

A Danish Early Germanic Iron Age Grave with Tablet Woven Cuffs

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Preface

This article presents exciting new textile information from a Danish Early Germanic Iron Age grave (tab. 1) at Broedbaek, North West Jutland, where tiny little fragments of textiles were found on metal clasps and brooches. Some of the textiles appeared to be made in a so far unknown tablet weaving technique. Similar tablet weaves have been found in an excavation more than a hundred kilometres to the north east, called Sejlflod.

Period	Dating
Early Germanic Iron Age	c. 400–520/40 A.D.
Late Germanic Iron Age	520/40–800 A.D.
Viking Age	800–1050 A.D.

Table 1. Subdivision of the Danish Late Iron Age chronology according to Lund Hansen 1995 and Jørgensen/Jørgensen 1997.

Introduction

Broedbaek is located in North West Jutland near Vinderup. The site was found on a foreland in a stream valley only a few miles from where the stream meets the fjord. Remains of houses dated around year 400 A.D were found along with an iron smelting furnace and several pits with pot-boiler stones. Two inhumation graves and a cremation grave were also found. Settlements and graves dating from the Early Germanic Iron Age are very rarely found together. Furthermore, graves have scarcely any grave goods in this area and at this time.

The textiles in question belong to the cremation grave (Grave 2), but surprisingly the textiles have not been burnt.

The interpretation of the grave is not completely clear, but it seems as if a person was first buried in a coffin and then ashes and grave goods from a second, cremated, person were spread over the coffin. On the same occasion the textiles were placed in a heap at the west end. It is not possible to state whether the graves are contemporary or whether the cremation grave had been placed at a later occasion on top of the coffin.

The cremation grave contained five fragments of cruciform fibula, a piece of a bronze needle, an amber bead, 2 pairs of bronze clasps with small fragments of tablet woven cuffs preserved in the corrosion, two bronze annular brooches with remains of textiles still in place around the pins, an iron knife and a circular iron buckle¹. Judging by the grave goods the cremated person was possibly a female.

Tabby and twill

The textile on the first bronze annular brooch is tabby with a simple selvedge. The tabby is unbalanced with approximately 27 threads in one direction and 10 threads in the other direction. The textile on the other bronze annular brooch is a 2/2 twill; the twill is also rather unbalanced with around 18 threads in one direction and 11 threads in the other. The spinning direction is Z both in warp and weft for both tabby and twill (fig. 1).

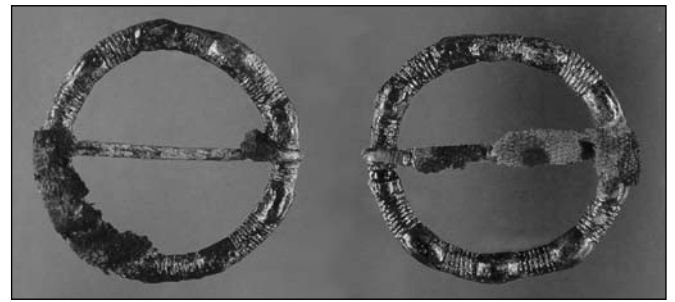


Fig. 1. Tabby and twill textile attached to bronze annular brooches (HOL 20.081 × 338K and 20.081 × 338J) from Broedbaek (Museumstjenesten i Ribe- og Ringkøbing Amter).

These textiles fit well into the general picture of textile technical skills in Early Germanic Iron Age, though tabby are less common than twill weaves².

