

Ancient Monuments Laboratory  
Report 13/90

TEXTILES FROM GROVE PRIORY,  
BEDFORDSHIRE.

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Summary

Numerous tags from garment refuse of the 15th-17th centuries were found to have remains of the laces inside, leather and textile fibres. Possible techniques used for such tapes and braids are suggested and illustrated.

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GROVE PRIORY, BEDFORDSHIRE

TEXTILES: Braids and Tapes from Tags

Elisabeth Crowfoot

Fibres: H.M.Appleyard, F.T.I.

Remains of the laces are still visible inside a number of metal lace-tags of the 15th-17th centuries. In most cases these are mineralised, but in five fibres were sufficiently preserved to be identified - four of animal fibre (295,306/02,624,908) and one probably vegetable (306/07) (H.M.Appleyard, Appendix p.3). In the small cords and ribbons on which these tags were used, animal fibres could be sheep's wool, hair or silk; the appearance of the only vegetable fibre identified suggests flax.

Of thirty-one Type 1 tags (metal sheet rolled round the lace and fastened with rivets) remains of the lace can be seen in eight. In seven of these, of copper alloy, the laces seem to have been leather, in two (95/01,878) a rounded thong, in five narrow flat stripes curled round by the rolling of the metal, with a sharply cut or broken edge visible at the end, and in some damaged examples also along the side (95/02,506,1070,1188,2158). In the one silver tag of Type 1 (1340) the lace, whose appearance suggests silk, had probably been a woven cord of circular construction, perhaps, from the clear wefts visible at one side, a tubular tabby (fig.1.e).

Remains of the lace are visible in twenty-four of the 105 tags of Type 2 (with the cut edges of the metal folded inwards to hold the lace without the aid of rivets). Of these seven are again probably leather (153/01,178/01,226,306/05,343/01,376/03,408/02). In a rather larger ferrule (624) parallel protruding fibres with no sign of spin or weave looked more like wood, but were again identified as animal fibres, probably only held together by the metal deposits; this could perhaps be the untwisted end of a soft wool string. Without destroying the tags, and probably in the process the laces, it is impossible to see most of the small fragments clearly enough to be certain of the techniques employed, but from what was visible probably eight were flat tapes or plaits, and six round plaits; two smaller laces were probably the four-thread whip-cords that are often made with bobbins (1203,1473, fig.1.d).

In the first group (flat, 306/02,343/02,343/03,354/05,610,1028,1204, ?555) the broken warp ends can be seen lying almost in a row, though curved round by the pressure of the metal. These suggest either flat diagonal plaits (fig.1.b,c) or narrow warp-face tabby-weave tapes (fig.1.a), which can be woven on a small band-loom, or equally simply (and to the skilled tablet-weaver probably faster) on 2-holed tablets.

In the probable round cords (179/01,1198,295,306/07,336/03,908) the number of broken ends that can be counted varies from 6 to 9; where the laces are visible through breaks in the sides of tags, they are very flattened, but as far as can be seen the lie of the threads suggests little cords made with a lucet (fig.1.) or, in the case of 179/01 and 336/03, perhaps the development of this technique where the threads are taken round pins on a circular or rectangular base, any number from three upwards, to produce a tubular cord or belt, known to children as 'French knitting' or 'Roman plait' (fig.1. ) (Hald 1975,42-46; Hald 1980.240-251).

Laces preserved in tags have been recorded from other late medieval sites - at Chelmsford, one leather thong and one diagonal silk plait, tightly rolled (P,Walton in Cunningham, Drury et al. 1985.47,57); with burials at St.Margaret in combusto, Norwich, two four-thread whip-cords, one probably of flax; one at Exeter, described as a 'plain tabby' (Allan et al.1984.339). A similar variety of laces to those here at Grove Priory seem to be present in the large collection of tags of the 16th-17th centuries from Acton Court.

Fragments of similar laces have survived without the protection of metal. The four-thread whip-cord has a long history in England, from Anglo-Saxon burials onwards (Crowfoot 1981.99), flat diagonal plaits were found at Southampton, silk, 13th century (Crowfoot 1975. 336-338) and wool at Oxford (Crowfoot 1976.272); and numerous examples of many types - plaits, tabby, tubular tabby, finger-loop braids and whip-cords - were preserved in City of London 14th-15th century deposits, particularly those from the riverside in the Baynards Castle area (Crowfoot 1980.113-114; unpublished TA/402-408, TB/571-589).

