

Tablet Weaving in the mid to late Anglo-Saxon context

What happened to tablet-weaving?

In the early Anglo-Saxon period¹, tablet-weaving was very common. Tablet weaves comprise 10-11% of textile finds in all regions (Walton Rogers, P110), being more common in the north eastern areas (Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the Yorkshire Wolds) and less common along the western border (Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire). The weaves in the north east had a more Scandinavian character (horse hair soumak, 3/1 twill), and those in Kent had a more Danish (double-faced repp-effect) or Merovingian (gold-brocaded) style. Walton Rogers suggests that the incoming Germanic peoples gave the long-established technique fresh impetus and expanded the range of techniques and usage.

The majority of finds in England feature metal brocade, either because that really was the most common type or because metal survives when organic fibres are lost. Brocaded bands have been found at sites including Sutton Hoo, Taplow and many bands from Kent. Non-brocaded finds include Laceby, Cambridge² (St John's fragment, Crowfoot) and Suffolk (Mildenhall wrist clasps, Crowfoot).

For the later period, eighth to eleventh centuries, there are far fewer finds. Those I know of include:

- St Cuthbert's vestments (Durham)³, early tenth century. Gold brocade on silk, warp patterning with brocade, and soumak.
- Edging to the Maaseik embroideries (Belgium), identified as English work from the eighth – ninth centuries.
- Finds from Winchester and Worcester (details awaiting ILL).
- A fragment of silk and a bone weaving tablet from Coppergate, York (11th C).

The Durham (Hansen p69-70) and Maaseik (Spies p125-126) finds are notable for having a different style of motif from both earlier finds and most of the contemporary continental finds. Instead of geometric patterns based on diagonal lines, we see more figurative motifs including vines, birds, and animals.

Tablet weaving was well known in England in the later mediaeval period. So why is there so little evidence from the mid to late Anglo-Saxon period? Possible explanations include:

- Much of the early period evidence comes from pagan cemeteries; in the later period, Christians are buried in simple shrouds without grave goods and fancy clothes.

1 Approx sixth to seventh centuries a.d.

2 Walton Rogers considers this strap-end fragment to be mediaeval based on technique. P125. Owen-Crocker accepts it as Anglo-Saxon (p152)

3 Hansen considers the Durham band to have been done under Scandinavian instruction, because of flaws in the design and his opinion that tablet weaving had been forgotten in England by this time. (p60). However I have not found any other author presenting this view. The stole and maniple were offered in honour of St Cuthbert by King Athelstan in 934.

- Poor soil conditions, meaning we have few textiles of any sort.⁴
- Maybe there are more finds but they are not well known.
- Perhaps tablet weaving fell out of use, then returned a few hundred years later. In defence of this idea, the Anglo-Saxons did develop a notable embroidery style, so we can say that insular traditions were not the same as in Europe.

Guidance for Re-enactors

It seems to me that there are two plausible options for the re-enactor:

- **Option 1:** based on the physical evidence, tablet weaving was specialist work, reserved for nobles and important churchmen.
- **Option 2:** based on the history of tablet weaving in England, and connections with continental Europe, tablet weaving was also popular in a domestic context.

Option 1: Tablet weaving as specialist work

The archaeological evidence shows tablet-weaving to be worn by nobles and senior churchmen, or to be part of religious relics.

Bands would be usually gold thread brocaded over silk, most commonly red although other colours were used (Spies).

Bands would be woven at specialist workshops, quite possibly by nuns.

Option 2: Tablet weaving as a domestic craft

The extent of tablet-weaving in the early Anglo-Saxon period, on the continent at this time, and in mediaeval England, suggests that tablet-weaving was a popular craft at all levels of society, perhaps particularly where there was a Scandinavian influence.

Continental evidence can be used as guidance for Anglo-Saxon tablet weaving in this period, although the insular evidence should be respected.

The highest status bands would still have been woven by specialists as per Option 1.

Patterns and techniques

The patterned two-hole weaves from Hochdorf and the elaborate warp-float techniques from Snartemo seem to have fallen out of use.

Generally speaking, brocade was very popular in the later period, and also warp-patterned bands are known from places including Mammen (Denmark, 10th C) and Leksand (Norway, 12th C). Brocade and 3/1 broken twill are perhaps the most characteristic techniques. The ground weave for brocade is most commonly plain weave with tablets alternately arranged SZSZ, or 3/1 broken twill which

⁴ Owen-Crocker mostly cites manuscript illustrations and stray jewellery finds for the mid to late period. The illustrations show that the aristocracy were still decorating their clothes with narrow bands of some sort.

may be plain or patterned..

Brocade is not technically difficult but is time-consuming, exacting work. Plain 3/1 broken twill is only moderately difficult, but as soon as you add patterns it becomes very challenging.⁵

Having said that, a major theme of tablet-weaving is inventiveness, with almost no exact duplication of patterns in historical finds. Finds such as the narrow Oseberg (late ninth century) band show that there were many variations in pattern and technique.

Possible regional variations

Scandinavian styles are cool in the North-east

Scandinavian-style geometric patterns seem most appropriate for Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the Yorkshire Wolds, because in these areas, Scandinavian-style female dress items were popular in the late ninth and tenth centuries and indeed were manufactured in England (Kershaw, conclusion).⁶

Alfred the Great and Wessex

In the central areas dominated by Wessex and Mercia, a more Anglo-Saxon character can be provided by using:

- Embroidered decoration combined with tablet-woven edging.
- Gold brocade on silk (very high status).⁷
- Patterns of vines, birds and animals, with a more organic look.⁸

Danish patterns may be favoured over Scandinavian.

Less of this foreign stuff on the borders

Towards the western borders, a preference for plain and warp-pickup bands may be appropriate. These can be woven with tablets, on an inkle loom, with a rigid heddle, string and leash or with the fingers. Note that we do not have evidence of rigid heddles at this time, and inkle looms are modern.

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5 A reasonable compromise for the re-enactor is double-faced weave, which is not a period technique but allows the same type of patterns to be woven. The surface texture is less pleasing and the patterns come out less square, but it passes the three-foot test and the threading and fundamentals of the technique are the same: two light, two dark threads, double sided geometric patterns made by turning tablets in different directions.

6 York itself seems to have been typically English in dress style, Scandinavian accessories being a rural feature (Kershaw P206, quoting Tweddle 2004, 450-2).

7 For mid status, use silk or wool on wool.

8 Avoid ram's horns and running dog. They are 19th century Turkish, and very distinctive.

(1984), pp. 65-96.

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