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Pleated Fragments of Clothing from Norway

Well preserved clothing from medieval excavations is relatively rare in Norway. Nevertheless, various forms of visual representations of medieval clothing are often used for reconstruction. These are often based on examples of clothing found in medieval art, and therefore do not necessarily give a naturalistic impression of medieval clothing. From time to time, art has been strongly conventionalized. Another problem is that representations of clothing in art are frequently show only the upper classes. In spite of the lack of well preserved material coming from clothing, the Norwegian collections of archaeological material contain thousands of textile fragments coming from clothing of different kinds. A closer examination of these fragments may reveal new information about medieval clothing in Norway.

One of the most interesting groups of textiles in Norwegian collections is a group of pleated fragments found during excavations of medieval towns in Norway and Sweden. These are fragments of clothing, and their size varies from a few centimeters to nearly one meter. The textiles have been intentionally and permanently folded during production – hence the term “pleated” in this lecture.

This group of textiles can be distinguished from other groups mainly by its homogeneity. Both in appearance and in production technique the textiles have relatively small variation. The most outstanding feature of these fabrics is the evenly pleated and sewn folds that give us an impression of order and severity. This kind of pleating separates the group from other known groups of medieval textiles. The pleated textiles are fragments of clothing, but the form of the garment is not yet known, and it is not clear whether the garment was worn by men, women or by both sexes [Hagen 1992; Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991; Nockert 1984; Schjøberg 1998]. There are also many unsolved questions concerning the localization of pleated textiles, that is in which town areas they have been found. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these questions. Maybe closer research of the archaeological material relating to clothing will bring us closer to an answer.

Production

All the pleated textiles in this group are made of wool, and in addition many of them are made of shining twills that give the pleated surface a lively impression even today [Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991: 50, Nilsen 2000: 13]. The bottom of each fold is stitched on the reverse side of the fabric. This makes the pleats less flexible when the user of the garment is moving. The pleated dress must have required a lot of work, because each fold has to be sewn separately. For this reason, I think the appearance, style and power of locomotion must have been important. All the fragments in this group have sharp, vertically standing pleats. Some pleats are wider at the bottom end than at the top, while in others the pleats are parallel. The pleats, which differ in fold width, are made of wedge-shaped pieces of cloth. Each pleat is kept in place by vertical seams on the reverse side of the fabric. Pieces of cloth are always joined at the bottom of a pleat. Overcast stitches are usually worked along the raw edges in addition to running stitches. In some cases running stitches and buttonhole stitches have been used, in others buttonhole stitches alone.

The vertically sewn pleats differ from the kind of pleated textiles found in Birka, dating to the Viking period, and from the pleated textiles found in Norwegian medieval churches. These textile groups are furrowed, and not vertically stitched in each fold. They are pleated by horizontal threads which are drawn together, making small, rounded pleats. This technique makes the garments look broad, in contrast to the vertically marked lines characterizing the pleated fabrics from the medieval towns.

Origin and development

To be able to compare the pleated fragments with other kinds of material it is necessary to date them. This particular type of clothing fragment has been found in archaeological deposits dating between the second part of the eleventh century up to approximately A.D.



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Fig. 1, 2. C 35126/TH 129, pleated fragment of clothing from Tønsberg with vertically sewn pleats. Three-shed twill from the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century. Photo: University Museum of Cultural Heritage, Oslo.

1400. In Bergen, Oslo and Tønsberg, nearly 90% of the fragments are found in deposits dating from A.D. 1150 to 1250.¹

As far as I can see, there are at least two possible origins for the vertically sewn pleats. It is possible that they are a result of a local tradition combined with a new development in professional tailoring. An already existing local style of clothing could have been developed into a new form through the new possibility of making garments more close-fitting to the body. The basis for this supposition is that all the vertically sewn pleats are fragments of larger, wedge-shaped pieces of cloth, and that all of them were once wider at the bottom end than at the top of the pleats. We also have to assume that the art of tailoring in Norway reached a relatively high level of specialisation as early as the first part of the twelfth century [Gjøøl Hagen 1992: 46-50]. There is no indication of any use of vertically sewn pleats in Norway during the Viking period, and the technique has not been used in local costumes in modern times.

