

A Brief Introduction to Early Saxon England and Brocaded Card Weaving

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Background

The Anglo-Saxon period in England ranges from mid-fifth century to the mid-eleventh century starting when a varied group of tribes from modern day Germany & Denmark migrated from the continent to Britain. Learning about these people is often complex. Although they had a system of writing using runes, they did not appear to use them to keep historical records. We are dependent on the archaeological record and what their neighbors wrote about them to learn what their lives were like.

During the 6th & 7th centuries the Saxons converted from their traditional pagan religion, whose gods included Woden & Thunor (similar to Odin and Thor of the Vikings), to Christianity. With Christianity came written histories, law codes, charters, wills, poetry and a host of other documents that allow us to learn about them from their own words.

Generosity, bravery, and boasting of great deeds are qualities admired in Saxon society. Personal ties to kin and lord were the most important in one's life. A system of wergild gave a worth to a person's life by social class and gender. The murderer and their family would pay this fine to king and injured family if a person was killed. This was ostensibly to prevent blood feuds between families. Smaller fines were applied for lesser offenses.

Much of what we know about the objects early Saxons made and used is based on things that were buried with people in cemeteries. The most elaborate such burial yet found was at Sutton Hoo and included a ship in addition to coins, jewelry, vessels for cooking and eating, and many other treasures. Sometimes burials might contain as little as a few glass beads, or no grave goods that could survive thousands of years in the ground. Leather, wood, and textiles rot pretty easily.

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The textile remains from the Anglo-Saxon era in England are frequently small. They survive because of interaction with a piece of metal they are touching such a brooch or knife. The metal oxidizes and either traps and preserves the fibers or replaces them like a fossil. However, some evidence of textiles has survived because the textile itself is metal. This is the case with some strips of gold which still bear the impressions of the threads they were woven into. So little of the other fibers has been found with these bands that it is hard to say definitely that they were card woven and not a rigid heddle type of band which would have been a simple tabby. However there are several reasons to argue that they were probably done with cards. We have an example from Taplow, Buckinghamshire where enough of the wool ground textile remains to show clearly that it at least was card woven. Also, there would be certain advantages to a card woven band. The method of brocading on a card woven band protects the back side of the gold, so it would receive little wear. Some people's body chemistry "eats" or is irritated by metal and having the layer of fiber would prevent this. Also card weaving is a

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stronger structure, and would hold up better to being used independently rather than as trim on another textile.

Interestingly, in England, the bands with gold found in female graves are typically found at the forehead or at a single wrist. One was found with small gold rings at either end. Adjustable circlets! I have seen it postulated that the band at a single wrist may be part of a padded wristlet. However on attempting a reconstruction of one of the patterns, I was struck by the similarity to the modern "friendship bracelet" as the result was about the same size. Card woven bands even in fine spun silk and gold are certainly sturdy enough to need no backing.

Other Works

Sonja Hawkes and Elizabeth Crowfoot give an impressive analysis of these finds. Much of my work is based on their research. I will focus on the bands found in Kent. Crowfoot gives black and white drawings showing the patterns that she has determined based on the marks on these fine pieces of gold which are often less than a millimeter wide. Carolyn Priest-Dorman has published an article on these bands also based in part on Crowfoot's work to which I am also indebted. Her work discusses the appearance of the types of woven bands with metal worked in and finding modern trims similar in appearance for application to costumes for the reenactor.

Technique

Here I will give an account of how such bands may be easily produced for the card weaver. I will not be giving an explanation of how to do card weaving, but how to incorporate this brocading technique and to illustrate the technique with these Kentish patterns.

Advantages

In my reading and talking to other card weavers, I have often heard complaints about the difficulty of incorporating metallic threads into the weaving. Many available metallic yarns either look too modern or are too fragile to work well as the warp in card weaving. The untwisting and re-twisting and rubbing against the cards is often too much for these beautiful yarns. This technique of brocading incorporates the metal threads as a secondary weft rather than a warp.

Using this technique is also more economical as more of the gold is shown off on top of the weave, rather than hidden inside by the twisting of the warp threads. The weaves typically float over three warps, go under one, and come back up to float for three more. Crowfoot also talks about the likelihood that once the gold was woven in, it was hammered or burnished. This would bring the edges closer together to cover the warp the gold went under, giving an effect more like weaving was covered in a sheet of gold foil with a pattern marked on it. Also, Collingwood describes some card woven bands in the later middle ages where the pattern that will be brocaded over is also threaded into the cards, but in a less expensive or undyed textile. This will be hidden by the brocading, and in the more complex patterns of the later middle ages, would have provided an aid in seeing which warps to pick up to brocade in the pattern.

