AML Rpt 4792

628

14th-15th Century Textiles from Lurk Lane, Beverley

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Catalogue

T1. Several pieces, largest 2.0 x 0.5cm and 0.5 x 0.5cm, of greyish fawn textile replacement. Fibre not identifiable; weave tabby; 12 x 14 threads per square cm; yarn spun in the Z-direction, 0.4-0.5mm diameter.

T2. On the back of a worked piece of wood (19.0 x 2.8cm) an area approximately 9.0 x 2.5cm of poorly preserved textile. Fibre silk; yarn of ?warp Z-twist, ?weft no twist. The weave is not clear but a diamond pattern is visible, each diamond measuring 1.8 x 1.8cm. The design appears to be carried in the weft, which may indicate a brocaded weave. A row of closely spaced ?copper alloy pins, 9-10 per cm, along the outer edges of the wood, may have pinned the textile in place.

Discussion

Although the fibre of T1 is not identifiable, the weave, yarn-type and general appearance are typical of linen. Linens rarely survive well on archaeological sites, as vegetable fibres decay rapidly in damp conditions.[1] Nevertheless, a few better-preserved examples in tabby weave have been recorded, for example in a c1300 AD burial at St Bee's in Cumbria (9-10Z x 10Z; 9-11Z x 7-9Z)[2], in two 14th-15th century sites in London (20Z x 18Z; 20Z x 20Z; 24Z x 24Z)[3] and in the early 16th century burial of Abbot Dygon in Canterbury (14Z x 11Z).[4]

In the medieval period, linen was regularly used for undergarments, bedlinen, linings (as at Canterbury) and shrouds (as at St Bee's). Some of the finer qualities were imported, but there is nothing exceptional about the Beverley example, which could be a local product. At the time that the finds were laid down, linen-weaving was widespread and linen cloth and raw flax were among the goods most commonly exchanged in the markets of the north-

east[5], while in nearby York, linen weavers were important enough to form, temporarily, their own gild.[6]

The patterned silk, T2, is much more difficult to fit into its historical context. Full-size silks were being imported at this period, from Italy and Spain, but the design of the Beverley piece, with small repeating diamonds, does not immediately bring to mind any of these Mediterranean products. In northern Europe diamond weaves are a common feature of native-made textiles from the Iron Age to the 13th century, but structurally such wool and linen examples are quite different from the Beverley silk and lack its weft-faced appearance.

Perhaps the closest parallels are among the narrow tablet-woven silk braids which are often found in the richer ecclesiastical burials. These are frequently brocaded (usually with gold or silver-gilt thread) in geometric designs such as diamonds, swastikas and saltires. Although none of the distinctive twists of tablet-weaving are visible in the warp of the present example, Elisabeth Crowfoot informs me that its structural appearance resembles that of a brocaded tablet-woven braid from the grave of Abbot Roger II (1252-1272 AD) at St Augustine's, Canterbury.[7]

No selvedges are visible in the Beverley example, but the minimum width of 2.5cm is quite acceptable for a braid: for example tablet woven bands as much as 8.0cm wide were found in the grave of Archbishop de Gray (d.1255) at York Minster.[8] The majority of such braids are brocaded with metal thread, of which there is no sign in the Beverley example, but brocading with coloured silks is also known, for example in the seal-tag attached to an early 15th century document in the Public Record Office.[9]

The craft of tablet-weaving had been practised in England since at least the Anglo-Saxon period. It was originally considered a proper occupation for noble women, but by the medieval period it was largely the province of professional

workers, such as the 'silkwomen' of London.[10] By the 15th century these women are known to have been buying silk yarn and gold thread from Italian merchants and making them into ribbons and laces for retail to wealthy customers.

Whatever the precise nature of the Beverley silk, its presence on the site points to a certain degree of affluence and social status. The garderobe pit in which it was found was associated with the living quarters of the clergy of the nearby Collegiate Church,[11] whose vestments were probably trimmed with similar decorative textiles. However, in this particular instance the silk seems to have been pinned to a slat of wood, perhaps as part of an upholstered piece of furniture.

References

1. P.Walton 'The Textiles from 16-22 Coppergate' The Archaeology of York 17/5 (forthcoming).

2. I am grateful to Jean Glover, Senior Textile Conservation Officer, North Western Museum and Art Gallery Service, for this information.

3. F.M.Pritchard 'Textiles from Recent Excavations in the City of London' Textilsymposium Neumünster, 1982, p207.

4. E.Crowfoot 'Textiles from the Tombs of Abbot Roger II and Abbot Dygon' Ancient Monuments Report No.2793 (unpublished).

5. C.M.Fraser 'The Pattern of Trade in the North-East of England 1265-1350' Norther History 4, p46.

6. D.M.Palliser 'The Trade Gilds of Tudor York' P. Clark and P.Stock Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700, 1972, p92.

7. As note 4.

8. A.S.Henshall 'Five Tablet-woven Seal-tags' Archaeological Journal 121, 1964, pp159, 161.

10. M.K.Dale 'The London Silkwomen of the 15th Century' Economic History Review 4,1932-4, pp324-335.

11. P.Armstrong personal communication, 3.2.86.