Tablet woven bands from Broedbaek

The pairs of two clasps (Holstebro Museum 20.081 × 338H and 20.081 × 338I) each consist of two bronze plates on the back forming the hook and eye, and two buttons on the front (fig. 2). In all four cases two buttons were riveted onto the plates fixing a folded border. In the bronze corrosion of the clasps tiny bits of this border were preserved. The fragments are 1–2 cm². In order to study the textile the thread course of the border was drawn as if it had been unfolded and only the places where the threads could be followed with certainty were drawn (fig. 3). On one clasp more layers of textile were seen. The textile is very difficult to analyse as it has disintegrated and has been lacquered in heavy conservation, but on the area between the buttons a relief pattern is seen. On the second clasp more textiles have survived and it is possible to see that the textile is a tablet woven band patterned with individual turns in the middle and broad edges of normal forward tablet weaving. It is not possible to analyse the

band in its full width as it is badly preserved, but by comparing the distances and the preserved edges, it is possible to estimate the appearance of the original band with some certainty.

The warp threads are 2-ply, Z-spun and S-twisted. The thread count is about 15 tablets per cm. The band is approximately 3.2 cm wide and it was woven using 48 tablets.

The band has a very fine relief pattern in the middle using 24 tablets and broad plain forward tablet woven edges each using 12 tablets. The relief pattern is not as densely woven as are the edges. The reason for this is that the pattern section in the middle was made using tablets threaded with only two threads per tablet, whereas the edges was threaded with four threads in each tablet. Where it is possible to see the pattern it consists of diagonal lines of three tablets and between these are smaller lines of three tablets. The pattern stands out with a relief effect and this is obtained by changing the twist of the tablets.

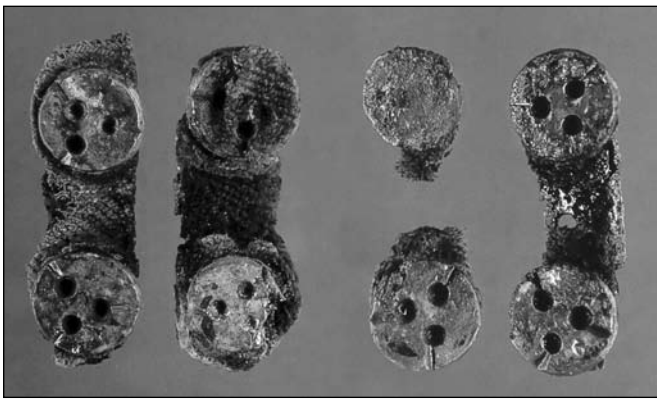


Fig.2. Clasps (HOM 20.081 x 338H and 20.081 x 338I) from Broedbaek Grave 2 (Museumstjenesten i Ribe- og Ringkøbing Amt).

During analysis a slight colour difference was seen between the edge of the border and the relief pattern in the middle. The middle is dark brown and the edges are more light brown. This might indicate that the band was originally dyed and it is possible that the relief pattern has been blue and the edges red. A colour analysis is needed to say anything for certain.

Reconstructing the tablet woven band

Based on the analysis above a reconstruction of the band was made but in fact, so little is left of the original that it is difficult to use words like «copy» or «reconstruction» about this work (fig. 4).

During the experiments different ways of obtaining the pattern were tried and after many trials a method to produce a tablet woven border with the same characteristics as the original was found. The tablets in the pattern section are threaded with two threads

in diagonal holes and the tablets are twisted individually. The pattern is made out of diagonal lines and these lines change regularly following the pattern. Where the lines change direction the tablet changes turning direction and it is rotated around a horizontal axis parallel to the warp.

Similar finds from Denmark

In the search for similar tablet woven bands in Denmark Lise Bender Jørgensens book «Prehistoric Scandinavian Textiles» was studied. At first glance no similar finds had been recorded but on the basis of the catalogue it became clear that the almost contemporary excavation at Sejlflod near Aalborg had yielded finds, which it could be interesting to have a closer look at³. With kind permission from Jens Nielsen and the help of Per Thorling Hadsund (both Aalborg Historic Museum), the textile fragments from Sejlflod were studied. In these graves, too, hooks

