 1937, 290-97; idem 1965, 57-9). The

parish church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary holds a large number of votive offerings, including the refashioned wedding dresses of local brides.



Fig. 2:
View of the late 19th-century Prčanj with the unfinished new parish church.
Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) / Public Domain.

The early modern society of Boka constructed an ideal image of a devoted and pious maritime woman whose life was marked by a long waiting for her man to return from the sea. In 2016, the legend of three sisters from Prčanj (Tre Sorelle) was declared as intangible cultural heritage of local importance. According to a version of the legend, they all were in love with the same seaman and they eventually got old and died one by one, waiting in vain for his return. The legend is associated with an abandoned house in Prčanj, built in the fifteenth century, where they supposedly lived and which consists of three nearly identical interconnected ranges that have separate roofs.



Fig. 3:
Stole made by the Florio bride. Photo: Draginja Maskareli.

The story of a girl from the Florio family from Prčanj has a more fortunate ending. Around 1830, she made an embroidered stole during the three years of waiting for her seaman fiancé (fig. 3). The priest had worn it at their wedding and it had been kept in the family chapel until 1914, when it was donated to the parish church (Luković 1965, 75).

Women's Dress of Boka in the Early Modern Period

The life and culture in the Bay of Kotor and the rest of the coast developed in a Mediterranean climate and economic conditions. A developed maritime economy, the closeness of a continental hinterland, and the centuries-long presence of two powers, Venice at sea, and the Ottoman Empire in the continental area, resulted in diverse influences that intertwined in the area and were reflected in dress shapes and names, as well as the types of materials (Bjeladinović 2011, 127).



Fig. 4:
Women from Boka in traditional dress, Kotor, 1930. Photo © The Archives of the Diocese of Kotor.

According to previous research, both men and women in early modern Boka, regardless of their age, financial and social status, wore traditional local dress, the origins of which can be traced back to the sixteenth century (fig. 4). Imported fabrics that seamen brought from their travels – together with different accessories, e.g. jewelry, fans or parasols – replaced the homemade fabrics of flax, Spanish broom, wool, cotton, and silk. Expensive and luxury fabrics were extensively used in the making of women's wedding clothes in Boka, mostly during the eighteenth century (Vukmanović 1953, 227-8; Butorac 1999, 279-80; Milošević 2003, 242; Bjeladinović 2011, 127). Clothes made of such fabrics were suitable for refashioning as liturgical vestments and objects.



Fig. 5:
Wedding jacket from Dobrota. Photo © Maritime Museum of Montenegro.

Parts of a traditional wedding ensemble, worn in 1849 by Ana Andrić from the town of Dobrota, are presently kept in the Maritime Museum of Montenegro in Kotor (Vukmanović 1953, 227; Vujošević et al. 2003, 92). A jacket – *kamižola* (Ital. *camiciola*) – belonging to the ensemble was made of red and yellow eighteenth-century Venetian silk damask with golden and silver floral motifs (fig. 5).

Before the acquisition for the museum, the jacket was significantly altered, so that the sleeves were the only part to have retained the original fabric. Its earlier appearance seems to be documented in drawings and photographs by Vlaho Bukovac, Franz Thiard de Laforest, and other authors, dating from the late nineteenth and the twentieth century and showing traditional women's dress in Dobrota (Brajović 1967, 68; Milošević 2003, 243; Laforest 2017).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the formation of maritime municipalities around the old town of Kotor (Cattaro) – among which was Prčanj – the citizens of Boka prospered and were able to afford keeping up with Venetian fashion (Milošević 2003, 239-42). Portraits from the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century, mostly held by the Museum of the Town of Perast and the Maritime Museum of Montenegro, show that along with traditional dress, men from Boka commonly chose to wear armors or fashionable Western-style clothes when sitting for a portrait (Mihaliček 1992, 56-8).

There are no portraits of women from this period that could be examined in the context of dress history. That is why the dowry inventories from the early modern Boka remain an important source of information. A variety of elements listed in the inventories reveals the presence of fashion influences and trends from the developed urban areas of the Mediterranean (Radojičić 2009, 246-9).

Women's Wedding Clothes and Liturgical Vestments from Prčanj

The published descriptions of votive vestments from Prčanj were not accompanied with photos, nor have the vestments been subject to museological treatment. The knowledge of them started to wane over time and my principal concern at the beginning of the research was to what extent it was possible to identify them (Radojković 1964, 260; Luković 1965, 74).

