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Reflections on an International Collaboration on a Corpus of Early Anglo-Saxon textiles from the RAF Lakenheath Cemeteries, Suffolk, England

Introduction

A crucial aspect when working on archaeological textiles is the research environment, either academic or informal, that can generate active discussion on a particular dataset. At UCL's Institute of Archaeology (SH) there is a small and active group of textiles specialists and students, working on a diverse range of periods and regions. This provides an excellent setting for the resolution of general textile research queries and issues. However, it was when working as a consultant for the Suffolk (England) Archaeological Service Field Team on the textiles from the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at RAF Lakenheath that it became apparent that consultation with a fellow period textiles specialist would bring added value to the project. In agreement with the academic lead John Hines of Cardiff University and the project director Joanna Caruth, consultation with a northern European specialist was written in and costed for in the second phase of the research design.

The reasoning behind seeking out a northern European collaborator reflected the nature of this English burial community. The Lakenheath cemeteries were excavated in the late 1990s and produced over 400 inhumations datable from AD 425 to c. 650. It was not the first excavation of this site on the edge of the Fenlands of East Anglia. A small area had already been excavated in the 1950s by the local archaeological society, finding 33 inhumations. A textiles report was produced by the late Elisabeth Crowfoot (1966),

although unfortunately her original archive and that of much of the site can no longer be found, so had lost much of its potential as a comparator for the new material. One of the key research issues for the early Anglo-Saxon period in eastern and southern England is the extent to which Romano-British communities survived and the processes through which incoming Germanic populations apparently gained hegemony – given that the material culture of the period was significantly northern European in cultural origin. Recent analysis by Penelope Walton Rogers (2012) of the textiles corpus for East Anglia had already highlighted the possibility of surviving and coexistent textile-making cultures, with definable geographical distributions. As with many of these inland communities, their material culture indicated that they were not wholly insular in character, but part of a wider social and economic network that included links across the North Sea to mainland Europe. In this context, specific textile issues relevant to the period as a whole might come to the foreground through investigations of this community – the distribution and usage of the elusive *pallium frisonium*, the intermittent presence of 3/1 twill and the inception of the use of eastern Mediterranean-type cloths, in abeyance in Britain since the late Roman period. Was there a possibility of finding common traits in the textiles culture that were familiar in the Anglian region of northern Germany/southern Denmark, the putative homeland of the Germanic settlers? Susan Möller-



Wiering (SM-W) accepted the proposal to collaborate within this project – having met briefly at the NESAT and EAA conferences. Her previous work on the Liebenau corpus (2005) and her monograph on textiles from weapon deposits in Denmark and northern Germany (2011), with its very clear photographic images, suggested a way forward.

Methods

It is important to reflect on the workstream of the post-excavation processes of this project. The entire project aimed at producing a draft publication for submission to the funders by early 2015. Comprising three distinct cemetery areas, the conservation of the metalwork was carried out on a site-by-site basis over three to four years. Once the material was conserved it then went on a tour of finds and organics specialists, with the associated problem of the potential for the deterioration of the mineral-preserved textiles through repeated handling. Fortunately, where practicable, much of the textile recording took place immediately after conservation and benefitted from a close working relationship with the conservator. Nevertheless, with an artefact corpus on such a scale (over 4000 organic and inorganic objects) it was never possible to see a complete grave group of all material types at any one time. Thus there was little practical opportunity to review the material as new comparisons and queries came to light as one worked through the corpus. Having worked previously mainly on Saxon and Kentish textiles (Harrington 2003, 2007 and forthcoming) the variations in the Anglian corpus produced some unfamiliar aspects and nuances that were profitably referred to SM-W for consultation.

A standard catalogue record was produced for each of the 1100 surviving textile fragments (average size 10 x 10 mm) from 215 inhumations, together with a photographic record. This last aspect was integral to the methodology for forming a permanent archive of the material. A Digiscope AM-413T at 35-50x magnification was used, with the additional use of 180-220x magnification for further exploration, and a Pentax Lumix DMC-F27, on a tripod with optimum lighting, for archive images. There are images of most of the textile fragments, some with multiple magnifications and views. These images were reviewed for further identification once the material had been returned to store and amendments made to the dataset.

Collaborative work

Selected images of 82 fragments (7.5% of the corpus) were sent to SM-W for verification, comparison and comment. It must be stated that these images may

not be at a standard for publication, as they are of mineral-preserved fragments, rather than extant fibres. For a textile researcher this was not necessarily an ideal working method. When the textiles are under the microscope, the focus and light can be changed in various ways to reveal features that are not clear at first. On a photo, one is restricted to a single view and is dependent on the quality of the image of an uneven surface. Still, notable details could be determined. However, that is not to assume that the same interpretations were necessarily made, although useful questions did result. The major addition to the textiles record was the resolution of technical issues in terms of weave structure and format. Most notably SM-W highlighted a possible woven stripe within a non-costume cloth in an early burial, the intricacies of folds underneath a cruciform brooch and introduced due circumspection to SH identifications of 3/1 twills (this cloth type had been identified by Elisabeth Crowfoot in a boat burial from Snape, Suffolk (2001) but could not be conserved and was thus unavailable for reference). SM-W's report is an appendix to the textile report in the Lakenheath Cemeteries project archive.

The method outlined above allowed for the resolution of queries at a basic level of the cloth, but could not begin to address more general issues of cloth and costume without more extensive exchanges of information. Our comments on wrist clasps could clearly be investigated in greater detail in the longer term. For example, what was the relationship between clasps and other artefacts that reflect wealth and status? Whilst the presence of different textiles under a pair of brooches, one at each shoulder, is becoming noted increasingly in the English corpus (discussed by Penelope Walton Rogers (2007) and also a trait at Lakenheath), this combination had not been discussed within German burial communities. What was the implication for burial dress if the body was in a coffin? At what point in time did shroud-like coverings begin to be used?

SM-W commented that in Liebenau, shrouds seem to have been an alternative to coffins, independent of the dating from the 5th century to c. 600. What might be the relationship of the cloths to other organic materials? But, as SM-W stresses, it is so important to have access to information about all kind of textiles, not only the very special and best-preserved ones.

Conclusions

The importance of a photographic archive of textile fragments is increasingly important, particularly due to the tendency of the mineral-preserved textiles to degrade over time. This is partly an issue of packaging

methods. Problematically, archaeologists tend not to have professional skills in photography, although initial guidelines for photo documentation of textiles were presented by Scharff (2007), and a detailed image archive would add greatly to the expense of a project. Nevertheless, new digital cameras and the advent of digital microscopes with a camera function that can send images directly to a computer hard drive have increased the possibility of adequate images being captured for longer-term research and analysis. Image enhancement via computer packages such as Adobe Photoshop adds to the quality and value of even poorly-lit images. This technology will only improve over time to make it both affordable and easier to use, as will the skills of the archaeologists to produce consistent images. The transfer of images via online resources is freely available. In other words, there is a level of potential here to be exploited.

Inevitably, a colleague would want to know more about the positioning of the host object, the gender and sex of the individual, the grave plan and the provenances of the artefacts and the full data set in order to discuss the details. Whilst this would be an ideal situation and would lead to protracted and interesting exchanges, this element of research would rarely receive adequate funding, regardless of the potential of the outcomes. But there may be a way forward if we, as a research community, can make our data and its full contextualisation more easily available to each other, in order that any question can be explored quickly and accurately. So, the proposal must be to build national and international online resources of catalogue data and images of textile fragments for each period. In the evolving world of digital resources, this must, through collaboration, be a realisable possibility.

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