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# The development of motif and technique in early medieval north European tablet weaving

## Introduction

The doctoral thesis reported here is being undertaken at the Department of Scandinavian Studies at University College London. Owing to the interdisciplinary nature of the research, the supervisory team is based across two institutions. The author's principal supervisor is Haki Antonsson, based at University College London, a prolific scholar in the fields of Old Norse literature and hagiography. In addition, he convenes modules on Viking Age material culture in Scandinavia, during which the author has contributed by teaching on Viking Age textiles. The author's second supervisor is Jane Hawkes of the University of York. Hawkes specialises in Anglo-Saxon art, language, culture, and history. Her academic interests include textiles and textile iconography, and she regularly supervises postgraduate students working on textile-focused research.

During their master's degree at University College London, the author specialised in early medieval, Anglo-Saxon, and Viking Age studies. An enduring interest in the literary and material cultures of these periods ultimately inspired a deeper engagement with early medieval scholarship. It was also during this time that the author became involved in historical reenactment, focusing on the period 400 to 1000 CE. A key aspect of this activity was the study of textiles and clothing from the era, a topic that soon became the central focus of the author's academic interests.

Since then, the author has acquired practical experience in textile craft, practised tablet weaving since 2019 and has experimented with various techniques associated with narrow wares. Living history remains a

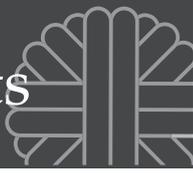
particular passion, and the author has participated in practical demonstrations at museums across England, Scandinavia, and Germany. In addition, they are part of the EXARC management team - an organisation that promotes the role of practical craft in archaeological research - encouraging contributions from both academic and non-academic practitioners engaged in experimental work. Throughout this project, the author has maintained a strong awareness of the practical dimensions that underpin textile production and craft.

Tablet weaving has been addressed in scholarly literature for more than a century. However, in comparison to the study of metalwork, woodwork, weaponry, bone artefacts, and other personal items, textile archaeology remains a relatively recent subfield within archaeology (for example, Øye 2022, 1). As such, it offers significant potential for further scholarly exploration, welcoming both fresh academic perspectives and experimental approaches.

Textiles may be analysed through a range of methodologies, some of which are more robust than others. These include approaches grounded in material culture studies (Lund and Semple 2021, 1-5), the examination of established trade routes, literary analysis, and comparative studies between textiles and other artefact types, such as metalwork, furniture, bone items, and manuscript art (fig. 1). The integration of these methods offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of the archaeological record.

## Methodology

Throughout the 20th century, the question of the origin of objects became central to the study of archaeological



finds, historic cultures, and past peoples. This trend can be partly attributed to the National Romantic movements that swept across Europe in the late 19th century, during which many countries turned to their historical pasts in order to construct national identities amidst the transformations of the industrial revolution (for example, Leerssen 2013, 9–25). A desire to categorise cultural identities through objects, motifs, buildings, monuments, and artefacts gained considerable prominence. This project interrogates the constructed dichotomies between Germanic/Scandinavian/pagan and central European/eastern/Christian identities.

The classification of Germanic and Scandinavian identities has long been contested, not least because of notable similarities in artistic styles. During the fifth and sixth centuries CE, various forms of metalwork, artwork, clothing, and textiles circulated and were shared across northern Germany, England, and Scandinavia. The prevailing consensus within the scholarly literature is that many such artefacts were produced locally or regionally. Several studies, for instance, assert that sixth-century Scandinavian

textiles were woven in the Scandinavian region—such as the tablet-woven bands from Snartemo and Högom (for example, Hougen 1935; Nockert 1991). This project revisits this assumption by considering the existence of broader international and interregional networks of trade and migration.