In some contexts tags and laces were purely of practical use - those with the Norwich hanged burials, lying near the pelvis, suggest the points used to attach the hose to the paltock or doublet. The leather laces in the rivetted tags may indicate use on boots, or solid leather garments such as jerkins. The mass of tags on textile laces from the 15th-17th centuries however indicate the fashions seen in paintings and portraits, particularly those of Holbein, where the sleeves and the bodice are attached separately, allowing the shirt underneath to puff out between the fastening laces; on some of these the metal tags are clearly shown. The large numbers of tags found together at sites such as Grove Priory and Acton Court must indicate the date when this fashion gave way to more rigid tailoring in which laces and tags had no place.

Appendix. Fibre identifications

H.M.Appleyard, FTI.

- Grove Priory. 624. This is not wood. Under low power with incident lighting it appears to be a mass of fibres bound together by deposits which are granular with green colouration, suggesting copper. From examination at a higher power the fibres are certainly animal.
- 306/02, 908, 295. These are all animal, but impossible to say of what type. There is damage including transverse cracks often seen in damaged animal fibres, and on some fibres evidence of what appeared to be scales.
- 336/03 These are very brittle, they appear to be of vegetable origin, but it was impossible to make a cross-section to decide what type of vegetable fibre.

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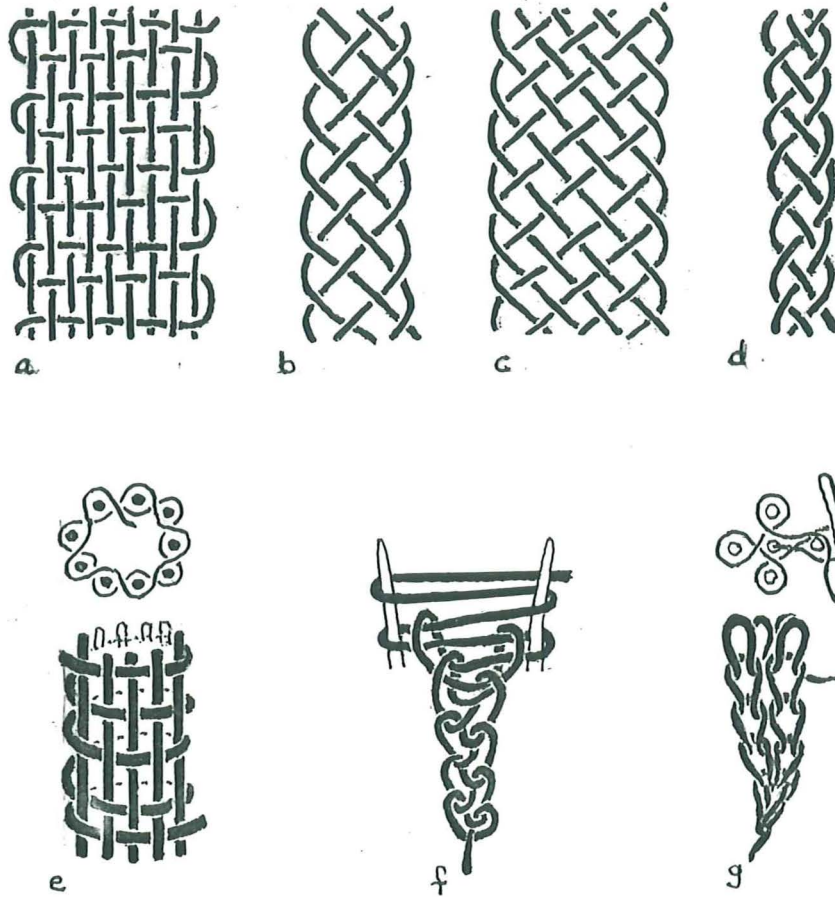
Catalogue

Type 1 tags:

