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Brocaded in Gold

Two Tablet-Woven Baldrics at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Germany

Introduction

In the collection of weapons and arms at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM), Nuremberg, Germany, there are two magnificent sabres from Morocco (Figs 1 and 2). They are on loan from the Paul Wolfgang Merkel'sche Familienstiftung (Diefenbacher *et al.* 2006). These sabres, listed under inventory numbers W3273 and W3274, attracted my attention during a visit to the storerooms of the Department of Weapons and Hunting Culture because of their textile parts. The broad bands to carry these weapons seemed to be especially interesting because they are tablet-woven in a special technique and due to their unexpected and mostly unknown usage. There has been no previous investigation or publication, either of these objects or on the woven straps of these 'Nimchas', the technical term for this kind of sabre. As the baldrics and sabres form an ensemble, the latter had to be taken into account as well. So the purpose of the investigation was to explore not only the technique and technology of the baldrics but also the cultural-historical context of the sabres. The following represents the first results of this research.

Cultural-historical background

Nimchas are swords of a special shape, construction and origin (Stone 1961, 469). There is some variety within their parts, the hilt and blade and especially the scabbard. Nimchas like W3273 and W3274 seem to belong to a separate group, which – beside some features of the swords themselves – is ostentatious in the design of the scabbard and the baldric. The baldrics are sparsely documented since most Nimchas

are preserved without them. Nevertheless, they form an important part of the Nimcha ensembles, because they were made for presentation and splendour as well.

The Nimchas from the GNM can be dated to the end of 18th or to the beginning of 19th century AD, as shown by comparison with parallel examples (so far these stem only from the art market, such as the Nimcha from Meknès, northern Morocco: MarocAntics 2015). At first glance they look identical, but they are not (Fig. 3). The green colour of W3273 is darker than that of W3274 which has more yellow in the textile parts, in the enamel paste of the mounts, locket and chape, on the scabbard and also in the velvet that covers the scabbard which can be seen between the mounts. This set-up of a main colour is characteristic of each of the complete ensembles I have found so far to draw comparisons from. They are only a few, and the dominating colour can be green, blue or red. As there are many Nimchas where the scabbards have the same appearance and construction as those at the GNM, it is quite likely that they originally also had the same kind of extravagant baldrics.

Description

The textile parts of the baldrics consists of tablet-woven bands, tassels made of cords and – for W3273 – cords to attach the baldric to the two suspension rings on the scabbard. There are also some additional metal parts, probably made of silver: the ends of the textile hanger and several ornaments in the form of hollow spheres and cones. My research deals with the straps used for hanging the sabres across the shoulder:



Fig. 1. Baldric W3273 from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (© Claudia Merthen).



Fig. 2. Baldric W3274 from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (© Claudia Merthen).

the baldrics. They are 1 m in length and 4.5-5 cm in width and made of green-dyed silk (Figs 4 and 5), as revealed by investigation of single filaments through the binocular microscope (Hauptmann 1951, 126 fig. 145, 127 fig. 146). The fibres are without serizin coating ('silk bast') and have the characteristic 'lice' which are formed during the removal of the bast and the further processing of the material (Hauptmann 1951, 66). For this reason the silk can be identified as mulberry silk. The straps are tablet-woven in a brocading technique; 65 and 67 tablets, respectively, ordered alternating in Z and S direction, were turned in one direction continuously for very long parts of the bands – either forward or backward. There are only a very few points where a change in the turning direction can be determined; sometimes they are hidden within a pattern in a perfect manner. The number and position of the warp threads crossing the brocading weft on the



Fig. 3. Different kinds of colour in baldrics W3274 and W3273 (© Claudia Merthen).



Fig. 4. Detail of baldric W3273
(© Claudia Merthen).



Fig. 5. Detail of baldric W3274
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surface of the weave form a sequence that reveals that these tablets had six holes. On both selvages, three tablets with two threads in every hole were used. The warp consisted of singles of s-spun silk filaments, the weft of a looser, lightly s-turned bundle of fibres (Fig. 6). Because one end of the baldric W3274 is broken, it is possible to get an impression from the 'inside' of the weaving, the quality of the threads and the original colour of the silk.

There are technical aspects that are so far known only from these baldrics. The secondary weft for brocading uses a group of eight wires with a round cross-section made of gilded silver; this was determined through X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. At the beginning and the end of the brocaded pattern these wires cross the back to reach the corresponding position on the front (Figs 7 and 8). When the pattern covers nearly the whole band, the wires turn around the warp threads of the third tablets from the edges. All the pattern lines are created by the warp crossing the brocading weft by a different number of threads.

The patterns on both bands are very similar. They are constructed symmetrically. The main pattern is made from netted rhombuses and star-like motifs, connected with stripes resembling knots and groups of smaller rhombuses. On W3273, an eight-pointed star with a star or sun inscribed follows three rhombuses. This pattern is repeated three times and finishes with three rhombuses. On W3274, the pattern starts with three rhombuses at each end. After these an eight-pointed star follows, with zigzag lines inside, after which there is another rhombus with a regular six-pointed star in the centre. Narrow stripes frame the middle pattern with arrows, crosses and rhombuses and also a zigzag line not made particularly regularly or carefully. The broad pattern on both sides finishes with a small rhombus and a star motifs, respectively. The turning points of the tablets are hardly visible; the motifs were constructed very skillfully to cover the floating warp threads.



Fig. 6. View from 'inside' baldric W3274
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Discussion

The technique and shape of both baldrics at the GNM are so similar that they could have been made at the same workshop or by the same hand. This kind of brocading, including the use of tablets with six holes and a bundle of wires for the secondary patterning weft, seems to be known only from Nimcha ensembles with preserved baldrics. The baldric technique and patterns on the other Nimcha ensembles noted so far bear a striking resemblance to those from the GNM (MarocAntics 2015; from Morocco, probably late 19th–mid 20th century AD: Schiettecatte and Nieminen 2015; from Morocco/Mahgreb, no date specified: Teulière 2015, fig. at the end of the website; and perhaps also the Nimcha pictured in Stone 1961, 469 fig. 594 no. 1, but this is still to be confirmed). Where the provenance is known, they come from northern Morocco.

Striking analogies in technique and pattern can be found in the bands used as head-dresses by Jewish women in Morocco (Collingwood 1982, 343 pl. 202), documented in photographs from Jean Besancenot dated to 1935 (Centre de la culture judeo-marocaine,

phototèque, http://www.judaisme-marocain.org/objets_popup.php?id=17620 [1.10.2015]). It is conceivable that the Jewish imagery and that from the baldrics interrelate and that this weft brocading technique is a special one exclusive to Morocco.

Visual resemblance for the warp crossing the brocading gold weft could also be found within the right-hand edge of a band from a 12th-century chasuble from Palermo (Collingwood 1982, 345 pl. 203), in a band on the chasuble attributed to St. Wolfgang, bishop of Regensburg, 11th/12th century (Spies 2000, 120 fig. left) and in a mosque motif on a mitre from the 12th/13th century (Spies 2000, 179 fig. right above). Here the weft passes under more than one warp so that the warp forms a special appearance. This kind of warp crossing seems to be a matter of technique, but in these cases the tablet should have had four holes.

Conclusion and perspectives

Nimchas with their preserved baldrics are a hitherto unexplored research area in tablet weaving and well worth studying. Therefore, by expanding my investigation to the Moroccan and Jewish set of brocading techniques and patterns, I hope to further knowledge in this area.

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Fig. 7. The back of baldric W3273
(© Claudia Merthen).



Fig. 8. The back of baldric W3274
(© Claudia Merthen).

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