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New finds of Viking Age textiles in Ukraine and Russia

In recent years, in the territory of Eastern Europe, active investigations of Old Russian cemeteries dated to the Viking Age are continuing. During the salvage excavations of sites for new building developments in historical centres of Russian and Ukrainian cities, archaeologists have discovered a new series of chamber graves of the 10th c. AD with numerous important finds. Among the burial goods of these chamber graves were fragments of textiles, tablet-woven bands of silk and silver thread, passanterie and silver thread embroidery from female and male articles of

clothing. At present, these finds have not yet been conserved and are not available to investigators. Thanks to the kind permission of the excavators, however, I was able to see the organic and other objects from these graves. Among them were fragments of various funerary garments. One of the finds will soon be published in *NESAT X* (Zubkova, Orfinskaya and Mikhailov forthcoming). As far as the others are concerned, until the conservation is completed, it is only possible to make preliminary observations.

Finds from the Mikhailovsky Monastery, Kiev, Ukraine

The first find comes from one of the earliest city cemeteries of Kiev. In 1999, in grave 49 near Mikhailovsky Monastery, under the direction of G.Y. Ivakin, a wooden chamber with a rich seated female burial was opened. The burial is dated to the second half of the 10th c. AD (Ivakin 2004; Movtjan 2004). It contained over 70 finds, including a Scandinavian silver fibula of Terslev type. On the skull of the woman, fragments of a tablet-woven band in silk and silver wire were found *in situ*. These fragments are probably remains of a head cover or band. Because of the unfavourable preservation conditions, textiles in this burial were preserved only under the metal objects. For example, to the right of the deceased were parts of a chest with iron fittings. Inside the chest were a pair of iron shears and 27 thin glass elements of various colours. On the shears, a corrosion layer preserved mineralised remains of a fine textile, made of wool or linen (Fig. 1). I believe that, the remains and glass elements belonged to a second set of garments. Analogous situation is observed in the Viking Age cemetery of Hedeby in northern Germany (Hägg 1991, 91–199). To the left of the deceased were silver mounts of a purse, on which the conservators identified remains of leather. Under the fittings and the leather, there was an inner lining made of silk.

Finds from Shestovica cemetery, Chernigov, Ukraine

The second find of garment fragments is connected to the famous Viking Age Shestovica cemetery near Chernigov, Ukraine. In 2005, an excavation under the direction of V.P. Kovalenko opened a new burial chamber dated to the second half of the 10th c. AD. It contained a seated male burial with a sword, scramasax, saddle, spear, chest, horse bit and two horse skeletons (Kovalenko, Osadchii and Sitiy 2007). The burial contained at least five textile fragments and numerous pieces of a band with silver thread (wire with a round section), which belonged to the various items of the burial costume (Mikhailov 2007). In the area of the skull of the deceased, on top of the sheath of the scramasax, two textile fragments were found. The first fragment (1.7 x 1.4 cm) was on top of the ring of the scramasax handle; the second fragment (4 x 1.1 cm) was on the blade, a few centimetres from the handle. Both fragments are completely mineralised: the first in the presence of copper salts from the sheath fittings, the second in the presence of iron salts from the scramasax blade. The first textile fragment



Fig. 1. Shears with mineralised textile remains, Shestovica cemetery, Chernigov, Ukraine (Photo K. Mikhailov).

preserves a portion of a hem. Warp and weft threads of both fragments are z-twisted and have a thread diameter of 0.4–0.5 mm and a thread count of 12/18 threads/cm. It is likely that both fragments were made of wool. Based on their position in the grave, the fragments belong to the same textile.

In the central area of the grave chamber, east of the scramasax, there was a wide block of the band and textile fragments from the garments of the deceased (61 x 48 cm). The band, c. 1 cm wide, is tablet-woven of silk and silver thread consisting of drawn silver wire (Figs. 2 and 3). In one part of the block, it was possible to follow the orientation of the layers from top to bottom: wood, fur, leather, textile (wool), and corroded remains of an iron object. The textile fragment in the eastern part of the block is a tabby with a thread count of 10/18 threads/cm, probably wool. The tablet-woven band had a V-shaped position in the grave, perpendicular to the sword, with one part 50 cm long, a second 20 cm long and a third part 10 cm long. Its position suggests that it formed the edging of a wool mantle.

Two fragments of the band with a piece of wool fabric (3.2x0.8 and 4.6x1.3 cm, band width c. 1.3 cm) were found in the area of the head of the deceased, who was buried with a hat with a silver top. All these fragments are remains of the outer wear of the deceased. Three fragments of tablet-woven band and silver wire from the band (2 x 0.86, 4.4 x 0.7, 3.1x1, 2.5 x 0.7 cm) were found outside the area of the body, under the saddle located near the wall of the chamber. They probably belong to the second set of garments, which was placed in the grave together with the other burial goods, separately from the deceased. Based on its size, the band decorated the collar of the sleeves of outer wear, possibly a tunic.

