

Ida Dermant

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Ida Demant

Textiles and Dress-Fasteners from Lerdal Grave 101

The paper deals with textiles on two cruciform fibulas found in a grave dated to about 400 A.D. It ends with a theoretical discussion. We are hopeful that we will gain more insight into the costume of the deceased.

The grave was excavated in the summer of 1997 by the museum in Haderslev, Denmark.¹ When it turned out that some textiles were preserved in an area of the grave, a large part was taken up in a soil-block and brought to the conservation workshop in Gram. The block contained most of the jewellery of the deceased, but the textiles were mainly preserved around two large cruciform bronze fibulas. Therefore these were taken out in small soil-blocks for microstratigraphical analysis of the textiles.²

The grave belonged to a minor cemetery with 6 inhumation graves situated in the centre of Southern Jutland – an area also known as North Schleswig. No 101 was the most richly equipped grave in the cemetery, and, as far as we know, in the entire area of North Schleswig during this period as well [Ethelberg: personal information].

As the ground was sand, textiles were only preserved in this grave due to the presence of the two large bronze fibulas.³ There were no textiles observed in any of the other graves.

Besides a knife, a bronze ring and the two approx. 11 cm long fibulas, the grave contained two small fibulas – a cruciform – and a disc-brooch. The latter was very badly preserved. Further there were two bronze needles with an eye and loop, a number of glass and silver spiral pearls and two sets of wrist clasps of Hines class A⁴ [Hines 1993: 4]. One of the latter was lying on a small textile fragment (Fig. 1).

¹ I am grateful to the archaeologist Ph.D. Per Ethelberg, Haderslev Museum, Denmark responsible for the dig for allowing me to work with this material and publicise my results.

² The soil-blocks were first examined by conservator Anne Marie Juhl. The microstratigraphical analysis was carried out by this author.

³ The degrading chemicals in the bronze inhibit the bacterial growth that would otherwise breakdown the textiles. (Arne Jouttijärvi: personal information).

So even though the skeletal material had decayed – which is common in Scandinavia – it is assumed that it was a woman's grave. Though it might be very speculative, it is further assumed that she was buried lying on her right side in a crouched position. The two large fibulas were fastened to her clothing – one on her chest and the other further down in the area of her waist. As the body decayed, both fibulas fell down to the bottom of the grave in front of the body, dragging some of the textiles with them.

The textiles were generally in a bad condition and very fragile. In the parts close to the iron pins of the fibulas, the fibres were completely replaced by metal salts, whereas the pieces closest to the bronze were so well preserved that it was possible to identify the material as wool. In certain parts even the colours were visible.

The upper fibula X227 (Fig. 2)

It was the one that had probably been fastened to the woman's chest:

It was the easiest one to deal with and understand: it was clearly seen *in situ* that the fibula had been used to hold two pieces of cloth together.

The needle went through two pieces of double folded fabric of the same quality so that the two folded edges faced each other – like in a kind of shawl or mantle, secured on the chest with the fibula.

The lower fibula (Fig. 1. X231) (Fig. 3).

This one was placed in the waist area. It had a more complicated stratigraphy with different types of weave:

There were 3 layers covering the fibula and approximately 10 layers underneath it. The latter were analysed starting from the bottom up. It was among these layers that some colouring was still visible. All

⁴ This type is described as a length of wire which two ends are rolled up towards each other in spirals, leaving a section in between from which the hook – or catch element can be fashioned [Hines 1993: 4].