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Structure

Brocading as a technique which uses two weft threads. The primary one provides structure and is usually very similar to the warp threads. The secondary weft is usually showier and will "float" across several warp threads. In brocading or "overshot" on a rigid heddle loom, a tabby is woven that provides the stable structure and a background surface to show off the secondary brocading weft. Each time the primary weft is thrown across, the secondary weft is also thrown across. However, different treadling is used to pick up the threads to give the brocaded pattern. In narrow woven bands, this picking can be done purely by hand or using a stick to hold the threads up for the secondary weft to be thrown through the shed. In card weaving, this background weave can be made with any simple turning pattern. Although twills have a single weft which may go across several warps as a time, they cannot go over as many warp threads without weakening the structure of the weave. Very long floats may be inclined to snag on sharp objects if worn in a garment.

The secondary weft will float over the top of the warp threads. Unlike when the pattern is threaded into the cards & produced by the turning of the cards, the pattern in brocading is produced by picking threads. In the simplest method, the cards will be threaded all in one color. and can be threaded in any pattern you like. All one direction, alternating S & Z or S on one half and Z on the other half of the pack of cards will all work just fine. If you are incorporating more than one color in the warp, you will probably want to experiment to see how the pattern in the ground will interact with the brocading.

This technique could also be applied to rigid heddle or inkle style bands, but the band will show the brocading weft on the back. In silk or other strong textile this may not be a problem, but if you are using a more fragile yarn, it may wear on the back side of the strip. You will simply treat your warp like it is upper threads of the card weaving I describe below.

If you are working with an odd number of cards, thread them ZSSZSZSZS if you are doing a border of 2 cards on either side where the brocading occurs.

Materials

These bands were made with gold strips in the pagan era or gold strips spun around a core of some other material (probably silk or linen) in the Christian era. They were found over a broad area from Italy to Scandinavia to England. Gold wire flattened in a mill for the pagan era style, or gold "Japan" thread found in embroidery stores for the Christian era style can be used for the secondary warp for brocading. I have seen silk used in later medieval pieces. I hypothesize that one would not perfect one's technique on the most expensive materials available. I did my first in wool.

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Method

1. Turn the cards and lay the primary weft in the shed.
2. Pack it in tight with the beater as normal.
3. In brocading, work only with the threads that are in the top shed at any given time. Treat the threads in the top two holes of each card as a unit.
4. In the pattern shown below, for row 1, lay your brocading thread under the upper threads of cards #1, 2, & 3, over # 4, under #5, 6, &7.
5. When your brocading thread goes "under", it will lie alongside the primary weft in the shed formed between the two top and two bottom holes on each card. When it goes "over", it will lie on top of the weaving as happens in an overshot weave. This will often be called a float.
6. Use the cards to pack the brocading warp in tight. I find this works better than using the beater.
7. Turn the cards and repeat for the next row.

Rows

6 OXOOOXO
5 OXXOXXO
4 OXOOOXO
3 OOOXOOO
2 OOXXXOO
1 OOOXOOO
Tablets 1234567

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I have also included weaving diagrams for some additional patterns. These are all from the same cemetery in south-east England. These could be done on an inkle loom using a pick-up technique as well, or woven into the borders of a larger piece on another type of loom.

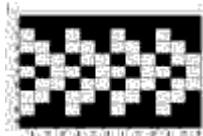


Figure 1

Bifrons, Kent Grave 21, 9 three holed cards, 6th century or a little later

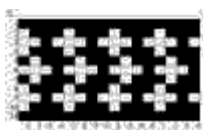


Figure 2

Bifrons, Kent Grave 29, 11 four holed cards, mid 6th century



Figure 3

Bifrons, Kent graves 41, 51, & 64, 6th century

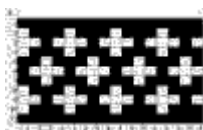


Figure 4

Bifrons, Kent graves 41, 51, & 64, 6th century

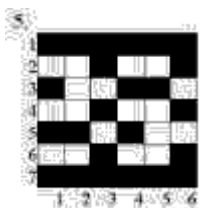


Figure 5

Bifrons, Kent graves 41, 51, & 64, 6th century



Figure 6

Bifrons, Kent graves 41, 51, & 64, 6th century

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