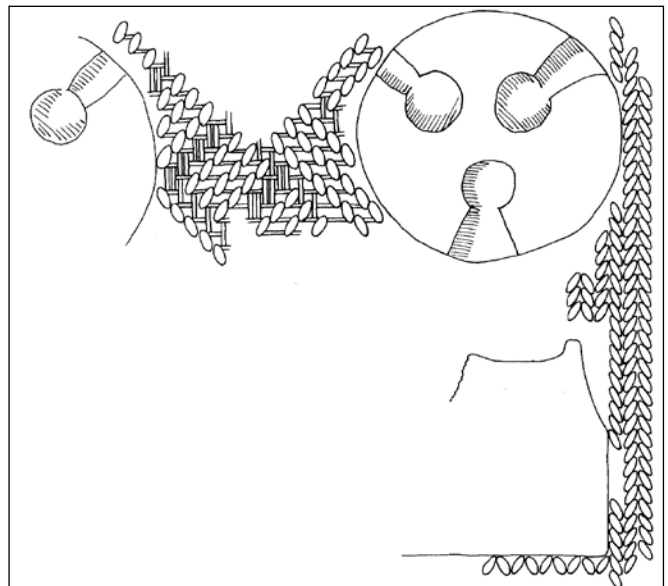


Fig.3. Analytical drawing of the best preserved thread course of the tablet woven band, first clasp from the left in fig. 2. (Lise Røder Knudsen).

and eyes and also clasps very much like the ones from Broedbaek had been found. On a pair of clasps (Aalborg Historic Museum 669 x 3376) the remains of a tablet woven border can be seen and it seems to have the same characteristics as the bands from Broedbaek. Unfortunately the pieces are so disintegrated and heavily lacquered in conservation that it is quite difficult to see more details than indicated on the picture (fig. 5)⁴.

Also a silver hook from Sejlflod (Aalborg Historic Museum 669 x 1168) had the remains of tablet woven band with relief pattern attached to the back. Even though the pattern is not exactly the same, it has many similarities with the Broedbaek sample and

the weaving method seems to be the same (fig. 6). The edges of the band are plain forward tablet weave with four threads in each tablet and the pattern section in the middle is two thread relief pattern tablet weaving⁵.

In fact, the task of publishing the Sejlflod material is in progress, and possibly the tablet weavings are an important link to understanding the correlations between people in Northern Jutland in the Early Germanic Iron Age.

Other tablet woven bands in a comparable technique

In a grave from Timrå, Skyttberg, Medelpad in Sweden a tablet woven band patterned with individual turns has been found⁶. The border has edges made by eight tablets in plain forward tablet weaving each tablet using four threads. The pattern section in the middle is woven with individual turns of tablets threaded with two threads each and a relief pattern is seen. The grave

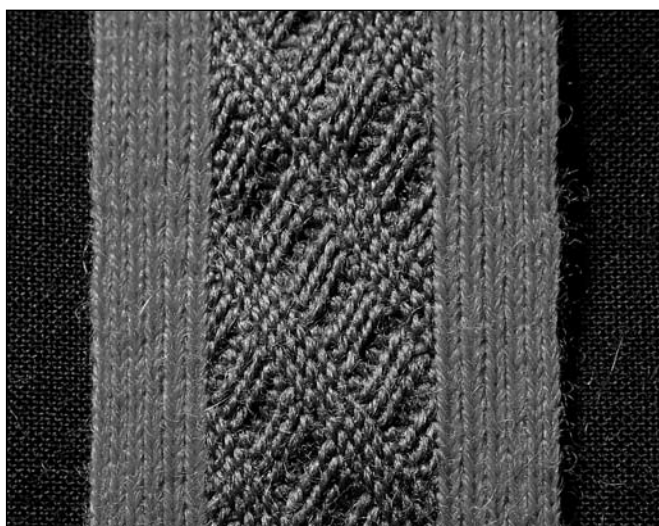


Fig. 4. A modern tablet weave showing the same characteristics as the original from Broedbaek (LRK).

is dated around 500–550 A.D.⁷. In the same publication more tablet woven bands with individual turns are described, but further investigations are needed to say more about the weaving method.