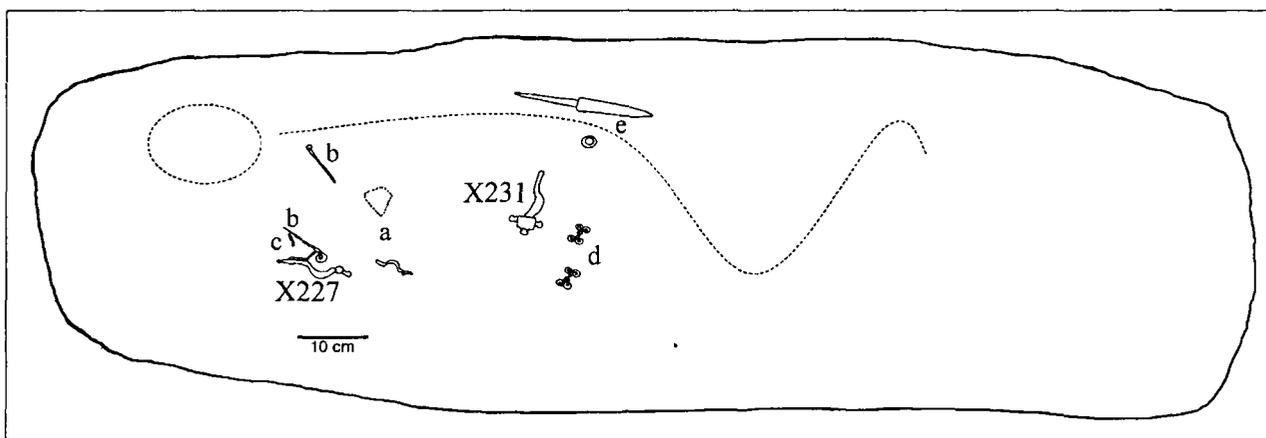


Fig. 1. Distribution of artifacts in the grave. The assumed position of the body is marked by a dot-and-dash line. X227 / X231: large cruciform fibulas embedded in the textiles. a – two minor fibulas; b – bronze needles with an eye and loop; c – glass and silver pearls; d – clasps; e – knife and a bronze ring.

of the weaves were 2/2 twills. However, by using different characteristics, it was possible to divide the textiles into 4 main types, which might represent different pieces of cloth or garments. They will be presented in stratigraphical order. (Fig. 4a, b)

A) The upper layer on top of the fibula turned out to be identical to the type to which the other fibula was fastened. It was clearly unbalanced twill

B1) The next type was twill too, but unlike the upper one it was a balanced weave.

This was the type of weave this fibula was fastened to.

Two layers were covering the fibula and several were underneath it. The one right on top of the fibula was in fact in one piece with one of the layers underneath the fibula.

It looked as if this fibula held two folded edges together too, but with an extra fold, which looked like an accordion. These folds are seen right underneath the fibula. But not all of them could be logically explained, because they were in one piece with the layers right above the fibula. It seems that the textile during the process of decay fell down, rolled over and wrapped itself in the textile to which it had been fastened before. This is the only way this sequence can be explained.

B2) At the bottom of the stratigraphy the same type of twill was found in two layers.

However, between these two layers, there was an undefined, amorphous, organic, dark layer, which crumbled when it was removed. That layer was also observed between the red layers at the top around the fibula.

This is another indication that we are dealing with the same type as in B1

It was apparent that this type as well as the other layers were red.

C) In the middle were 5 layers of two-coloured twill. One thread-system in the weave was red and the

other one was dark. The lower layer was edged by a tablet weave. Layer 3 and 4 were in one piece connected by a fold on one side. This piece must have been part of the woman's underwear.

As mentioned earlier, it is uncommon for skeletal remains to have survived in Scandinavian graves, but body-grease is often found. However, no such remains were discovered here in the stratification. This is probably due to the fact that the fibula had fallen down in front of the body.

The clasp-fragment:

As far as the interpretation is concerned, another fragment seems to be particularly interesting. It was placed on a clasp and it has the imprint of the "eyes" on one side (Fig. 5). It was hard to see the type of weave in the fragment, but there was no doubt that this little piece was two-coloured and therefore it was most probably part of the same cloth as the middle layers in the stratigraphy of the lower fibula. (Fig. 4a:c).

The interpretation what costume parts may be represented?

