

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 47/88

TEXTILES: GISBOROUGH PRIORY,
CLEVELAND.

Elisabeth Crowfoot

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Summary

Textile fragments from a 13th century burial in the south aisle of the church included many broken-up pieces of a tablet-woven braid with remains of silver-gilt brocading, probably the decoration of an ecclesiastical vestment. Technique and pattern are typical of good medieval examples, but exceptionally fine. See also Report No. 46/88.

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GISBOROUGH PRIORY, YORKSHIRE

Textiles

Elisabeth Crowfoot

(Metal analysis: Justine Bayley. Fibres: H.M.Appleyard.
Dye testing: Penelope Walton.)

The textile remains from the 13th century grave in the south aisle probably come from a vestment such as a chasuble, the gold-brocaded tablet-braid (T/1) from the borders, the tiny fragments of tabby weave adhering (T/2) a lining or backing to the braid, and the even smaller remains that may be from a compound silk (T/3) perhaps the patterned fabric of the vestment.

The braid, which survived in many brittle and broken fragments, was originally very good quality, exceptionally fine, with an intricate pattern which could be recovered in some areas (fig.1). The fibre of the weave is too deteriorated for identification, but its appearance suggests it must be silk. The brocading threads are 'spun-gold', i.e. formed by a strip cut from a very thinly beaten-out sheet of metal wound by hand-spindle round a fine thread core. Production of this type of decorative thread has been a skilled man's job from the Roman period down to the present day in the Middle East (Wild 1970.39-40). The gold is never pure, but the proportion of other metals present increases from the 9th century onward, and the decay and disappearance of much of the metal in later weaves and embroideries is largely due to this adulteration. Most of the metal has flaked off the threads in the Gisborough braid; what remains appears bright gold, and is classified as 'silver-gilt'.

Tablet-weaving, a favourite technique for braids, belts and girths, produces a very strong fabric, but the construction allows the use of very fine warp threads, silk, flax or wool; brocaded decoration is inserted by hand during the weaving. The earliest examples of this technique in England are from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, 6th-7th century, using flattened gold strip instead of spun-gold (Crowfoot & Hawkes 1967.42-53); woollen braids brocaded with gold and silver wire from the Viking graves at Birka, Sweden (Geijer 1938, 82-83) are possibly imports from the Near East. Many of the later English and continental examples come from ecclesiastical burials - the 10th century braids on the stole and maniple, and some later fragments, all gifts to the tomb of St.Cuthbert at Durham (Crowfoot G.M. 1956.433ff,446-447), the 12th century 'William Rufus' tomb at Winchester, probably that of Henry of Blois (d.1171) (Crowfoot E. Winchester Studies 7, in preparation), and that of Walter de Cantilupe at Worcester (Crowfoot G.M.op.cit.451),

and braids from the burial of Roger II, Abbot of St. Augustine's Canterbury 1252-1272, which decorated the borders of a chasuble of fine white wool twill. In most of these the patterns exploit the diagonal lines natural to the weave, swastikas, Xes, diamonds, frets and straps.

The Gisborough braid is one of the finest - 123 tablet twists in a width of just over 3 cm, compared with 39 on nearly 2 cm on Abbot Roger's widest braid. The pattern has been reconstructed, the centre area from two full-width pieces, with the corners filled in from a pattern present on a number of the smaller scraps. At this period, when these braids are a high-grade professional product, the same pattern probably continued throughout the whole length of woven braid, though with a pattern like this the repeating unit may have been larger than the piece recovered (fig.1).

Catalogue

T/1. Braid (A.M.Lab.no.8650706).

Many fragments, two only with complete width preserved, 3.0 - 3.2 cms, (a) L.3.3 cm, (b) 2.6 cm. Edge fragments surviving represent at least 25-30 cms of braid.

Fibre, too degraded for any details to be recognised, but appearance indicates silk. Spinning, warp ?S, weft fine Sply, brocading weft, core almost unspun, strip silver-gilt, 2 turns per 1 mm. Threads are now dark brown, occasionally redder, and greyish at the borders, but no dye was present; colour ?due to pollution, i.e. probably originally white or yellow natural silk. Weave, regular tablet-weave, 4-hole tablets threaded right and left in 'chevrons', twists c.36-40 and wefts and brocading wefts 38-40 per 1 cm. Edges (15 twists each) 8 greyish, ?finer, undecorated, plain gold stripe over 5, 2; centre, brocaded pattern on 93 tablets. Brocading weft inserted under one or two threads of the twist, occasionally under the whole twist, visible as a gold dot on the back of the weave; apart from this, gold only passes to the back as a line under the two twists before the pattern, and visible round the weft returning after the stripe. One small fragment, (c) L.c.1.7 cm, shows the typical reversal line, when the tablet warps become twisted, and are untwisted by turning the tablets in the opposite direction (Collingwood 1982. 106-107).