On the island of Gotland in Sweden more tablet weaves with relief patterns have been found, but these examples are dated to the late Viking Age some 600 years later than the sample from Broedbaek. Besides, they are all very narrow (0.6–0.9 mm). Two of these bands come from Lilla Ringome in Alva and Nystugu in Tingstäde. They are woven with one plain forward four thread edge tablet on one side and two plain forward four thread tablets on the other side of the band. The technique is based on individual turning of the tablets in the pattern and only two threads

per tablet and some nine tablets in the pattern section. The pattern shows a winding. From Kopparsvik, Visby also on Gotland in Sweden a similar band was found with only one edge tablet in one side of the band and a relief pattern of V-shapes⁸.

From Krimulda in Latvija, which is not far from the Swedish island Gotland across the Baltic Sea, another example of a tablet woven border with relief pattern sewn onto the selvedge of a 2/2 twill has been found. The dating is 11th–12th century A.D.⁹.

Tablet weaving in the Early Germanic Iron Age

From the Early Germanic Iron Age in Scandinavia several graves containing clasps, hooks and eyes are published. It is not uncommon for textiles to have survived near the metal. The textile is frequently a tablet woven border and the borders of this period are often patterned with a kind of soumak across the tablet border using coloured horsehairs or as in the Broedbaek border they

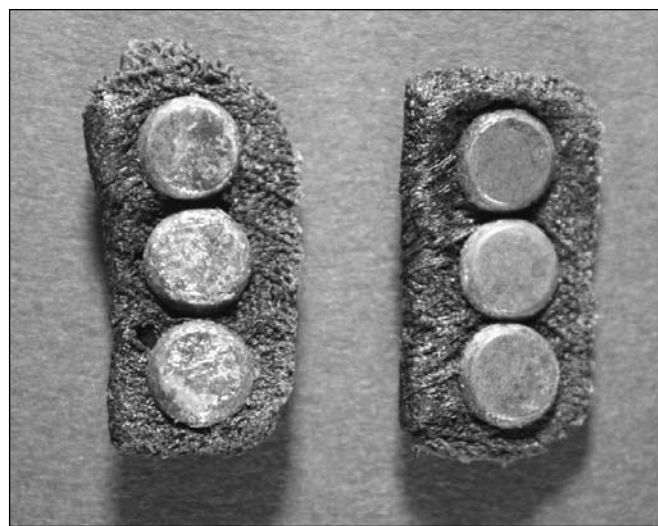


Fig. 5. Clasps from Sejlflod (699 × 3376) with tablet woven bands with relief pattern (Aalborg Historiske Museum).

are patterned using individual turns of the tablets. According to Bender Jørgensens catalogue of prehistoric Scandinavian textiles 15 Danish graves contained tablet weaving from the Early Germanic Iron Age. Of these, two examples were patterned with horsehair and seven with individual turns. The remaining pieces were either too poorly preserved to establish the weaving method or the pattern of the border was not preserved or they were simply made in plain forward tablet weaving. From Norway a larger number of tablet woven borders from the Early Germanic Iron Age and the intermediate period before are registered in the catalogue. Out of 38 graves containing tablet woven borders 14 graves contained tablet woven borders with horsehair patterning and 14 graves contained tablet woven borders patterned with

individual turning of the tablets. Two of the graves contained both horsehair patterned- and patterning with individual turns. From Sweden the catalogue is incomplete and only 12 graves containing tablet weaves from the period have been registered. Of these, four were patterned with individual turns and none with horsehair patterning. From Margareta Nockerts book on the Högom Find and other Migration Period Textiles¹⁰ it is possible to see that many more fragments have been found, but it is not possible to make any statistics about this material as only the most important examples with a similar character to the Högom find are presented.