Three different types of cloth have been identified, and they probably represent three different pieces of clothing. There is nothing unusual about any of these types. They all correspond in general to the textiles characteristic of the period, as discussed by Lise Bender Jørgensen in her works on prehistoric textiles in Scandinavia. They are all medium-fine quality, 2/2 twills [Bender Jørgensen 1986: 29ff].

The different fibulas and needles discovered probably relate to these three types. One can only wonder what function they performed.

It is a general assumption that in the Iron Age and in the migration period, the Germanic woman wore a peplos-type dress. That is mirrored in the way fibulas are sometimes placed in the female graves. It has been

assumed that fibulas mainly served a practical purpose and were used as a “glorified safety pin”. This hypothesis is supported by the famous Danish bog-found Huldremose peplos, – even though the find has



Fig. 2. Fibula X227 with the textiles *in situ*. The white lines indicate the points where the two folded edges meet.

been interpreted as a peplos only hypothetically [Hald 1980: 359ff].

Under the peplos Germanic women might have worn some sort of sleeved dress. This idea has been put forward in several works, first indirectly by John Peter Wild in his work on dress in the Northern Roman Provinces, and later, among others, by Gale Owen-Crocker in her book about early Anglo-Saxon dress. [Wild 1968: 173; Owen-Crocker 1986: 39]. The idea finds support in the occurrence of clasps in Anglo-Saxon female graves, where preserved skeletal material is common. The clasps are most often placed near the wrists, indicating the presence of sleeves.

There are also some Norwegian finds of sleeve-fragments with clasps, but they all date from a later period. However, only one of them, mentioned by Margareta Nockert, seems to have belonged to a woman [Nockert 1992: 46].

Sleeved garments are also known from gold-foil figures as shown by Ulla Mannering, but one could not say whether they were worn under a peplos-type dress, because the women were wearing shawls or mantles over their shoulders and no fibulas could be seen [Mannering 1999].

No sleeved garment is yet known archaeologically from any Danish grave, that is, not as a preserved item that can be interpreted as a garment worn close to the body in the female costume. Such garments are known from North German bog finds, but have never been seen as items coming from female costume [Schlabow 1976: 69ff]. However, we might have traces of one here in this grave. The little scrap of fabric with marks from the clasp-rings is of the same type as the middle layers in the stratigraphy – a two-coloured twill. This suggests a sleeved garment worn close to the body.

The paired fibulas indicating a peplos, however, are lacking. As we have seen, there are two cruciform fibulas holding two different garments. The upper one seems to be securing a shawl or a mantle. The second fibula was fastened to a red twill cloth, more or less covered by the shawl or mantle. According to the stratigraphy, it had in some way been wrapped around the body, but as it was only recognised around this fibula placed near the hips, it cannot be established how much of the body it covered.⁵

It could have been a skirt, but as it was double, with an amorphous organic material used as some sort of interlining, it seems a bit too thick and clumsy for that purpose. It is impossible to say what it was, but it could have been part of the grave furnishings.

Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the two identical fibulas did not secure a peplos-type dress. What about the other parts of the jewellery then? (Fig. 1)

The two needles (Fig. 1b), lying in the grave, could have been placed near the shoulders and used to secure a peplos-type garment, but they appear to be too small and flimsy for that. Personally, I find them more



Fig. 3. Fibula X231 after the two first layers of fabric had been removed.

suitable for a pearl string (Fig. 1c), acting as fasteners to secure the ends to each side of the chest.