Current academic publications often present a stark contrast between the Late Roman Central European world and the Scandinavian regions. The former is depicted as a thriving centre of textile trade, characterised by the export and import of silks, linens, tapestries, and fine garments across the Roman Empire (for example, Gleba and Pásztkai-Szeőke 2013). The latter is typically represented as comprising small-scale, localised production units that occasionally produced high-quality textiles. This binary construction reinforces the notion of early medieval Scandinavia as underdeveloped or culturally stagnant, trapped within the so-called “Dark Ages”. This project challenges such reductive interpretations, arguing instead that the tablet-woven bands of fifth-century Scandinavia offer evidence of dynamic cross- and trans-cultural exchange.

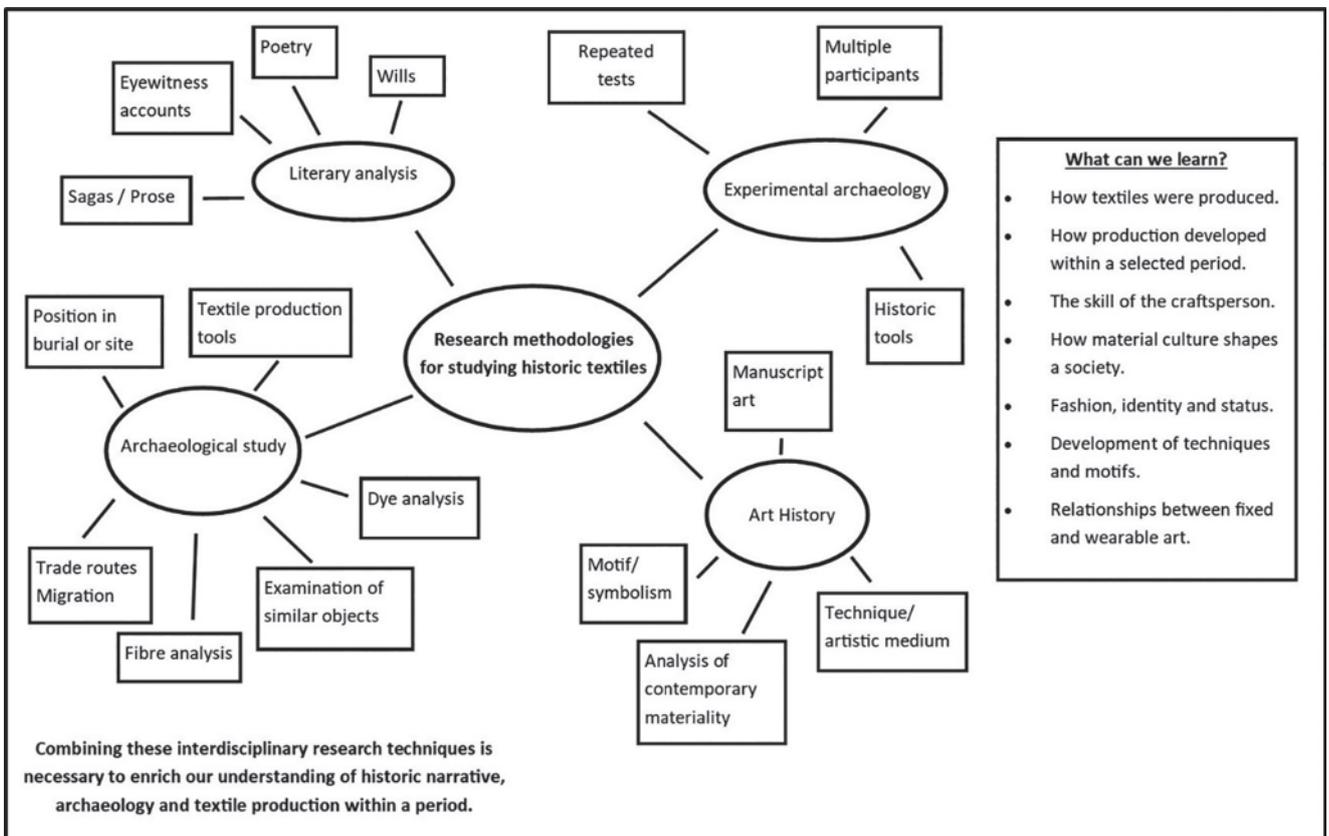


Fig. 1: Examples of the principal textile research methodologies (Image: Georgia Gould)