Secondly, the pleated garments may have originated as a local variation of a European trend in the medieval period. The long, vertical folds in the fabric can thus be seen as an example of early Gothic style. This theory stresses the difference in visual expression rather than the fact that both groups of textiles are pleated. If this hypothesis is correct, then vertically sewn pleats did not develop from a local tradition,

¹ In Bergen, which is the Norwegian city with the largest quantity of these textiles, 493 of 563 examples are dated to this period (these figures are from the table compiled by Ellen Schjøllberg, Bergen). In Oslo, 32 of 36 examples are dated between AD 1100 and 1250 [Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991]. In addition, 25 examples are not yet dated. In Tønsberg, 37 of 38 dated examples are from the 12th or 13th century [Nilsen 2000: 13]. 31 examples from Tønsberg are not dated.

but arrived as an independent fashion linked to early Gothic style. Consequently, a comparison of the remnants of clothing with those shown in sculptural art from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would be important.

Comparison with sculptural art

Among preserved medieval sculptures, there are several examples of clothing that looks pleated. Margareta Nockert has compared the pleated fragments of textiles with a stone effigy from Gudhem Abbey in Sweden, and with sculptures from the west portal of Chartres cathedral in France [Nockert 1984: 191 ff]. In both cases, the garments on the figures have a vertical folding that is reminiscent of the form and expression of the vertically sewn pleated textiles. I will deal more closely with the example from Gudhem Abbey, because it is geographically more closely connected to the pleated textiles.

The effigy from Gudhem is regarded by Aron Andersson as being a late Swedish offshoot of the Ile-de-France twelfth century sculptural tradition. The effigy is probably attributed to Queen Katarina, and is dated to the middle of the thirteenth century. The body of the figure has extremely elongated dimensions. The lower part of the torso has a column-like shape with repeated parallel folds or pleats of equal width [Andersson 1949: 250-252].

A comparison with preserved fragments of clothing shows points of resemblance. All the pleated fragments with vertical seams are made in wool, and the yarns are shiny and stiff. The vertically sewn pleats in this material will make a stiff, repeating impression totally different from, for example, a fabric made of silk.

More than one problem is encountered when excavated fragments of clothing are compared to medieval sculptural art. Much of early Gothic art is

characterized by strong stylistic convention in, without any real naturalism [Anker 1981: 233, Stang og Østby 1979: 81]. This problem has been pointed out by more than one scientist who has been working on the pleated textiles [Gjøll Hagen 1991: 52, Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991: 53]. But I am not convinced that this problem makes a comparison of the fragments of clothing with sculpture irrelevant. Conventions in style are visible in architecture, sculpture and painting. Why should the same conventions not be visible in clothing? It is not unlikely that the same characteristic expressions of style may be found in different types of material culture from the same period and geographical area. The similarity of visual expression of the pleating in sculpture and archaeological textiles in Scandinavia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is interesting. The visual effect of the pleating should be studied in association with the convention of style in sculptural art. The costumes could then be seen as part of a larger expression of style. My opinion is, therefore, that the vertically sewn pleats can legitimately be compared to Queen Katarina's strict and repeated parallel folds.

Who was wearing the garments?

Some of the pleated fragments found in Norwegian medieval towns are quite long. The largest fragment is found in Bergen, and is 85 centimetres long. The length indicates that this could be the lower part of a long dress. This does not necessarily mean that the fragment was part of a woman's dress. Long, folded coats can be seen in sculptural representations of both sexes. Several Norwegian wooden sculptures of St. Olaf have long folded coats. One example is from the church in Skjedsmo, dated to the thirteenth century [Stang 1997: 45].