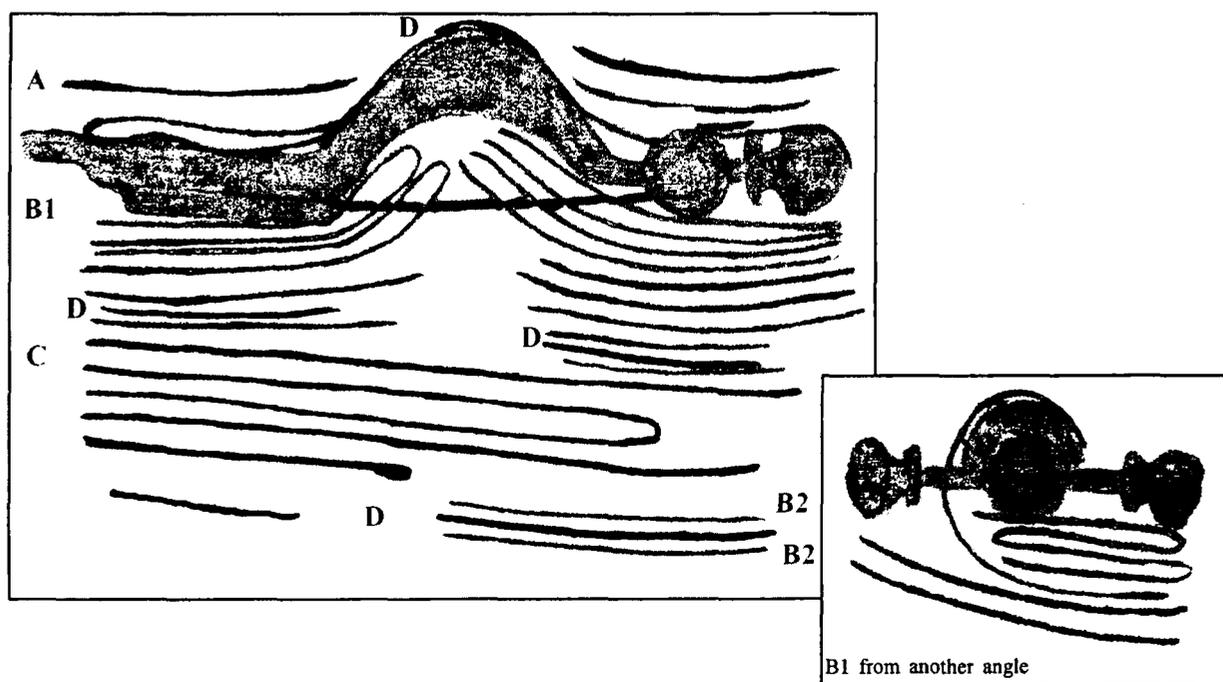
Theoretically, the two small fibulas could have been used as dress fasteners on the shoulders (Fig. 1a). Firstly, I find only the small cruciform one suitable for fastening a dress on the shoulders. The last one is a very badly preserved plate-fibula, which is more likely to have been worn on the chest in some way. Secondly, they were both lying rather low in the grave in relation to where the head is considered to have

⁵ H. W. Böhme refers to a group of early fifth century graves from northern France where the women seems to have worn a big mantle closed with one and sometimes two fibulas in the waist area. The same phenomenon appears on the Saxon gravefields in the second half of the fifth century. This could perhaps also be the case in this grave, but then the woman must have worn two mantles or cloaks – and this one worn under the one secured by the upper cruciform fibula (X227). [Böhme 1998]

Stratification

| Type | Characteristics | Observations | Related Jewellery |
|------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| A | - unbalanced 2/2 twill. | Double folded. | Upper cruciform fibula X 227. |
| B1 | Red 2/2 twill. | Many folds. Some like an accordion, which the needle is put through. | Lower cruciform fibula X 231. |
| | (Organic) Skin? Red 2/2 twill. | | |
| C | Two-coloured 2/2 twill. | 5 layers. The tablet weave was in the lower layer. | Clasps |
| | A small tablet weave sewn on to the selvedge. | | |
| B2 | Red 2/2 twill. | | |
| | (Organic) Skin? Red 2/2 twill. | | |
| | Bottom of coffin | | |

a



b

Fig. 4. a – stratification of textiles in grave 101; b – stratification around fibula X231.

been placed – and too far away from the shoulders. It seems that a peplos was not part of this woman's costume.

