

TEXTILE REMAINS FROM WEST HESLERTON ANGLO-SAXON CEMETERY
(1978-1981 excavations)

Penelope Walton

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Many of the metal artifacts in the graves at West Heslerton were found to have small areas of textile remains adhering to their surfaces. Although these remains were often little more than one centimetre square, it was usually possible to identify the technical details of the original fabric, such as the weave and the direction of spin of the yarn. Fibres had for the most part been replaced by the corrosion products of the metal goods to which they were attached, but it was occasionally possible to find intact fibres which could be identified.

The weave structures of these textile remains proved to be in the same range as those found in many Anglo-Saxon graves in southern England and East Anglia - that is, tabby (plain weave), ribbed tabby, 2/2 twill, 2/2 diamond twill, tablet weaving, weaves with a pile worked in and a variety of cords and plaits.

The tabbies were usually finer than the twills, most being in the region of 11-18 threads per centimetre, but some up to 22 per cm. Most of them had been made with Z-spun yarn (that is, yarn produced by turning the spindle clockwise) in both warp and weft, and, where original fibres had survived, these ZZ tabbies proved to be flax or some other vegetable stem fibre. However, a small number were worked with Z-spun yarn in one system, possibly the warp, and S-spun (anti-clockwise) in the other, and these ZS fabrics could usually be identified as wool.

One of these last, from grave B10, had a pile of weakly twisted threads worked in, but it was not clear whether this was a piled weave either of the smooth even type seen at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, and Broomfield Barrow, Essex (Crowfoot 1976 p70) or the shaggy variety used for the Viking cloaks of Kildonan and Jurby (Crowfoot 1949 pp25-27) or whether the pile had been darned in after weaving, as in the Anglo-Scandinavian finds at York (Hedges 1982 pp113-114).

Most of the tabbies had equal thread-counts in warp and weft, but some, called ribbed tabbies, had a firm well-spaced yarn in one system (warp?) while the second system, which was more closely-packed, wove round the first, making a strong ribbed fabric, which may have been used for garments, but which is also suitable for borders or belts.

The twills were mainly in the range of 8 to 12 threads per centimetre, although one was as fine as 12 x 16 and another, on an iron spearhead from grave F12, was a very loose 5 x 6 per cm. Here again some were worked from Z-spun yarn and some from a combination of Z- and S-spun, but the linen twills, where identified, were always Z-spun only. Two examples of broken diamond twills were found (see figs), both with mixed (ZS) spinning: one from grave B85 has reverses in the diagonals after 10Z and 15S threads, while the other (an unlabelled find) has irregularly shaped diamonds, one made up from only 6Z and 5S threads.

Broken diamond 2/2 twills of this type are known from northern Europe and Scandinavia from the first to eleventh centuries, and several Anglo-Saxon examples have been found, for instance at Finglesham (Crowfoot 1958 fig 10, pp36-37) and Coombe in Kent (Crowfoot 1967 fig 6, pp38-39) and at Swaffham (Crowfoot 1978a, pp29-30, fig 12) and Bergh Apton in East Anglia (Crowfoot 1978b, fig 110 pp99,103,105). Where borders have survived on diamond twills with mixed spinning, the Z-spun system has proved to be the warp. The pattern at the centre of these diamonds sometimes varies, according to the order in which the heddle rods on the loom are lifted, as can be seen by comparing the two West Heslerton examples, but the break at the reverses in the diagonal lines are always of the same sort, that is, with complete displacement of the twill pattern.

Two examples of tablet weaving were found, one (grave HE 46, described in report 18.1.1980), a patterned two-hole technique, and the other (grave F13) a simple four-hole technique with the tablets threaded alternately front and back to give a chevron effect. Tablet weaving was frequently worked as a border for twill fabrics, as an integral part of the weaving process, and it was

also used on its own for sewn-on braids to edge garments. Of the West Heslerton finds, one is probably too decorative to be a twill selvedge and the other, on a wrist clasp, is most probably part of a stitched-on cuff, similar to the one edging a twill sleeve attached to a wrist-clasp from Mildenhall, Suffolk (Crowfoot 1951 p27, fig 1).

Finally, several plied, cabled and plaited cords were also found, often in association with beads. Two pieces of a tubular plait with knotted ends, probably from a belt, were found in grave HE 46 and has been discussed in the earlier report.

Although all of these fragments are very small, it is possible to draw some conclusions as to the dress of these East Yorkshire Anglo-Saxons. First of all, in the graves of males (identified from the presence of weapons) only twill and diamond twill were to be found, the fine linen tabbies being only in those graves where there were two annular brooches, which is assumed to indicate a female inhumation. It is known from stone-carvings and manuscript illustrations that the dress of Saxon men remained for several centuries a simple sleeved tunic with a cloak and it would therefore appear that at West Heslerton these two garments were made from twill or diamond twill. The loose curls of fibre on the spearhead of grave B75 may be from a fur or a piled-weave cloak or perhaps from a blanket placed below the body.

Women's fashions were subject to more change, but in the period before conversion to Christianity, the general mode of dress was a loose tubular garment, as much as nine feet in circumference, held together at the shoulder by two brooches and tied at the waist. Beneath this was a sleeved garment with cuffs, and over it a cloak (Dodwell 1982 pl72). At West Heslerton we have examples of two different fabrics, the one twill, the other either twill or tabby, pinned by the annular brooches just below shoulder level; and on the wrist-clasps are also remains of twill with in one case tablet weaving for the cuffs. These are probably the remains of the sleeved shirt and overgarment. In one grave there was a plaited belt at waist level and in others there was sometimes ribbed tabby, a suitable belt material, in the same position. Twill was also found on the back of the cruciform

brooches which were presumably used to fasten the cloak; on one annular brooch there was also a piled fabric - a common cloak material at this time.

As well as these remains, which fit in well with what is known of Anglo-Saxon costume of this date, there also frequently occur pieces of fine linen tabby on the front of the annular and cruciform brooches. Similar remains have been found in other cemeteries, such as at Swafham in Norfolk (Crowfoot 1978a p29) and Mucking in Essex (Crowfoot pers comm). Since they do not occur in male graves, it seems probable that they are from some sort of head-veil, hanging over the shoulders and onto the breast, in the manner of those seen in later Saxon illustrations and ~~are~~ referred to as early as the seventh century (Dodwell ibid). Finally, the women adorned themselves with strings of amber and glass beads, which, either by accident or design, were caught up in the brooches ranged across their breast.

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