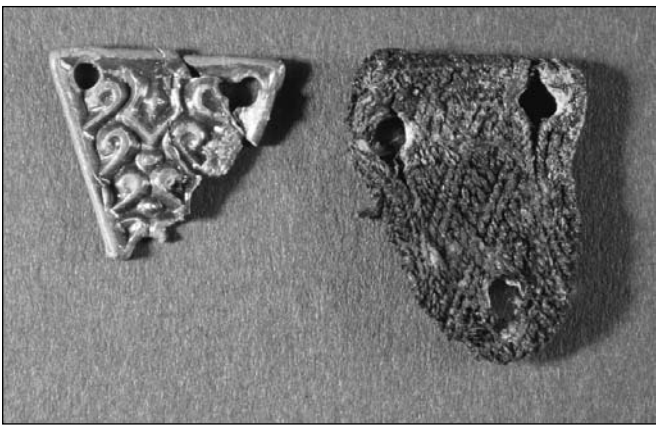


Fig. 6. Hook from Sejlflod (669 × 1168) with remains of tablet woven band with relief pattern (Aalborg Historiske Museum).

From the numbers of finds mentioned above it is possible to see that tablet woven borders patterned with individual turns occur as frequently as borders with horsehair patterning in the registered material from Denmark and Norway.

The pattern woven borders are made in different tablet weaving techniques – the famous pieces from Evebø-Eide, Snartemo V and Øvre Berge (all in Norway) are examples of the different methods of making patterns with different colours using individual turning of the tablets. The examples from Broedbaek and Sejlflod show a presumably single coloured pattern using only two threads in diagonal holes in the pattern section of the band and show a pattern where it is the relief – and presumably not the colours – that make the desired pattern.

The famous and beautiful tablet weaves with coloured horsehair patterning must have been shiny and very colourful, but the weaving method is very, very slow and quite difficult to perform¹¹. One could wonder why the people of the Early Germanic Iron Age used so much effort to produce horsehair bands like this? Nockert has raised the question whether the horsehair technique was the domestic Nordic way of producing textiles, which looked like imported multicoloured silk damasks¹².

The Broedbaek- and Sejlflod tablet woven cuffs with relief pattern in very fine wool show an elaborate weaving technique, but they are quickly produced compared to the horsehair patterned bands. They might have a resemblance to damask weaves and they could be an example of using domestic materials and techniques to produce textiles looking somewhat like foreign damask and silk.

Conclusion

The analyses of the textiles from Broedbaek Grave 2 have shown that at least two different pieces of textile and a tablet woven band had been placed in the grave. Judging by on the presence of the clasps it is possible that the band had been used as a cuff on a garment but unfortunately there are no firm connections between the band and the two other textiles. As the textiles were placed in a heap together with the dress fasteners neither the position of the cuffs nor the use of the garment can be determined. Based on contemporary finds there is a theoretical possibility that the tabby weave had been used as a shift with long sleeves and cuffs at the wrists and the twill weave as a peplos-like dress¹³.

It can be concluded that the relatively anonymous Broedbaek grave contained a person who have had access to exclusive and rare textiles, which are firmly rooted in the Scandinavian textile tradition.

Acknowledgement:

Curator Lis Helles Olesen from Holstebro Museum, Denmark, is the archaeologist responsible for the Broedbaek excavation. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with this find.

Curator Jens Nielsen, Aalborg Historic Museum kindly gave us permission to study the material from Sejlflod and conservator Per Thorling Hadsund assisted and made photos.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Helles Olesen in prep.
² Bender Jørgensen 1986, 59ff.
³ Bender Jørgensen 1986, 205 – 208.
⁴ Nielsen 2000, 91.
⁵ Nielsen 2000, 63.
⁶ Nockert 1991, 42, fig. 55.
⁷ Nockert 1991, 136.
⁸ Nockert/Knudsen 1996, 41–46.
⁹ Zarina 1988, 49, 67.
¹⁰ Nockert 1991.
¹¹ Sundström 1995.
¹² Nockert 1991, 88ff., 103ff.
¹³ Demant 1996.