The first conclusion is that the two identical fibulas did not necessarily function as a pair to secure the same garment. The fact that they both secured something that might have belonged to the outer garment could perhaps justify the term "pair-function" – if of course the second fibula were fastened to a piece of a garment at all.

The next and more important conclusion is that the dress this woman was buried in was obviously not dependent on fibulas – or any dress fasteners. They do actually seem to have had a more decorative function than a practical use.

This makes sense when one takes into consideration the fact that not all the graves excavated so far contained fibulas – or any dress fasteners at all – and among those which did, not all contained a pair. A local study from Denmark showed that 10-20 percent of all the graves had preserved dress-fasteners [Ejstrud, Jensen 2000: 106]. This has been noted before and it has been suggested that the peplos could have been secured with fasteners made of organic material or stitched together on the shoulders [e.g. Bender Jørgensen 1977; Brush 1993]. This seems a plausible hypothesis as well.

But another aspect may be more important to consider: we are dealing with a grave!

The furnishings of a grave have been seen as a mirror of life – a mirror of the social structures of the society in which the deceased once lived. A rich grave belonged to a rich and powerful person, weapons to a warrior etc. But as has been put forward in the theoretical debate of recent decades, a grave might only mirror life indirectly. The funeral is considered to have been a medium, through which structures of society were negotiated and as such the grave should be seen as a complex feature with many meanings. These meanings are contextual and not just to be read directly [e.g. Samson 1987; Kristoffersen 1999; Lucy 1999].

It would take too long to go further into this debate here – and it is not necessary in our context either. The most important thing is to stress the difference between the living and the dead in relation to costume.

The living dress themselves to work and function in their daily lives and to express their own identity to the same extent as we do in the way we dress in general.

The mourners dress the deceased first of all to express the identity they find suitable for the deceased and the messages they want to convey during the funeral feast. This is limited – or increased – by the capabilities of the family. In fact the family could



Fig 5. The little fragment with imprints from the clasp.

well be expressing their own status as much as the status and identity of the deceased.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, they dress the deceased to be dead – in opposition to the living who need to be able to work and function.

This means that a woman buried without fibulas or other dress fasteners could still have worn a dress dependent on dress fasteners when she was alive, and vice versa. A woman wearing plenty of jewellery might not have worn all of it at the same time when she was alive – or in the way she does when she is lying there neatly in her grave.

Furthermore, the textiles or garments surrounding her might not be placed in a way functional for a living person.

Our aim is to study the function of fibulas in the costume of the Iron Age in the Northern Germanic area by means of microstratigraphical analysis of grave material – as has been done and is done with finds from later periods. In archaeological research most of the emphasis has been put on the fibulas themselves for chronological purposes. They have also been examined as evidence of social status. If any interpretations concerning costume are included, they are often based on stereotypes, e.g. the peplos. Lise Bender Jørgensen questioned the evidence in discussion at the NESAT Symposium in Edinburgh in 1999 and I want to take that challenge up. I would like to assess the jewellery in relation to the textiles and discuss the costume, inclusive of the garments and the jewellery.

The use of stereotypes results from the fact that textiles are very seldom preserved in large quantities. They do, however, occur and microstratigraphical analysis can provide some information about the costume. Inga Hägg has paid attention to problems concerning post-depositional movements and their effect on the material [Hägg 1974: 5ff], but there are, as I have stressed here in this paper, other obstacles too. The fact that funeral dress was not necessarily the same as dress worn in everyday life.

In the beginning I must be satisfied that I can identify the funeral dress or, to be precise, the textile grave furnishing in which the dead has been laid to rest, as it is commonly known that not all the textiles in a grave are part of the dress. Blankets are often found as well and, in this case, the lower fibula might have been used to secure something that was not part of the costume as such.

Then, perhaps, through the filter of the ritual, I will be able to come to some conclusions about the dress worn amongst the living.

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Ida Demant

Engkærgårds allé 232
DK-8340 Malling
Denmark