Both Poul Nørlund and Margareta Nockert have pointed out that the long male coat was probably only used by the king and higher nobility in Scandinavia in the first part of the twelfth century. On the other hand the upper middle class was beginning to use the long dress about A.D. 1200 [Nørlund 1941: 32, Nockert 1985: 69]. If this is correct then it is not likely that the vertically sewn pleated clothing was used by men. The group of pleated textiles have been found in so many towns that it seems impossible to connect them exclusively to the king and high nobility. However we have no finds of completely preserved dresses from the twelfth century in Norway, and the hypothesis for the spread in use of the long coat is totally founded on written sources and representational evidence.

It is also possible that the pleated textiles could be fragments of cloaks. A type of cloak called "fellikåpa" is mentioned in the Laxdøla-saga. This could refer to

a pleated cloak, but the Laxdøla-saga is the only written source that mentions this name, the meaning of which is uncertain [Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991: 53]. There is only one completely preserved medieval cloak in Scandinavia, found in Bocksten, Sweden. This cloak is not made of wedge-shaped pieces of cloth, but of pieces of cloth of various sizes tailored into a semicircular form. The cloth has not been pleated [Nockert 1985: 41-47].

The making of the pleated dress must have demanded a lot of work, and the fabrics are often made of a worsted yarn [Nilsen 2000: 13, Schjøberg 1998: 209]. It is possible that the vertically sewn pleats were made by professionals, both because of the standardised production, and because the more complicated wedge-shaped cut has been used [Gjøll Hagen 1991: 46-50]. We have at present no overall view of the areas inside medieval towns where the pleated textiles have been found, and it is therefore not easy to connect them to specific activities or social groups. The fact that this product is relatively work-intensive and expensive nevertheless indicates that the pleated cloth should be connected with the upper classes in the medieval towns.

The form of the garment

One of the important questions related to the vertically sewn pleats is what kind of garment they represent. The archaeological material cannot give a completely satisfactory answer to this question. We have not yet found any well preserved pleated garments from the medieval period, but there exist at least two fragmentary garments with pleats on the upper part of the torso. In his book *Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes*, Poul Nørlund describes a woman's dress with a pleated bodice from Greenland. The dress has long sleeves, and vertical pleats standing tightly together in the upper front [Nørlund 1924: 123]. Each fold is stitched on the reverse of the fabric, but it is not clear whether the pleats are made in the same technique as the pleats found in medieval towns. Unfortunately, the stitches do not exist today [Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991: 53]. Neither is the lower part of the dress preserved. The dress from Herjolfsnes has been preliminarily dated to the fourteenth century [Nørlund 1941: 53].

Another archaeological find of pleated textile was found in a child's grave in Uvdal stave church in Norway. The child's outer garment, made of three-shed twill in wool, lay smoothly around the child's neck and shoulders. However, the garment was pleated at the chest with rounded, vertical and parallel pleats. The method that has been used is probably furrowed pleating. The dress is fragmented, but the same cloth has also been found on the child's thigh bone. This

indicates a long dress. This grave has been preliminarily loosely dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century [Nilsen 1998: 74-77].

The size of some of the vertically sewn, pleated fragments from medieval towns indicates that they are fragments of long dresses. Large parts of the garment have been pleated, not just the upper part or the bodice.

Many of the fragments consist of wedge-shaped pieces of cloth which have been pleated, joined together. This could mean that the dress has been figure sewn, like the dresses from Herjolfsnes.

Small fragments are made of pieces of cloth where the width of the pleats are the same in the upper and lower part of the fragment. These are apparently pleated in parallel, while other larger fragments are so called "sun-pleated", which means that the pleats widen towards the bottom end. This variation in the material could have several explanations. The small parallel pleated textiles could be fragments of garments which were originally sun-pleated, of which only smaller parts now remain. It would then be almost impossible to identify the widening of the pleats towards the bottom end. Alternatively, the parallel pleated fragments could be the remains of a different part of the garment than the sun-pleated fragments. The folds on Queen Katarina's effigy from Gudhem indicate a garment where the upper and lower parts have been stitched together horizontally, or consisted of two separate parts. The pleating in the bodice is tighter than in the lower part of the garment, and a division between the two parts can clearly be seen.