Tablet-woven textiles are products of manufacture; their creation is determined by specific craft technologies. Taking wool as an example: the process begins with the rearing of sheep, followed by the shearing of their wool, which must then be treated, washed, and combed using specialised tools. Only after this preparation can spinning commence. Using a spindle and distaff, the craftsperson invests many hours transforming raw fleece into fine, workable yarn. At this stage, the yarn may be dyed—either before or after spinning, depending on the desired vibrancy of colour. Once spun and dyed, the yarn must be wound, and a warp prepared. Depending on the intended size of the textile, this stage alone may take several days. A weft yarn must also be prepared before the labour-intensive weaving process can begin. Textile production is, therefore, a protracted and skilled endeavour, often involving the work of multiple individuals (Walton Rogers 2007, 4–91).

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which evolved from post-processual archaeology, emphasises the role of human agency in the creation of artefacts, artworks, and objects. However, it has been criticised for overlooking the agency of the artefacts and materials themselves. For example, when viewing a painting by a renowned artist such as Leonardo da Vinci, viewers may experience emotions such as awe or inspiration. These responses are elicited not solely by the artist's skill but by the material object—the painted canvas—which acts upon the observer. The painting is the result of a complex interplay of backing material, pigments, brushwork, and time. Agency, therefore, does not reside solely with the artist or the makers of the canvas and paint, but also with the object itself, which shapes its reception. This concept of object agency can be extended to archaeology and artefact studies, prompting scholars to acknowledge that even the smallest textile fragment carries with it a rich history of production, use, and interaction. This perspective reshapes the ways in which archaeologists and art historians engage with material culture.

In addition, it is possible to appreciate the interrelationship between textile artefacts and other objects involved in their creation. In the case of wool textile production, the relationship between the human and the raw material is far from linear. The tools employed in textile production—such as wool combs, typically made of wood and iron—are themselves the products of skilled craftspeople, including woodworkers and metalworkers. These tools are subsequently traded or passed on to others involved in textile preparation. Even the shears used in the initial shearing process were forged by



Fig. 2: Detail of tablet-woven band from Oseberg, Historical Museum, Oslo, , Norway, inventory number: 12L1B2 (Image: Georgia Gould)

metalworkers. Each tool is itself the result of a prior object and process, forming a complex network of relationships: human–object–object–product–object–human. Recognising this intricate web of interactions allows for the identification of local and regional trade networks.

Through the examination of selected tablet-woven bands, this project considers the agency of all constituent parts, tracing their lifecycle from production to their eventual inclusion in grave assemblages. This approach aligns with the principles of object biography, is an archaeo-anthropological method which builds on the theory of *chaîne opératoire*. It establishes a “life cycle” of an artefact, charting its course from “birth” to “death” (Joy 2009, 543). Object biography is a tentative analysis of how an artefact came to be, from its conception in the minds of its creator/s to its function and potential burial or destruction. Whilst this methodology has its flaws as both purely theoretical and in also appreciating that one object can have more than one “life”, there is a benefit to viewing an artefact as more than just an old object. By examining its object biography, it is possible to bring a “silent” object and “back to life” – a tool which is useful in the curation of artefacts in museum and heritage contexts.

Joy uses the example of the bronze Portesham mirror, an Anglo-Celtic artefact dated to the first century CE. Using the technical processes of manufacturing the mirror, she suggests how the mirror was “born”, describing the extensive metalworking which



Fig. 3: Textile tools from Oseberg, Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway (Image: Georgia Gould)

contributed to its creation, as well as the number of craftsmen who were involved. Furthermore, Joy examines the wear-and-tear on the mirror, suggesting the possible function of the mirror, how it was used and by whom. She studies the position in the burial, what this might signify both in its life and in its “death”, as well as providing a consideration of its agency on the owner and on those who discovered it. Joy postulates how it would have appeared in its heyday, whilst still in use (*ibid.*, 546). This life cycle brings an anthropological element into the theory; it establishes further networks of trade and craftsmen. In addition, providing information in this context allows both academics and laymen to engage with the history of an object beyond a solely archaeological study of an artefact.

