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Female dress in the Late Viking Age

Introduction

The interest in the Viking Age (circa 800 to 1050 CE) is immense today and the demand for knowledge of clothing from the period seems to be ever growing. In the Early Viking Age, the women in Scandinavia wore dresses attached to oval brooches, however in the later part of the period these brooches suddenly disappear in the archaeological material, meaning that a new dress type must have been used. Why this change happened and how the new style looked are central questions in the project *Female Dress in the Late Viking Age*, based at the National Museum of Denmark. The duration of the project is ten months and it is funded by the Ministry of Culture, Denmark. The principal investigator is Charlotte Rimstad with Ulla Mannering as a close collaborator.

The grave from Hørning Church

In the Late Germanic Iron Age there was a shift from wearing smaller fibulae on the shoulder to wearing oval brooches further down on the chest (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 1997, 59). Knowledge about the well-known suspended, or apron dress as it is often called, is based on finds of these oval brooches and textiles from graves (Hägg 1974; Bau 1981; Lønborg 1993; 1999). The brooches often contain straps that held the dress together, but whether it was actually a dress with suspenders or perhaps just a development of the Iron Age peplos dress still remains to be investigated. Regardless of the dress type, the oval brooches suddenly disappear in the Danish grave contexts of the Late Viking Age, meaning that women were wearing different styles from then on. The project *Female Dress in the Late Viking Age* will thus focus on the following research questions:

- What did the female dress look like in the Late Viking Age?
- Why was there a change in the way dress was constructed?
- Which decorative elements were part of the elite female outfit?
- What did the female dress look like in the rest of Europe and how were the garments related?

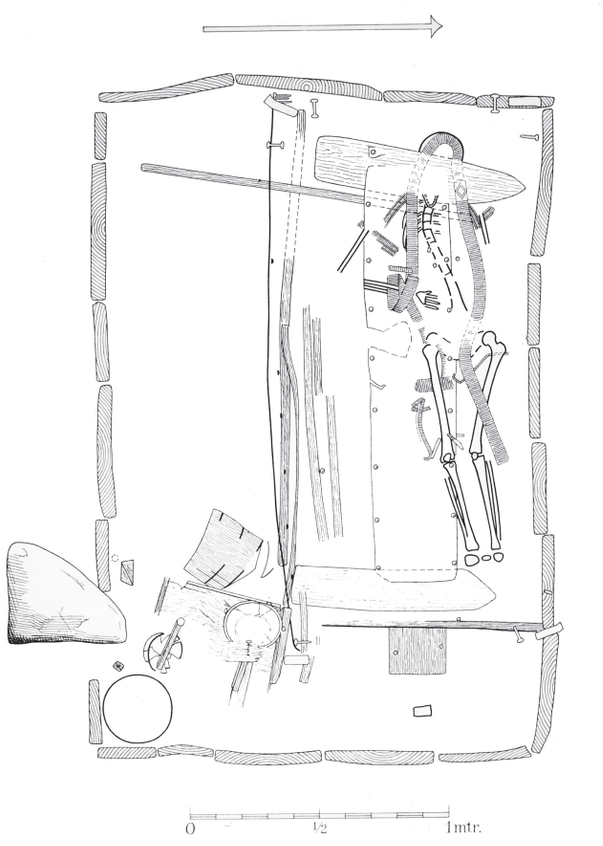

Fig. 1: Overview of grave A from Hørning Church (Illustration after Krogh and Voss 1961, 25)

Fig. 2: Fragment of a tabby-woven wool textile next to a tablet-woven band from grave A. (Photo: Charlotte Rimstad)

In order to shed light on the new type of dress, several Danish high-status female graves will be studied. The project takes its starting point in grave A from Hørning Church, near Randers in Jutland. This grave was excavated in 1960 during a renovation of the church floor and while the standing church was elevated in the 1100s, the excavation found traces of an older wooden stave church beneath the floor (Krogh and Voss 1961; Voss 1991). At the centre of the church, a female chamber grave was found, dated to around 1000 CE (fig. 1). The stratigraphy showed that the female had at first been buried beneath a turf mound, which had later been removed for the wooden church to be built on top of her grave. The woman must have been of great importance, and the building of the church seems to have included her in the transition from Norse religion to Christianity.

