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A 16th Century Silk Fabric Fragment from Northern Finland

A small piece of silk was found in an archaeological excavation at a farm site in Liminka, northern Finland (Fig. 1). Only rarely textiles are encountered in archaeological excavations on settlement sites in northern Finland, and this is the first piece of silk found to date. In the 16th century, Liminka was a relatively densely populated village with some 80 farms situated on the mouth of the River Liminganjoki on the shore of the Liminka Bay (Luukko 1954, 338–339). The excavation was conducted on a 16th century farm site on the bank of the River Liminganjoki. During the excavation, cultural layers associated with a wood-encased stone foundation of a hearth were investigated. The hearth had been a part of a building measuring *ca.* 3 x 6 m or more. The finds included the silk fragment, animal bones and a few pieces of red earthenware; they originate from the earth mixed with the hearth stones.

A small piece of silk fabric gives us a glimpse of textiles used by the dwellers at Liminka in the 16th century. This time period is considered as the late Middle Age in Finland. During this time the settlements were small and agricultural in nature. Only in the following century the Swedish Crown established towns in Northern Ostrobothnia. The towns, such as Oulu (established in 1605), soon became local centres of trade and inhabitants of the neighbouring areas moved into those. Previously Oulu had been a part of the parish of Liminka. Liminka is situated less than 30 kilometers from Oulu and in the 17th century Oulu had gained the position Liminka had in the preceding century.

This particular fragment consists of fine silk threads going back and forth in one system only, and at the first sight there does not seem to be any regularity. When looked at closer, it appears that silk threads once used to form one set of a woven textile, and the other system has disintegrated. It was probably of plant fibre (flax?), which survives poorly in Finnish acidic soil. For example in the church yard of the Oulu Cathedral only one piece of linen textile has survived. The others are of silk or wool. Silk threads have been loosely twisted, and for the most part it is not possible to differentiate them from the bunch of fibres. The piece of textile is partly encrusted with sand, making technical analysis difficult. Thus, it is difficult to calculate the thread density, but the general appearance is that it has not been very dense (perhaps around 14 to 16 threads/cm) with respect to the fibre (*ca.* 0.05 mm) and thread (*ca.* 0.2 mm) thickness.

Using linen or wool along with silk makes the fabric less expensive (Rothstein 2003, 528), but still the textile was partially made of silk. The textile fragment has two cut edges forming a triangle. It is quite difficult to say what kind of textile it belonged to. It is also possible that it was a refuse piece from a fabric that was cut and sewn into a cloth. However, everything was most likely recycled whenever possible. Textile's largest dimensions are 6.2 x 5.4 cm, which means that it is quite small to be used for any other purpose than decoration. Perhaps it was meant to be a leaf or other small part of a headdress.

Some pieces of silk fabric have survived in burial



Fig. 1.

contexts in Oulu which date to the 17th and 18th centuries. These burials have been excavated in the church yard of the modern Oulu Cathedral (built in 1711–1797, largely renovated after the fire of 1822), where the previous church (built in early 1610's) made of wooden logs was located. Some of the silk fragments have been found in chamber burials that belonged to the families of higher social rank within the town. In single coffin burials silk is often used in caps; flowers and leaves in headdresses made of bronze; belts around the waists of children; socks; and once in a separate man's collar. Here, silk is definitely a marker of high social status. Most of the burials have no other remains than needles that were used to attach the funeral dress, fragments of woolen textiles or iron nails from the coffin. Most of the graves have no other remains than nails. Textiles along with other small items that were used to attach different costume parts, such as buttons or fasteners, play a significant part in the display of the social identities of the deceased in the grave yard.

Such conclusions are more difficult to be made based on the settlement site materials. But the fragment of silk textile gives us here an opportunity to reflect

upon the relationship of social identity and costume in the 16th-century Liminka. Silk was an expensive import material in the 16th-century Finland, and it was certainly not available for everyone (Pylkkänen 1956, 72–86). Riitta Pylkkänen (1956, 72–86) estimates that only small quantities of silk fabrics were imported to Finland in the 16th and 17th centuries and that most of these fabrics were ordered for the needs of the court and the aristocracy. Most of the silks were imported from the European Hansa towns to the towns of Turku and Viipuri in Southern Finland. Carelian tradesmen also imported some silk fabrics to northern Finland from the east. The latter silk imports may have been Persian in origin (Pylkkänen 1956, 76). The aristocracy and burghers used silk in many of their clothes, for instance dresses, vests and socks (Pylkkänen 1956). It is also known that the wealthy farmer-tradesmen of Ostrobothnia (where Liminka is located) dressed handsomely in the manner of the aristocracy (Pylkkänen 1956, 358), perhaps using silk as well. Silk was also used in folk costume, especially for scarves, bonnets, caps and various decorations (Lehtinen and Sihvo 1984).



The piece of silk fabric found at the Liminka farm may have been a part of a wealthy farmer's or his wife's costume, but it is not necessarily linked to high status as we know that silk was used for decorating and accessorizing the folk costume as well. Once out of fashion, silk fabrics might have been given or sold to poorer people, or made into children's clothing (Rothstein 2003, 529). The small fragment of silk fabric from Liminka may have been a re-used piece of a worn-down garment, or a refuse piece used for decorating the costume. Re-using and recycling materials was a common practice in northern Finland at that time, not necessarily connected to poverty or low status but practiced by everybody (Nurmi 2011).

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