

The Textiles

Elisabeth Crowfoot

With three very minor exceptions the textiles recovered at Wharham Percy have been used in burials - the earlier medieval remains as simple shrouds or wrappings round the bodies, the later fragments from the handsome exterior decoration of coffins in 18th-19th century graves.

1. Shrouds

In England the habit of interring corpses fully clothed seems to have prevailed for some time after the Anglo-Saxons became Christian, but by the date of the earliest burials with which textiles were found at Wharham Percy, probably 12th-13th century, the practice of simply shrouding the body had become general custom, except in the church or cathedral burials of important secular or ecclesiastical dignitaries. Throughout the medieval period the fabric for the shroud was normally linen. Members of religious orders can still be found in their coarse woollen habits, but their retention in death is probably intended as a sign of Christian poverty (Carter & Henshall 1957, 273; Crowfoot 1976, 102), and the outcry when Charles II, in an effort to bolster the wool trade, ordered that shrouds should be of woollen cloth, demonstrates the long-established preference for linen.

The table (fig. , p.) shows briefly technical details of the pieces examined, their fibre, spin, weave, quality and colour; it may be noted that with the exception of one find (site 51/202, not associated with a burial) the archaeological textiles are all in tabby weave - often called "plain weave" or "linen weave", the simplest form of construction where the weft passes alternately over and under single warps.

The fragments from the early graves at Wharham Percy are of simple undyed flax tabby weaves of fairly good quality. The spinning is all Z, the direction contrary to the natural twist of flax fibre, but most commonly employed in northern Europe from the 6th-10th centuries onwards, where wool, a fibre with no natural preferred twist, had long been established as the most important for textile manufacture. Some of the thread here shows the variable spinning, so common in flax thread that it seems probable that the unevenness, so carefully avoided in fine woollens, was accepted as suitable to even good quality linen.

The burials excavated were in four layers, and probably came from varying medieval dates. Thus Burial 177 might be considerably later than Burials 182 and 189; but though its linen is finer than that of 182, there is very little difference between it and that from 189; very similar quality fragments come from unpublished graves at Guildford (Priory, Gr. 78; Blackfriars Church, Grave 172) and Canterbury (St. Augustine's, Grave 8). It is impossible to say from the little that remains what form the shrouds took; it seems probable they were a simple sheet-like cloth, folded round the body and tied in place at head and feet, as so clearly seen in the traces of 1485 to

Tomesine Tendryng in Yoxford church, Suffolk (Cotman 1838, 13, Pl. 17).

2. Coffin coverings

The woollen fabrics from the later graves are a varied and originally colourful group, all associated with, and largely preserved by, the metal-work on the outside of the coffins. In most, the coverings seem to be made of good quality sheep's wool, though in some the fibres are badly degraded and damaged by insects, particularly so in the probable earliest, C 1078 (Appendix , H.M.Appleyard, p.), a coarse to medium grade cloth, S-spun in both systems, and unfulled - a less sophisticated cheaper fabric than the others which, apart from the S-spun² undyed pieces from Burials D and G (C 1462, 1480), show the mixed spinning, Z(?warp) and S(?weft), that lends itself to finishing by fulling, and are all close heavy cloths with a raised matted surface.

In some cases only very small samples were available for dye identification, and the appearance to the eye was deceptive, the original colour masked by rust or bronze corrosion from the coffin fittings. The colours identified were dark blue (indigotin) in four graves and red (madder) in two. In three cases (Burials KK, G and D) dye tests proved negative, but it is doubtful if this always indicates a natural undyed wool; the limited size of these samples may account for the apparent lack of dye (see Penelope Walton, Appendix , p.), since in one grave (Burial G) H.M.Appleyard's fibre tests indicated there might have been dyeing, while in two cases of indigo dyeing (Burials LXXXIX, XX) distribution of dye was uneven, some fibres being blue, some undyed.

In one grave, the only one identified by name and date, that of Christina Harvey, d.1839, two fabrics had been used in making the coffin covering, clearly distinguishable under magnification by their spinning, Z/S in one piece, S/S in another, and the coarser weave of the latter; in this, the colour had completely faded to brown under a bronze stud, but both fabrics had been dyed blue, and as both were fullled they would have been indistinguishable when used together to any but very close examination.

