

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 28/93

TEXTILES FROM ACTON COURT, AVON

Elisabeth Crowfoot

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Summary

Textile fragments preserved by contact with metal include decorative details in metal-covered threads from fashionable clothing of the 16th-17th centuries, and remains of cord or ribbon tags surviving the bronze tag-ends from costume uses of the 14th to 19th centuries.

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ACTON COURT AVON
TEXTILES
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Fibres; H.M.Appleyard FTI
Dyes; Penelope Walton
Metal analysis; Michael Heyworth

The textile remains from Acton Court are all preserved by contact with metal, either because they were made with decorative metal threads - a cut metal strip wound spirally round a silk core - or because they were in contact with metal objects, which protected the fibres, though sometimes mineralising them, leaving only a cast of the original threads. In the small first group, the metal-covered threads have been used for costume details - a button, fragments of cord edgings and embroidery, and scraps of a picot-edged braid. The second textile group consists of tiny fragments of cords, plaits and tapes, preserved inside bronze tags, again a clothing accessory.

The distribution in both groups of objects is scattered, but the very heavy concentration in Room 30 probably indicates the origin of most. Here the finds come from an occupation level, small objects found under the subsided wooden floor, perhaps a room where sewing and tailoring was carried on, a wardrobe where garments were stored and altered. Some of the fragments may be earlier, but the room's late 16th to early 17th century date gives the period of their abandon, when they were worn out, or ceased to be used with a change of fashion.

All the objects of the first group, with one exception, come from this deposit, or agree with it in date. They are easily recognisable as fragments from the decoration of fashionable costume of the late 16th century, when heavy embroidery and braids on collars, and the decorated 'guards' on the 'wings' and 'skirts' of doublets, and on ladies skirts, were carried out in metal and coloured silks, and edged with narrow metal plaits and cords - the button (136.537) from the opening of a doublet, the fragments of laid embroidery, where the metal threads still keep something like the shape of a leaf (136.307.a,b,c) and stems (136.350), the joined cords (136.252) and 4-plait in double metal thread (933.406) from the outlining of an elaborate panel. (Arnold 1985, buttons, 78, 120, 170; braids 140-142, 193, 230, 279-82, 288-291). The picot-edged braid (1015.189) probably later, although in simpler technique, gives the same appearance as bobbin-lace braids. (Arnold, op.cit. 336-338).

The lace-tags, very small but durable objects, are found on many occupation sites from the 14th-17th centuries. The presence of isolated examples from later levels are no doubt due to earth movement during building. The small remains of tapes preserved here are often difficult to identify as in many cases only the broken thread ends can be seen, but they all probably fall into well-known categories, which have survived on other sites outside tags. Most appear to be round cords, possibly 17 examples, probably similar to those often made with a lucet, but the curling round of the braid by the metal being twisted makes it difficult to be certain whether the braids were originally round or flat types; 10 seem to be probable flat plaits, but the use of plyed and unplyed threads complicate counting the ends. Five are probably flat tabby tapes and two possibly round

tabby constructions; these were perhaps made with 2-hole tablets, easy and quick if a very fine tape is required; one possible example astray in a 19th century context seems to show the paired threads at one place which occur in circular cords made in this technique. (308.460).

Fibre is only occasionally well enough preserved to identify. The laces from Acton Court are better class than most town collections - four examples of silk in tags as well as in the core of the metal threads, to two vegetable cords, one certainly flax, and two probably wool.

Laces have been identified in tags from other sites, particularly of the 15th-16th centuries - Grove Priory, Bedfordshire, where the remains again suggest flat plaits, tabby tapes, and circular cords (A.M.lab 1390) a tightly rolled diagonal silk plait from Chelmsford (Walton 1985.47,57); 'plain tabby' at Exeter (Allan et al.1984.339) and two 4-plaits, one flax, from burials at St.Margaret in combusto, Norwich (Crowfoot, forthcoming). The earlier examples of these tags are of practical use, for example, holding the hose to the paltock; the more decorative ones, bronze and silver of the 15th-16th centuries, are intended to be seen, fastening details of sleeves, bodices and doublets, seen in portraits, particularly those of Holbein, and the long aiglets preserved on silk ribbons fastening trunk-hose of the late 16th to early 17th century to fashionable doublets (Arnold op.cit.84,90,23A).

Bibliography

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Costume fragments,embroidery,etc.

- Late 1530 933.406. (877473) Fragment, length 6.8 cm, width 2 mm, 4-plait, paired threads, wool? core (FS), metal deteriorated; traces from sewing down.
- Late 16th- 136.537. (876913) Button on wood mould, half preserved, c.1.3 cm to centre; thread silver-gilt, mid-17th C. decoration, three circles, threads grouped in threes, 5-6 per cm, ?continuous on round centre, single rays (fig. or pl.).
- 136.307. (876803) Tangle of metal threads, silk core (FS), strip Ag,Cu; from embroidery:
(a) area 1.3 x 1.7 cm, ?petal or leaf, laid threads 17 per cm, tabby (weft gone) or underside couching.
(b) fragments ?stems or outlining, similar threads.
(c) tabby area (wefts visible in X-ray), rolled into ?cord.
- 136.350. (876821) Fragment as in 307(c), 3.2 x 0.9, tabby, count threads 14-15/5 per cm. probably made as a narrow tape and sewn on.
- 136.252. (896869) End of two cords ?plaits, threads protruding, core silk (reeled), strip silver and brass; whipped tightly together with S silk.,
- 17th-18th C. 1015.189. (877771) Fragment decorative braid, based on two 4-plaits, linked with top edge pulled up to form picots, lengths 9.6, 2.8, c.10.0 cm, height at picots 5-7 mm; core silk (FS), strip silver-gilt.
- 19th-20th C. 502.7 (876606) Inside Ae ring, fine white tabby weave, cotton (FS), c.5 threads per mm, on bias, held inside ring edge; ?part of cloth covered button.

