

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 29/90

TEXTILE:SHREWSBURY

Elisabeth Crowfoot

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Summary

Coarse fragments found during excavation outside the Abbey precincts, a wool basket-weave, and a plait of moss fibres of a type known for ropes and basketry from the Iron Age to early medieval town sites.

Fibre Identification: H M Appleyard & Robert Scaife

Dye testing: Penelope Walton.

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SHREWSBURY: TEXTILES

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Fibres: H.M.Appleyard, FFI; Robert Scaife
Dye testing: Penelope Walton

Two collections of fragments of a textile nature were found during excavation of the SW corner of the outer Abbey precincts, a plait of brittle black moss-stems, and a coarse woollen basket-weave.

Weaving with paired threads ('doubles' or 'sisters') in warp or weft (half-basket) or in both systems (basket weave) is well represented in the textiles of the northern Roman provinces (Wild 1970.90-1,93-4,107,109; Wild 1977.8,11; Henshall 1950.136,159) but the practice is uncommon in later weaving, and usually reserved for sacking. This weave is coarse and uneven, and possible nail marks and folded edges suggest furnishing use, lining or screening.

The use of moss fibres (generally, as here, a Polytrichum species) for basketry and matting, including plaits, found in Scotland in Iron Age contexts (Henshall op.cit.162) still continues in medieval levels at York and Shrewsbury (Walton 1989.394-7; Barker 1961.) These plaits have been described as ropes, though the moss-stems are not ideal for the purpose, and as Walton suggests for the York 12th century examples, plaited coiled basketry or matting might be more appropriate (Walton, op.cit.397).

The condition of both, the plait blackened, the weave very deteriorated and stained, its wool fibres only just recognisable, suggest preservation in damp conditions.

Catalogue

AS 85. U/S. 1245. A.M.Lab. 885820-822.

A solid simple 3-plait of multiple strands of moss stems, now black and brittle; length 59 cm, circumference 6.5 cm. Some detached fragments.

Fibre: Robert Scaife. Polytrichum sp.

AS 85. 1017 A.M.Lab. 885824.

Numerous fragments of one textile, grey-brown, colour variable; best preserved areas; c.8.0 X 1.8 cm, folded double diagonally; 4.0 X 2.2 cm; 6.0 X 3.5 cm, rust marks on folded edge, ?from nails. Both systems S-spun, one a tightly twisted yarn, the other finer, badly deteriorated. Basket weave (tabby with pairs in both systems), thread count c.6 prs/6 prs per 1 cm. The weave is uneven and very damaged, open areas suggest missing additional threads but are probably only deterioration.

Fibres: H.M.Appleyard.

Badly degraded animal fibres, with a few signs of scales; the cross-section confirms they are probably wool fibres.

(AS 85.1017, con.)

Dye testing: Penelope Walton

No trace of dye. This was surprising, as the sample appeared to have a faint blue-green tinge. Non-extractable colours generally prove to be either inorganic (our tests are geared towards organic dyes) or, less frequently, modern synthetics (most synthetics extract in our tests).

Bibliography

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