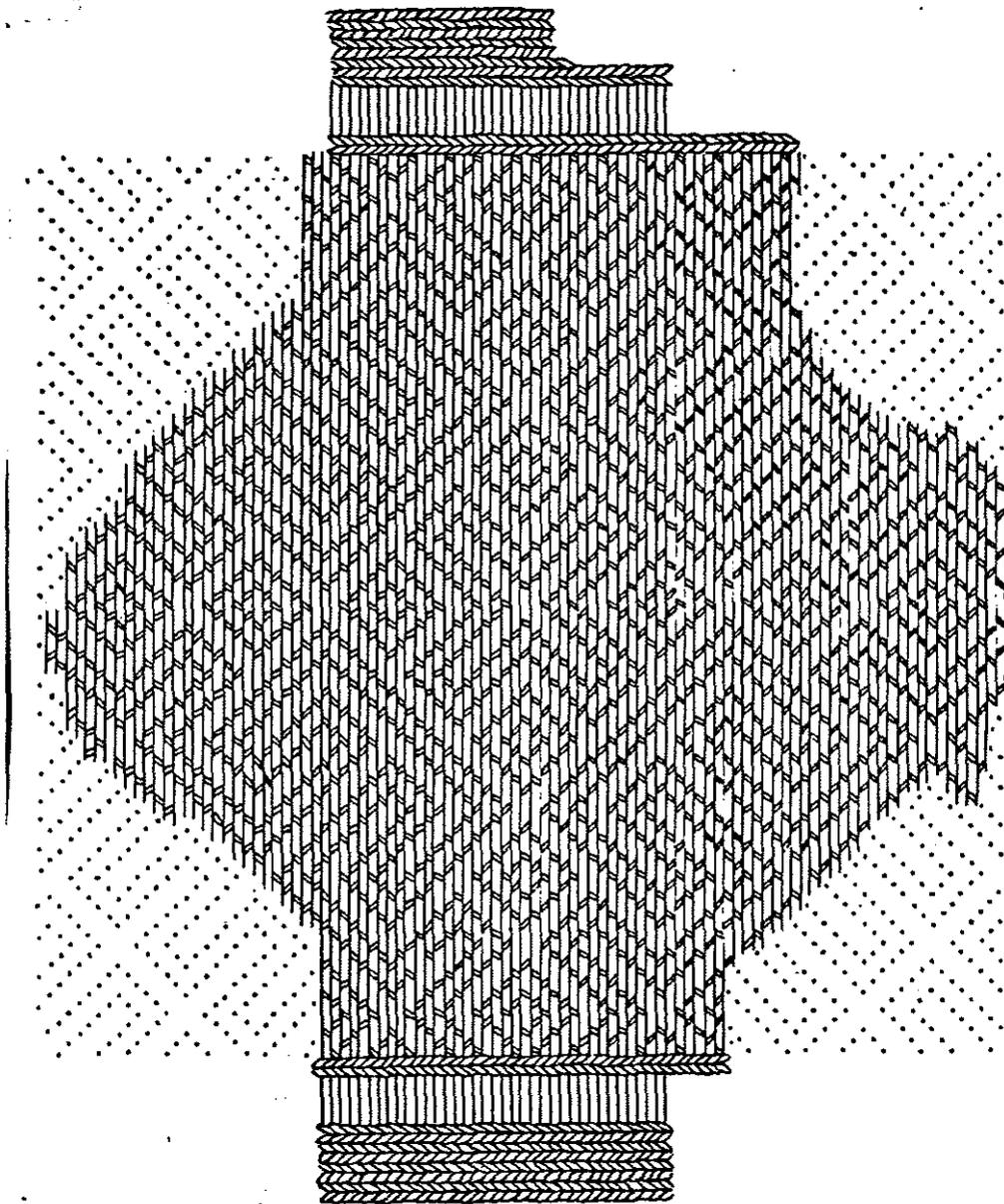
On piece (b) the twists can be seen on the back to have the inaccurate meeting produced by manipulating the tablets in two 'packs' (Collingwood op.cit.160-162), a variation found in some early braids (Crowfoot G.M.1951.28-30, Anglo-Saxon; 1952.202-204, medieval). This has no effect on the appearance of the brocading on front, and is used for the Walter de Cantilupe braid. Dr. Peter Collingwood suggests that perhaps the weaver began with the divided packs, and then changed to the less troublesome single pack - i.e. that (b) perhaps comes from the beginning of the weave.

Tiny fragments from two textiles adhere to the underside of some of the small fragments of the braid T/1:

- T/2. Two scraps, c.2.2 X 1.0 and 1.0 X 0.7 cm, in folds or layers, spin Z both systems, threads very even, weave tabby, very close and regular, thread count per cm 46-48/42-44(taken as 21-22 on 5 mm). ?Silk or flax.
- T/3 Tiny fragments, lying under T/2, and traces on front of gold threads, c.1.5 X 0.6, 0.8 X 0.6 cm, very fine threads, pinkish, unspun, crossing, surface obscured by loose unspun threads, possibly from patterned compound silk.

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Uisborough. Pattern on gold-brocaded tablet braid.
Centre pattern based on two complete widths, (a) and (b);
dotted corners present on several smaller fragments.