This can be demonstrated by analysing the object biography of the silk and linen bands from Oseberg, such as the narrow band on the fragment 12L1B2 (fig. 2). Even within this one narrow band, just 6 mm at the widest, the “birth” of the linen and silk yarn of the band will have been very different. The silkworms were reared in the near or far east, the silk threads then manufactured and reeled using a myriad of tools of various materials. Then, it would be transported across continents, possibly traded, dyed, worked and reworked. The linen’s journey may have been shorter, beginning its life as raw flax, before being harvested, dried, worked and transformed into spun thread. Eventually, these two yarn bundles met – either on

the Oseberg farm or elsewhere – and were once again worked with tablets and tools to become a fine textile border (fig. 3). Even as one of the smallest tablet-woven bands in the collection, its creation was a long process, with networks of actors which travelled across the world.

Building upon the notion of “bringing objects to life”, it is necessary to incorporate the concept of sensory engagement into the analysis of textiles. Human beings navigate their environment through a complex interplay of sensory experiences—textures, sounds, sights, tastes, and scents—many of which are processed unconsciously. These sensory inputs profoundly shape our perception of the world, our interactions with others, and the ways in which we engage with our surroundings. Even in contemporary analyses of artefacts, the senses remain central. For example, fibre structures are frequently examined visually and categorised using descriptors such as “hairy”, “medium hairy”, or “fine”—terms which implicitly reference the tactile qualities of the textiles (Harris 2019, 210). However, textile artefacts are often poorly preserved, having undergone significant distortion, degradation, and discolouration during their long interment. As a result, conventional archaeological methods can offer only a partial reconstruction of their original form and function. Therefore, object biography and sensory archaeology can be employed together to animate these objects. It must be acknowledged that any sensory interpretation is inevitably shaped by

modern contexts and contemporary frameworks of meaning. However, examining how these artefacts interacted with their original sensory environments can enhance our understanding of both the objects themselves and the lived experiences of historical periods. This approach is particularly valuable in the case of fragmentary or poorly preserved textiles, whose material histories risk being lost without such interpretative frameworks.

The second branch of this anthropological study of the artefacts and their agency considers the “bewilderment principle” and *varietas*. These theoretical frameworks are new in the study of artefacts, but relevant literature has been published by Mary Carruthers (2013) and recently Matthias Friedrich (2023). To reiterate the analogy of studying a painting by Leonardo da Vinci in an art museum and the agencies involved, the painting acts upon the viewer in various ways, although this may vary from person to person. An Italian scholar of the renaissance might recognise some of the finer nuances of the piece, perhaps the brilliant mind of the artist, or the background of the time in which he lived. A layperson may appreciate how the Mona Lisa’s gaze follows them. Perhaps the viewer is not interested in

art at all, passing by the piece with only a cursory glance. The same object, art piece, or artefact can influence different people/recipients in different ways. This further applies to textiles, particularly tablet-woven bands, especially those that incorporate motifs or functional elements; for example, a fifth-century animal motif (fig. 4) may initially appear “Germanic” to an archaeologist, especially when compared with contemporaneous material. However, zoomorphic motifs were also prevalent in Roman dress, and thus a Roman viewer might interpret such imagery as indicative of Roman artistic influence. Similarly, a Sasanian observer might discern stylistic parallels with silk bestiary motifs from their own cultural repertoire. The weaver, meanwhile, may have been working with a particular vision – either one communicated by the commissioner or owner of the textile, or one shaped by their own cultural background and lived experience.