Only one covering (C 1999) preserved any possible textile decoration, a patch of S-plyed threads that might have come from a fringe. This strongly blue fabric was exactly similar to another (C 1972, Grave LXXXIX), as if they had come from the same bale of cloth, and was therefore not included in dye and fibre sampling.

The textile evidence from these later graves was submitted to Julian H.B.Gitten at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who has recently

made a detailed study of these funeral customs, and has kindly permitted the use here of his description of the origin and development of the textile-covered coffin; he writes:-

"The practice of covering the outer shell of a coffin with a rich material began in the late sixteenth century, the earliest recorded example I can call to mind is that of Elizabeth I (1603) whose red-velvet-covered coffin was exposed in 1863/5 during the famous search of the Westminster Abbey vaults organised by Dean Stanley for the body of James I.

Why outer shells were covered in rich stuffs has not been definitely interpreted. I subscribe to the theory that the covering has its origin in the rich palls which draped the plain wooden coffins during the lying-in-state of monarchs and royal nobles upon which was sometimes placed an effigy of the deceased. With the lying-in-state of General George Monck at Westminster Abbey in 1670 the effigy was placed directly on to his velvet-covered coffin, the pall having gone out of fashion during the Commonwealth not to be revived until the early eighteenth century.

From the last quarter of the seventeenth century until, say, the middle of the nineteenth century, it was common practice to cover the outer shell of the coffin in a rich material which not only gave status to the funeral but also provided a good base to show off the elaborate fittings. It has been said that the coffin was little more than a large jewel casket. Indeed so; for what precious contents it held for the mourners!

Obviously, the quality of the material differed greatly from region to region and also from one pocket to another. At the top end of the scale were the large triple coffins destined for important family vaults, covered in crimson velvet and glinting with a wealth of gilt fittings; down market came the black cloth-covered single shell coffin with tin fittings destined for an earth burial or, if within pocket, a brick lined grave.

The supply of such coffins was in itself an elaborate and complicated rite. Until the Civil War the obsequies of the nobility and landed gentry were the prerogative of the College of Heralds (monarchs being dealt with by the Earl Chief Marshall); for the lesser important were the trades and religious guilds and, for the common man, the parish.

Funerals after the death of Charles I were organised by cabinet makers or upholsterers. They would arrange for the collection of a body, placing it in its inner elm shell, have a plumber to provide the lead shell and then call in the upholsterer to cover a 1" outer oak shell with the velvet and fittings. As time progressed private enterprise took over and one would find in the cities and larger towns persons who would 'undertake' to do this liaison work between cabinet maker, plumber and upholsterer, hence the term Undertaker."

The Wharham Percy examples must come into the category of better-grade coffins for well-to-do commoners, their coloured fullled woollens the nearest cheap substitute for velvet, perhaps in this area of Yorkshire the highest quality funeral supplied by the local undertaker.

Of the three textiles without grave associations, one (Site 51/202) was found attached to a fragment of iron, with other folded half-carbonised scraps, a half-basket weave or "extended tabby", with paired threads in one system, probably the weft, for speedy weaving; the weave was commonly used for sacking, but here its fibre seems to be probably wool. Another scrap (67.3.46) is only a few white unspun fibres, plucked from an animal, possibly a dog (Appendix , H.M.Appleyard, p.). The third item is an obvious late intrusion (c 1981), a child's machine-knitted glove in white nylon.

Microfiche synopses

Shrouds Elisabeth Crowfoot

Fragments of shrouds were found in three graves in the churchyard, north of the nave (burials 177, 182 and 189). They were simple flax tabby weaves of fairly good quality and very similar to finds from other medieval ecclesiastical sites in England.

Coffin coverings Elisabeth Crowfoot and Julian W.S.Litten

Remains of woollen fabrics, all medium grade tabby weaves, most heavily fullled and dyed, four dark blue (indigotin) and two dark red (madder), were preserved by the decorative metal fittings on nine coffins from 18th-19th century burials. The practice of covering the outer shell of a coffin with rich material dates from the late 16th to the 19th century. The woollens here would be a cheaper local substitute for the velvets of important burials.