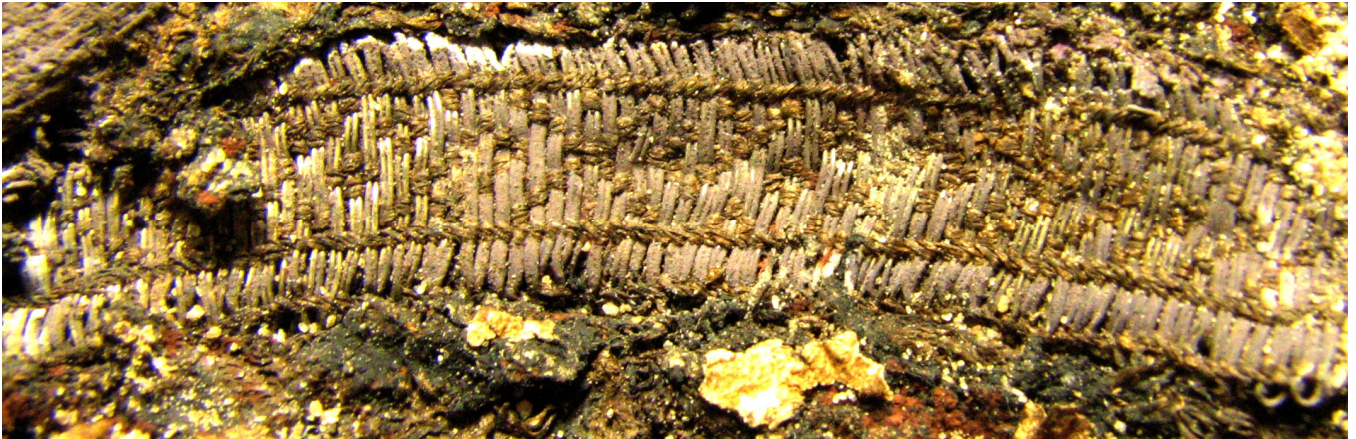


Fig. 2. Tablet-woven band from the grave chamber, Shestovica cemetery, Chernigov, Ukraine (Photo K. Mikhailov).

Based on the position and the character of the finds, it is possible to document two sets of male clothing in the grave. The position of the hat with the silver top and the band fragments suggests that costume parts shifted their position under the hat and the scramasax in the process of body decomposition. The position of garment parts may be explained by a seated or half-seated position of the deceased. The position of the



Fig. 3. Tablet-woven band from the grave chamber Shestovica cemetery, Chernigov, Ukraine (Photo K. Mikhailov).

tablet-woven band on the body indicates that it decorated a mantle, which was on the body. Separate concentrations of fur in the soil block suggest that the lining of the garment was made of some type of animal's fur, while the mantle itself was of densely-woven wool. The closest comparisons to the costume decorated with the tablet-woven band are found in Denmark and Sweden. The largest number of burials with

clothing decorated with gold and silver bands (95 finds) is known from Birka (Geijer 1938). Comparisons to such a mantle with tablet-woven edging can also be found in 10th c. AD burials of Hedeby. In contrast to the Shestovica find, in Hedeby the mantles were found in female burial chambers (nos. 188/1960, 2/1963, 5/1964) of the cemetery, located to the south of the city rampart. In two of them, the band length was 63-80 cm, with a width 1.2 cm and thread diameter 0.2-0.8 mm (Hägg 1991, 244-247, Fig. 123). A similar long mantle edged with a silver band was found in the Danish burial at Hørning, dated to the end of the 10th c. AD (Voss 1991, 189-203).

Finds from Pskov, Russia

A new cemetery of Viking Age was discovered by the Russian archaeologists in the centre of Pskov. During 2002-2008, seven chamber graves were investigated, containing burials of men and women. In most of them, remains of a second set of garments were documented next to the body of the deceased (Jakovleva 2004a-c; 2008). They were made of linen, wool, silk and tablet-woven bands with silver thread. In several cases, it was possible to identify the cut of the garments and the colour of the textiles. The chambers also contained furnishings and large objects of organic material. The Pskov archaeologists plan a detailed publication of all the burials in the near future.

It is hoped that future finds of textiles and costumes in Eastern Europe will allow scholars to widen their understanding of Viking Age costume, which at the moment is known mainly from the finds of Birka in Sweden and Hedeby in North Germany.

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