#### Findings

Although the project is ongoing, there are some preliminary findings from the study of luxury tablet-woven bands. A secondary framework, which will be outlined fully in the thesis, has been developed



Fig. 4: The wide band from Snartemo grave II, Historical Museum, Oslo, Norway (Image: Georgia Gould)

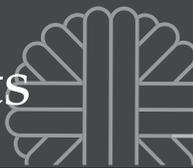


Fig. 5: Reconstructed garments based on the Bjerringhøj and Hvilehøj finds on display at the National Museum of Denmark (Image: Georgia Gould)

to evaluate whether a textile may be classified as luxurious within an early medieval context. This framework is linked to the main framework for textile analysis. Application of these frameworks support the hypothesis that the weaving techniques employed in the production of luxury tablet-woven bands evolved alongside the increased use of certain materials such as silk and metal. One notable development is the growing prevalence of brocading techniques between late 500 and 1100 CE, marked by the introduction of metal-brocaded tablet-woven bands into northern Europe, such as those found in late sixth-century Kent (Crowfoot and Chadwick Hawkes 1967, 50). This observation must be qualified by the recognition that metal-brocaded bands possess a higher likelihood of partial preservation compared to those composed solely of organic materials.

Some motifs remain ubiquitous in tablet-woven textiles from the fifth to the 11th centuries. For example, the swastika motif is present in the wide tablet-woven bands from sixth-century Snartemo V and Helgeland, Norway, as well as in the tablet-woven cuffs from tenth-century Bjerringhøj, Denmark (Hougen 1935; Mannering and Rimstad 2023). The cultural significance of this motif is further corroborated by its recurrence in contemporary jewellery and furnishings. However, a discernible shift in animal motifs is evident between the Migration Period and the Viking Age. The ambiguous yet full-body depiction of animal figures woven in 3/1 broken twill structure and soumak during the fifth and sixth centuries appears to develop into

similarly ambiguous yet partially formed faces and geometric designs by the tenth century, as exemplified by finds from Dublin and Birka. Complete animal motifs are present in Viking Age textiles, but there is a noticeable stylistic trend that may be attributed to changing weaving techniques.

### Discussion

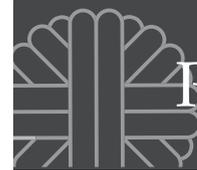
While it is possible to examine the potential reasons behind the selection of specific motifs, it is equally valuable to consider the agency of both the weaver and the viewer or owner of the textile. These textiles existed as lived objects – worn garments, wall hangings, furnishings, and other accessories – that actively engaged with people and their environments. They functioned as sensory artefacts, mediating visual, tactile, and even auditory experiences, thereby shaping the world in which they circulated.

This perspective offers a richer understanding of these artefacts and deepens the narrative surrounding their production, use, and trade throughout the period. By drawing these threads together, experimental archaeology can assist in reconstructing the archaeological processes, networks of production, and sensory dimensions of textile use and function in the past. A pertinent example is the recently completed *Fashioning the Viking Age* project (fig. 5), which this project will draw upon in its own reconstructions of relevant tablet-woven bands (Mannering and Rimstad 2023; Strand and Demant 2023).

### Conclusion

This project introduces a new multidisciplinary methodology for the analysis of early medieval textiles, with a particular focus on tablet-woven bands. It offers a renewed and integrative approach that synthesises methodologies from archaeology, art history, and anthropology to examine both the motifs and techniques employed in these textiles. By doing so, the project seeks to illuminate the broader cultural significance of tablet-woven bands, exploring their roles in trade, migration, and the expression of social status within early medieval material culture.

This methodological framework is designed to have wide-ranging applications. It may be employed not only in academic research but also in curatorial practice, offering museum and heritage professionals a richer interpretative lens through which to present textile artefacts to the public. By foregrounding the social, technical, and symbolic dimensions of textile production and use, the approach facilitates more nuanced and engaging displays, contributing to both scholarly discourse and public understanding. The



project is scheduled for completion between late 2025 and early 2026, with the intention of disseminating its findings through academic publications, conference presentations, and potential collaborations with heritage institutions.

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