Fibres: H.M.Appleyard. Dyes: Penelope Walton.

Bibliography

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| Carter H.B. & Henshall A.S. 1957 | "Textile from Burial Q, St.Mary's Priory Thetford", <u>Med.Arch.</u> 1. 102- |
| Cotman J.S. 1836 | <u>Engravings of Sepulchral Effigies in Suffolk</u> |
| Crowfoot E. 1976 | "The textiles" in T.G.Hassall "Excavations at Oxford Castle 1965-73" <u>Oxonensia</u> 41, 271-273. |

Appendix . Fibre identifications

H.M.Appleyard. F.T.I.

- C 1078. (800266) Badly degraded wool; although brown, it is uncertain whether this is due to dye or simply natural discolouration. There is a lot of debris attached to the fibres.
- C 1972. (796417) Fine to medium diameter wool, some fibres are undyed and others are dyed blue.
- C 2209. (796419) Badly degraded wool, brownish in colour; evidence of insect larvae damage.
- C 2228. (796420) This is very similar to 2209, but the fibres are coarser, darker and some are medullated.
- C 1480. (820004) Wool fibres, all dark brown but very little pigmentation, they appear to be evenly dyed; there are a lot of deposits and some bacterial degradation.
- C 1547. (820005) Medium diameter wool, some fibres with continuous medulla and some with fragmental medullation; no pigment, slightly yellow, but probably undyed.
- C.1462. (697004) Wool, badly degraded; there is no pigment, and a small amount of fragmental medullae.
- C.2233. (822456) (a) and (b), both badly degraded, but (b) more so; blue stains on some fibres; probably wool.
- Site 51/202 (822458) Very black and brittle, fibres very irregular in diameter, but have very protruding scale margins as seen in profile, the scale patterns are not visible because of the colour; there are both longitudinal and transverse cracks. Certainly animal, most probably wool.
- 67.3.46 (822457) Short animal fibres, most with both roots and tips, fairly regular in thickness, many fairly fine but some coarser fibres; fragments of skin. Most of the finer fibres are non-medullated, but some with fragmental medulla, and some coarser fibres with continuous medulla; ?dog hairs, but not the range of scale patterns expected.
- C.1981. (818949) Modern; under polarised light this has all the interference colours of nylon, of the delustered type.

Appendix . Dyes

Penelope Walton

All dyes were extracted with solvents and tested with an ultra-violet/visible spectrophotometer.

| | | | |
|------------------|----------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| Find no. C.1078. | Lab.no. 800266 | | indigotin |
| C 1972. | 796417 | | indigotin |
| C 2209. | 796419 | | madder |
| C 2228. | 796420 | Grave W? | madder |
| C 1480. | 820004 | Grave G | negative (< 1mg) |
| C 1547. | 820005 | Grave KK | negative |
| C 1482. | 697004 | Grave D | negative (< 1mg) |
| C 2233. | 622456 | Grave XX | (a) indigotin (b) indigotin |

Nine samples were tested for the presence of dyes, out of which six gave positive results, two madder and four indigotin. The remaining three were not necessarily undyed, but may have been coloured with dyes which decay rapidly or are more easily masked by soil stains. Two of these samples were so small that only very well-preserved dyes would have been detected.

Indigotin and madder are both regularly encountered in English textiles from at least the 10th century onwards. The blue dyestuff indigotin can be extracted from either the woad or the indigo plants, both of which were used in the 17th century, woad mainly from local sources and indigo imported from East India and the West Indies; in later centuries woad was almost completely ousted by indigo (1). Indigotin outnumbered the other dyestuffs in the post-Civil War wool textiles from Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2) and the 17th century knitted caps from the Dutch whaling settlement at Spitzbergen (unpublished work).

Madder, the popular and cheap red dye of the Middle Ages, was also found in the Newcastle and Spitzbergen textiles along with other reds of more recent introduction. It is clear that, although by the 17th century there was competition from new red dyestuffs from the Americas, madder from the continent continued to be used extensively.

Notes.