Textile fragments in lace-tags.

- ?13th-14th C. 1802.1186(877125) Threads mineralised, Z spin, ?cord (lucet).
- 1534-5 1760.1115(877103) End visible where broken, Z spun, ?flat plait curling round.
- 1530-1550 529. 61 (876643) Where broken, coarse Zspun threads, lucet or round plait.
- mid-1530- 1992.1420(886171) On outside of tag, mineralised fine tabby weave, Z spun. Inside, ?round mid-1550s braid.
- mid-17th C. 276.379.(876841) (4 tags) In one, fragment exposed, length 5 mm, S spun, ?lucet cord.
- 15th-16th C. 281.659.(876961) Mineralised threads visible both ends, 6 or 7, ?round braid.
- late 1530 1669.1080(877084) (3 tags) One broken, visible tabby tape, Z/Z spin, ?12-13 warps 1 cm, wefts 3-4 on 2 mm.
- late 16th-17th 518. 43.(876630) In broken fragment, Z spun, end tightly folded round, ?tabby tape.
- late 16th to 136.185.(876725) (5 tags) Inside broken tag, silk (FS), flat plait, 8 or 9 threads. mid-17th C. End bound S thread.
Tag 2. ?end bound; visible thread ends ?7.
Tag 3, 6 thread ends, S spun, coarse; ?lucet cord.

136.191.(876729) (4 tags) Traces in two, ends visible, threads confused.
 136.209.(876738) 3 mm length exposed one end,Z spun, ?lucet cord.
 136.252.(876766) (37 tags) Five with fragments,one clear lucet cord,coarse z spun threads,four interlinkings on 5 mm; two others z spun ends; one ? 5-thread flat plait, crushed; one dark brown, ?silk, flat plait?
 136.512.(876905) (19 tags) Visible ends in three, one 2.5 mm diam., Z spun,(FS),?lucet.
 136.565.(876919) (22 tags) In one,coarse white S or S-ply threads, flat plait;in two others, cut ends tied round, coarse threads.
 mid-17th C. 2763.1211(881310) (3) Fragment length 1.25 cm exposed, 4-thread plait, undyed, S-ply threads; Another, 8 or 9 thread ends, flat plait, rolled; small fragment, 6 or 7 thread
 3022.1260(881337) Z spun threads clear inside, curling round with metal.
 late 16th C. 185.168,(876712) Coarse threads clear where broken, Z (FS), ?lucet cord.
 17th-18th C. 207.469.(876887) 8 mm length visible in break, Z spun, coarse, lucet type cord.
 17th-19th C. 509. 24.(876616) Inside, threads (FS), 1.1 cm, Z spun,S ply, tying round end. Other fragment, ?lucet cord pierced by rivet,Z,Sply threads.
 17th-18th C. 1014.744.(876994) Clear one end, coarse Z spun threads, mineralised,?round braid.
 late 17th - 1723.1048(877072) Ends of threads (FS), probably plait, 2-3 mm wide.
 18th C. 1064(877077) Visible both ends, 3 mm, Z,?lucet, plyed or paired threads.
 1078(877083) Thread ends, position indicates flat plait.
 1742.1059(877073) Broken patch near point,4mm, S threads, probably tying end, semi-mineralised.
 1106(877096) 7 mm at one broken end, flat plait rolled round, ?9 threads; flax, Z spun.
 1743.1110(877099) (1 tag in 2 pieces) In one, only ends; another, lying in clear semi-circle, flat tabby tape, c.7 or 8 warps.
 2128.720.(876981) Broken tag, 9 mm plait or cord,flattened, Z spun, probably on 7 or 9 threads.
 19th century 308.460.(876885) Broken near end, ?circular tabby, count 7 warps on 2mm clear,8 wefts on 3 mm, pair showing at front in warps,(see p.2).
 19th to 20th C.652,278.(881343) Length 1.5 cm, diameter c.2 mm, circular tabby tape, ?tablet-woven, (double where curled round), slightly uneven, 5 wefts on 2 mm,28-30 warp ends.
 2068.1229(881320) Tag broken down side, coarse threads for 5 mm, Z spun, flattened, ?round cord.
 2085.1224(881318) (8 tags) One thread ends showing, 14 visible, tight circle,probably fine tabby tape, but threads possibly paired or plyed; another 11 ends visible.
 2072.1221(881316) Outside, on one tag, semi-mineralised scrap of tabby weave. In end of tag, thread ends,S spun.

Fibre identifications:
H.M.Appleyard FTI.

1802.1186. Silk.
1993.1420. Fibres smooth, fairly regular, ?silk,
but sample too small for cross-section.
933.406. Fine animal fibres, deposits obscuring
surface structure, but general appearance
scale structure wool.
136. 307. Silk, Bombyx mori.
185. Silk.
512. Very brittle deposits, ?animal fibres.
2763.1211. Under low power, fibres were visible inside
metal case (Cu), but no identifiable
185. 168. Badly degraded wool fibres.
509. 24. Fairly smooth fibres, transverse cracks,
sample insufficient; ?vegetable origin.
1015. 189. Silk fibres, cross-sectional appearance
Bombyx mori.
1742.1106. Flax, poor condition.
502. 7. Clearly undyed cotton.

Dye Analysis
Penelope Walton

1015. 189. Core of silver-gilt embroidery thread.
136. 307. Silk core of metal thread.
These samples were exposed to our usual tests for
natural dyes, that is, solvent extraction followed
by absorption spectrometry. Neither sample showed
any trace of dye.