The coats from Herjolfsnes are of a completely different type. There is no horizontal break between the upper and lower parts of the garments, but in the lower part long wedged-shaped pieces of cloth have been inserted. This made the garment close-fitting at the waist, but broadening out and becoming wide in the skirt. None of the dresses from Herjolfsnes have horizontal stitching between the bodice and the lower part of the garment.

The group of pleated fragments could thus be remnants of long garments that were close-fitting at the waist, where at least the larger parts of the skirt were pleated. The bodice could have been made separately, or the bodice and skirt could have been cut together, like the garments from Herjolfsnes. No fully preserved medieval garment exists in Scandinavia today with evidence for a horizontal seam between the bodice and the skirt, but this does not necessarily prove that such a garment did not exist. Several sculptures, among them the effigy of Queen Katarina, show us that such a form could have existed. On the largest pleated fragment from Bergen, which is 85 centimetres long, both ends have been preserved. This could indicate that the fragment was once part of a two-piece or horizontally joined dress.

Location

The vertically sewn pleated textiles have been found in the medieval towns of Trondhim, Bergen, Oslo, Tønsberg, Lödöse and Lund [Hagen 1992, Kjellberg, Hoffmann 1991, Nockert 1984, Schjølberg 1998]. All the Scandinavian towns where these textiles have been found are located near the coast, in areas with a relatively high degree of cultural exchange. In these areas you would expect influence on fashion from the outside world. At present, no general research has been made on the location of the pleated fragments inside the medieval towns. A superficial glance at the pleated fragments from Tønsberg, tells us that the fragments are not located inside a small area, but spread over large parts of the medieval town. Only 21 of 69 examples have been found near the medieval port, in the area called Nedre langgate [Nilsen 2000].

Is it possible that the vertically sewn pleated fragments could be the remains of a fashion which arose in Norway and parts of Sweden alone? Karin Gjøl Hagen has suggested that the pleated garments were made by professional Scandinavian tailors [Gjøl Hagen 1992: 47]. But is it really reasonable to suppose that this fashion came into being without any influence from the outside world?

In relation to this question, it is interesting to ask whether it is likely that the vertically sewn pleated dress had been in use both in towns and in the countryside. Medieval textiles found in the countryside of Norway have not been examined as much as textiles from medieval towns. I have carried out technical research on 3000 examples of textiles found in 16 medieval churches in the eastern part of Norway [Nilsen 1995, 1997]. All the churches are located in rural areas. There are no vertically sewn pleated fragments represented in this material. This indicates that the dress with vertically sewn pleats was mostly used in towns, but examination of textiles from rural areas in Sweden and other parts of Norway could change this picture. Variations in preservation conditions could also be important. Approximately 37% of all the textiles examined from the medieval churches of eastern Norway are made of wool. In the towns of Oslo and Tønsberg, the picture is totally different. The percentage of woollen textiles in these towns is between 88 and 90%. At this point it is unclear whether the preservation conditions are the primary cause of the differences in the percentage of woollen textiles, or if other factors related to the churches are just as important.

Summary

Archaeological excavations in Norwegian and Swedish towns have revealed numerous pleated fragments of

textiles. A large amount of the findings are dated to the period between A.D. 1150 and 1250. The fragments are remnants of medieval clothing. The group differs from other groups of pleated textiles in both technique and appearance. All of them are made of wool, often of shiny twills, and the bottom of each fold is stitched on the reverse side of the fabric. At present, there are more questions than answers related to the form of the garments, who was wearing them, and the origins of the fashion. I have suggested that these fragments could be remnants of a long, figure-sewn dress for women. The form of the dress may have been developed from a local furrowed pleating-tradition. Another possibility is that the vertically sewn pleated dress had its origins in an international Gothic style. To get closer to an answer, more systematic research on the archaeological material is required. The connection between medieval art and remnants of clothing is another question that needs to be discussed much more. Style and the spread of style and its relation to fashion is a complex theme that deserves more attention.

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