- 1 J.H.Betty, 'The cultivation of woad in the Salisbury area during the late 16th and 17th centuries' Textile History 9, 1978, 112-117.
R.Davis, 'English foreign trade, 1660-1700' in Minchinton (ed.) The Growth of English Overseas Trades in the 17th and 18th centuries 1969, 90; Minchinton, introduction to The Growth of English Overseas Trade etc. 21.
- 2 P.Walton, forthcoming, 'The textiles' in B.Harbottle, 'Excavation of the Civil War bastion at the Castle, Newcastle-upon-Tyne', Archaeologia Aeliana

Wharfedale Percy. Textile Catalogue

| <u>Find no.</u> | <u>Lab.no.</u> | <u>Phase</u> | <u>Burial</u> | <u>Measurement</u> | <u>Fibre</u> | <u>Spin</u> | <u>Weave</u> | <u>Count</u> | <u>Colour</u> | <u>Finishing</u> | <u>Comments</u> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|---|
| C 900 | 725000 | pre IX | 177 | 2.5 X 0.8, 1.6 X 1.1, 1.7 X 1.2 | flax | S/Z | tabby | 18-24/16-18 | undyed | - | 12 small fragments, close even spin and weave |
| C 928 | 725001 | pre IX | 182 | 1.0 X 0.5 | flax | Z/Z | tabby | 12/9 (6 on 5mm) | undyed | - | rather open weave |
| C 9914 | 725002 | pre IX | 189 | 2.7 X 2.2, 2.5 X 1.4, 1.5 X 0.8 | flax | Z/Z | tabby | 20-22/18-22 | undyed | - | numerous scraps, large pieces in folds, spin irregular |
| C 1078 | 800266 | IV-VII, ?later | | 5.3 X 4.0 | wool | S/S | tabby | 8-9/9-10 | brown (indigotin) | - | between iron & wood, largely replaced fibres |
| C 1972 | 796417 | X - XII (wood 1820) | LXXXIX | 0.8.5 X 5.4 | wool | Z/S | tabby | 14-15/22 | dark blue (indigotin) | fulled | between metal & wood overlap where cloth joined |
| C 1999 | 796418 | X - XII | | 2.0 x 2.2, 2.5 x 2.0 L.2.4, w.1.7 | wool | Z/S Z, Sply | tabby | 14-15/20-22 | dark blue | fulled | round studs, & detached as above; parallel threads, ?fringe |
| C 2209 | 796419 | III - XI | TT | 9.0 X 14.0, 12.0 X 8.5 | wool | Z/S | tabby | 20/12 | dark brown (madder) | fulled | near-black, ?burnt marks of fitting |
| C 2228 | 796420 | XI | ?W | 4.3 x 2.5, 1.9 x 1.8 | wool | S/S | tabby | 16/10-11 | dark brown (madder) | fulled | fragments adhering on most of the studs, against wood |
| C 1480 | 820004 | | G | 6.5 X 1.9 | wool | S/S | tabby | 7-8/7-8 | brown (negative) | fulled | ?warp tight spin, ?weft loose |
| C 1547 | 820005 | | KK | 2.5 X 4.5 | wool | Z/S | tabby | 10-12/12 | brown (negative) | fulled | stained green from studs |
| C 2233 | 822456 | c.1800-1820 1839 | XX | (a) 4.0 X 3.6 (b) 1.7 X 1.5 | wool wool | Z/S S/S | tabby tabby | 12-14/12 10-11/12 | blue brown (both indigotin) | fulled fulled | from wood under stud |
| C 1482 | 697004 | | D | 2.3 X 1.1 | wool | S/S | tabby | 9-10/10-11 | light brown (negative) | - | loose spun threads |
| 51/202 | 822458 | | | 3.5 X 3.3 | ?wool | Z/Z | half-basket | 5/4pr | black | - | ?carbonised, attached iron |
| 67.3.46 | 822457 | | | L.c.2.2 | ?dog | unspun | - | - | white | - | plucked fibres |
| C 1981 | 818949 | | | L.17.0, width 7.5 | nylon | Z | knitted (machine) | - | white | - | child's glove, modern |