Liturgical vestments kept in Prčanj date from the seventeenth century onwards. They were mainly made of Italian, Venetian fabrics. Although Don Niko Luković noted that most of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century items were made from the wedding clothes offered by local brides (Luković 1937, 36), no more than three sets of eighteenth-century liturgical vestments are explicitly identified as items made from women's wedding clothes by the published descriptions. The field research conducted in September 2016 and June 2017 showed that all three were identifiable and preserved to different degrees.



Fig. 6:
Chasuble made from the Verona wedding clothes. Photo: Draginja Maskareli.

A chasuble with a preserved matching stole, maniple, and burse was made from the clothes offered by a bride from the Verona family (fig. 6). The fabric, dated to the mid-eighteenth century, is white, Venetian silk brocade, with a pattern of gold, long-petaled flowers, arranged over a grid of vertical zigzag and wavy horizontal stripes in purple, pink and silver (Radojković 1964, 260; Luković 1965, 74).

The chasuble shows features typical of items made by refashioning clothes, such as pattern mismatching or using scraps in order to get enough fabric. The features are particularly apparent on the chasubles' front, which was considered less important because prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the priest stood facing the altar, with the back of the chasuble visible to the congregation during most of the service.

The set shows visible traces of previous repairs. The lining of the chasuble contains an inscription saying that it was repaired twice: in 1911 and in 1948, most probably by members of the later generations of the Veronas. Nevertheless, the set is today in an extremely bad state of conservation.

A detailed historical and technological analysis of the fabrics from Prčanj is yet to be performed. For example, a set of liturgical vestments and objects made of “gold Venetian brocade” decorated with “roses in red silk” is dated to 1752, which may be the year when the offering was made. It was made from wedding clothes worn in the Verona family (Luković 1937, 312; idem 1965, 74), as well. Its main part – a chasuble – remained unavailable during the field research, while the matching stole, maniple, and burse were found (fig. 7).



Fig. 7:
Maniple and burse made from the Verona wedding clothes. Photo: Draginja Maskareli.

Particularly interesting for local dress history is a large set of liturgical vestments “for three” made from the wedding clothes that belonged to the mother of the captain Jozo Zerman (fig. 8). Although the clothes were usually donated immediately after the wedding by the brides, in this case, the son donated the clothes as a devotional bequest in 1799, fulfilling his mother’s wish after her death (Luković 1937, 312; 154-5; Vukmanović 1953, 228; Radojković 1964, 259; Luković 1965, 74).

The set that was partly published in 2009 by Jelena Ivoš consists of a chasuble and two dalmatics, with a preserved matching stole, three maniples, a chalice veil, and a burse. It was made of Venetian lampas (*ganzo*) from the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The fabric is covered in gold floral and lace motifs, while the red ground is visible only as a contour (Ivoš 2009, 320, 332-3; Banić 2016, 809-16).



Fig. 8:
Dalmatic and chalice veil made from the Zerman wedding clothes. Photo: Draginja Maskareli.

The quality and quantity of fabric obtained from the Zerman wedding clothes suggest that it might have originally been a rococo dress of the *robe volante* or *robe à la française* type. The eighteenth-century dowry inventories of Italian settlers in Venetian Boka occasionally listed sumptuous rococo dresses under the Italian name *andrienne* (Radojičić 2009, 249).

Conclusion

The custom of offering women's wedding clothes to the church in Prčanj disappeared in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, different manifestations of Marian piety have remained an important element of the identity of modern Boka. The great feasts dedicated to the Virgin Mary, accompanied with solemn ceremonies, are also attended by today's mainstream Orthodox population.

The sanctuary of Our Lady of the Rocks (Madonna dello Scarpello) on the islet off the coast of the town of Perast has remained a center of Marian cult with its own, still existing custom of offering wedding accessories to the Virgin Mary: after the wedding in the church, a bride leaves an offering of a primarily symbolical value. This is usually a bridal wreath or a bouquet, which is kept at the church afterwards.

The traces of women's wedding clothes hidden and preserved in liturgical vestments in Prčanj definitely have a strong narrative power and should be considered as an interesting subject for further research. They tell us a lot about the early modern female inhabitants of the town, their roles and lives, as well as of the rich and diverse dress history of the area.

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