13. 1. 95/01. End: mineralised, round thong, leather.  
 13. 1. 95/02. End: mineralised, flat cut strip, leather.  
 13.174. 506. Mineralised, leather, cut edge visible at join of metal.  
 13.280. 878. End: fibrous, round thong, leather.  
 6. 47. 1070. Mineralised, visible below rivet, ?flat leather.  
 6. 25. 1188. End: mineralised, fibrous, leather flat cut, curled round by rolling metal.  
 7.663. 1340. End: mineralised, 6-8 broken threads, Z-spun, circular, diam.2 mm; coarse Z weft broken side, appearance ?silk.  
 30.128. 2158. Mineralised, L.9.5 mm visible, ?leather cut flat, 2.5-3.0 mm wide, rolled by folding metal.

Type 2 tags:

13. 74.153/01. End: fibrous, curled round inside, diam.c.1.5 mm, leather.  
 13. 78.178/01. End; fibrous, cut, c.2.0 mm wide, ?leather.  
 13. 78.179/01. Visible where broken 9.0 mm, ends ?7 threads, fine fibres, mineralised, light Z-spin, ?Sply; ?Roman plait.  
 13. 65. 226. Mineralised, leather, cut strip c.2.5 mm wide, folded round.  
 13. 47. 295. Animal. Tiny fragments, round cord, occasional slight S-spin, ?lucet or plait.  
 13. 47.306/02. Animal. In broken tag, L.1.4 cm visible, warps ?Z, 5 on 2.5 mm, wefts, 4-5 visible, ?Sply; flat tape, tabby.  
 13. 47.306/05. Mineralised, cut fibrous end, ?leather.  
 13. 47.306/07. Mineralised, thread ends visible, Z-spun, 6-7, round cord.  
 13.113.336/03. Vegetable. L.9 mm visible where broken, ?circular but very crushed.  
 13.134.343/01. Mineralised, cut leather strip c.2 mm wide, fibrous end, smooth side visible through breaks in tag.  
 13.134.343/02. Visible through break, ?flat tabby tape, width 3.5-4.0 mm; warp ?Z,Sply, 7 on 2.5 mm, wefts very slight Z, 5 on 2.5 mm, appearance silk; one loop of weft return visible.  
 13.134.343/03. ?Mineralised, ?flat plait curled round, ?9 threads, Z-spin; diam.(as wound) 2.5 mm.  
 13.112.354/05. Threads visible at broken patch, coarse Z-spun, damaged surface, flat tape or plait.  
 13. 47.376/03. Lace showing both ends, ?round leather, diam.2.0 mm.  
 13. 47.408/02. Mineralised, ?leather end, cut, turned round by metal.  
 13.123. 555. Part ?round lace (or flat curled tightly), fine ends 8 or 9, Z-spun, dark brown, passage not clear.  
 13.214. 610. Visible in break, flat tape, coarse fibres, appearance silk, slight Z twist, ?8 ends; tabby or diagonal plait.  
 13.U/S. 624. Animal. ?Ferrule. Fibrous end protruding, no sign spin or interlacing.  
 1. 2. 908. Animal. Round, visible at break for L.7 mm, ?circular tabby, Z,Sply/Z, 8-10 warps, wefts 5 on 5 mm, diam. 1.5 mm.  
 7.524. 1028. Mineralised (?fibres inside tube still), Z-spin, ?6-7 thread ends, flat plait or tabby.  
 7.570. 1198. Very like 179/01; coarse fibres visible in break, white, Z,Sply; ?round plait.  
 6. 2. 1203. Threads ?present whole length of tag, visible in break; ends 4 plyed threads, whip-cord, diam.3 mm.  
 7.559. 1204. Probable flat plait or tape, c.4 mm wide, fine threads, Z-spun, 6-8 ends.  
 7.502. 1473. Squashed flat, 4 threads, ?whip-cord; fibres visible, ?silk, no spin clear.



Grove Priory, Bedfordshire

Textiles: fig.1.

Types of braids and tapes from tags

- (a) Tabby tape
- (b,c) Flat diagonal plaits
- (d) Four-thread bobbin plait
- (e) Tubular tabby braid
- (f) Lucet braid
- (g) 'Roman plait'