The woman had been buried in a wagon bed and her bones were poorly preserved, with only a few long bones and the lower jaw present. The grave also contained other interesting items, such as a small table with a bronze bowl on it, probably a small washing table, as well as a wooden bucket, a ceramic vessel, two whetstones and five beads. Despite the poor preservation of the woman herself, it was clear that she had been wearing an outfit with at least five brocaded tablet-woven bands of silk and silver (fig. 2). The warp threads are of silk as well as a now disintegrated plant fibre, probably flax (Hedeager Krag and Ræder Knudsen 1999). The weft threads are of silver, sometimes with the silk warp being pulled forward on top of the silver thread, creating geometrical patterns. The smallest band is merely 0.8 cm wide, whereas the largest band was originally about 5 cm wide and 2.5 metres long. It was observed going from the woman's forehead, along the shoulders and down to the legs, as if it had adorned a veil. The other bands were narrower and had clearly been placed on the sleeves elsewhere on the woman's outfit. There were also remains of wool textiles, such as a gauze tabby weave connecting to some of the tablet-woven bands as well as a fine 2/1 wool twill. The project will carry out new analyses of the textiles, especially of the tablet-woven bands and their contexts, conducted by weaver Marie Wallenberg. Remnants of fur were found underneath some of the fragments and species identification analyses will be done in collaboration with the project *Imported fur in Viking Age Denmark and its importance as visual marker*, led by Luise Ørsted Scharff Brandt (see project description in this volume). Moreover, dye and fibre analyses as well as radiocarbon dating will be included (Vanden Berghe et al. 2023; Skals et al. 2024). The dye analyses will be performed in collaboration with the *Textile Colours of the Viking Age* project, led by Ulla Mannering (see project description in this volume).

Comparative material

The grave from Hørning Church will be compared to other similar graves containing these elaborate bands from the same area. One example is the Hvilehøj grave, also near Randers, dated to the late tenth century, which had a tablet-woven band of blue silk threads, silver and gold and several other silk bands attached to a fur garment (Mannering and Rimstad 2023a). Similarly, the female graves from Fløjstrup, Fyrkat grave 4, and Fårup contain similar delicate bands, even if also poorly preserved. The Fløjstrup grave, dated to the ninth century contained remnants of a small, blue band of silk samite and is the oldest find of silk in Denmark (Rimstad et al. 2024). From the Fyrkat grave, dated to the tenth century, the famous "vølve" grave, a whole block is preserved, still with the lower jaw in situ. The X-ray shows how the tablet-woven band was placed in the neck region, perhaps edging a neck opening (Mannering and Rimstad 2023b). The Fårup grave, similarly from the tenth century, contained a band found to the right of the buried woman (Brøndsted 1936, 107–108).

All these finds suggest that there was a female elite in the area of mid-Jutland in the late ninth and tenth century, all displaying elaborate materials of silk, gold,

silver and expensive dyes. Such tablet-woven bands with precious metals are not found in Denmark before this era, so why do they suddenly appear? In the years 800–1200, Byzantine fashion influenced all of Europe and it is an obvious thought that it also reached the outskirts of the continent. It has been suggested that this type of dress was a certain Christian fashion, which came to Denmark in these first years of Christianity (Hägg 1991; Hedeager Krag 2003). However, the tablet-woven bands are part of a very Nordic tradition, making it likely that only the materials and perhaps the very idea of the new fashion travelled, whereas the bands themselves were locally produced. Regardless of whether these women saw themselves as Christian or not, they clearly had international connections, as neither silk, silver or gold are found in Denmark, and an important aspect of the project is therefore to compare these graves to the iconographic and written sources available from the rest of Europe. The project thus seeks to answer questions about the development of garments, production, import and identity in the last part of the Viking Age. It will nuance the knowledge of women in this period, where research has traditionally concentrated on the role of male power in the formation of state, towns and religion in Denmark (see, for example, Krogh and Leth-Larsen 2007; Christensen et al. 2021; Sindbæk 2022). This project will demonstrate the empowerment of women and their long-distance connections through more subtle means such as garments and decoration.

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