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## Early medieval costume in Switzerland

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Antoinette Rast-Eicher

## Early Medieval Costume in Switzerland

### Introduction

The database of material for this paper has been acquired from inhumation graves in Switzerland (Fig. 1). Most of the textiles are mineralized onto metal objects. As some of the research has yet to be completed, this paper is a first draft of an overview with preliminary results. Some projects are in the process of being printed, other material is still in the laboratory for the conservation of the metal and the documentation of the textiles. Due to cultural differences in the metal finds, the material is divided geographically between the North-East and West of the country (the South has too little material to give a representative sample). The material also divides chronologically between graves of the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century and graves of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. To the North-East belong the regions of Basel, Zürich and Schaffhausen (see Fig. 1: 1-10). The graves from the canton of Zug (see Fig. 1: 11, 12) which in fact belong to central Switzerland, are treated here as part of the North-East group because of their cultural similarity. The material from the western part of Switzerland includes graves mostly west of the river Aare, those from around Bern (Fig. 1: 14-16, 18) and others in the Canton of Fribourg (Fig. 1: 17).

The nature of the database is quite different for the North-East group and the West group: in eastern Switzerland we can work with a much larger number of textiles than in the West, some reports are finished, printed or ready for printing. The numbers will increase even more with the inclusion of the catalogue of male graves from Baar Früebergstrasse ZG (100 graves!) and from Langenthal BE which are not yet completely studied in the laboratory. In the western part of the country the cemeteries are fewer and smaller, and projects for textile studies are only starting.

I have tried to pick out of the total number of the textiles those whose function can be interpreted as "costume". It is not always obvious what their function is. We must make a very precise observation of the position of the textile in the grave in relation to the other objects. For this type of analysis it was important

to remove the objects during excavation and put them in plaster so that the process could be carried out in optimum circumstances in the laboratory. This permits precise documentation with drawings, macro-photos and a written catalogue. The fibre analysis has been carried out by scanning electron microscopy.

### Costume or grave tradition?

There are specific objects that have a close relationship to the costume found in the graves. Most relevant are the girdles in the male graves, and the girdles and the brooches in female graves. Women wear many more items close to the body, and therefore close to the dress – like arm rings, earrings, legging buckles etc. Other objects in female graves are accessories suspended from the girdle such as rings, knives, coins etc. They are in direct contact with the dress above and below the girdle. All these objects generally make a reconstruction of the costume much easier for women than for men.

Representational evidence, such as the pictures of the Stuttgarter Psalter (around 800 A.D.), and of a Carolingian church painting in Mals (Italy), close to the eastern Swiss border [Rüber 1992: Fig. 38], clearly shows that throughout this period male costume consisted of tunic, trousers and mantle. In the graves it is, however, very difficult to define the costume because men do not always wear their girdles, so textiles found in association with them are not necessarily clothes.

An important regional difference between North-East and West concerns the girdle. In the seventh century large girdle plates were worn by women and men in the western part of Switzerland. In the East, women mostly wore a simple buckle while men could have buckles with large plates.

### Male costume

The key article of dress in constructing any overview of male costume is the girdle. There seem to be

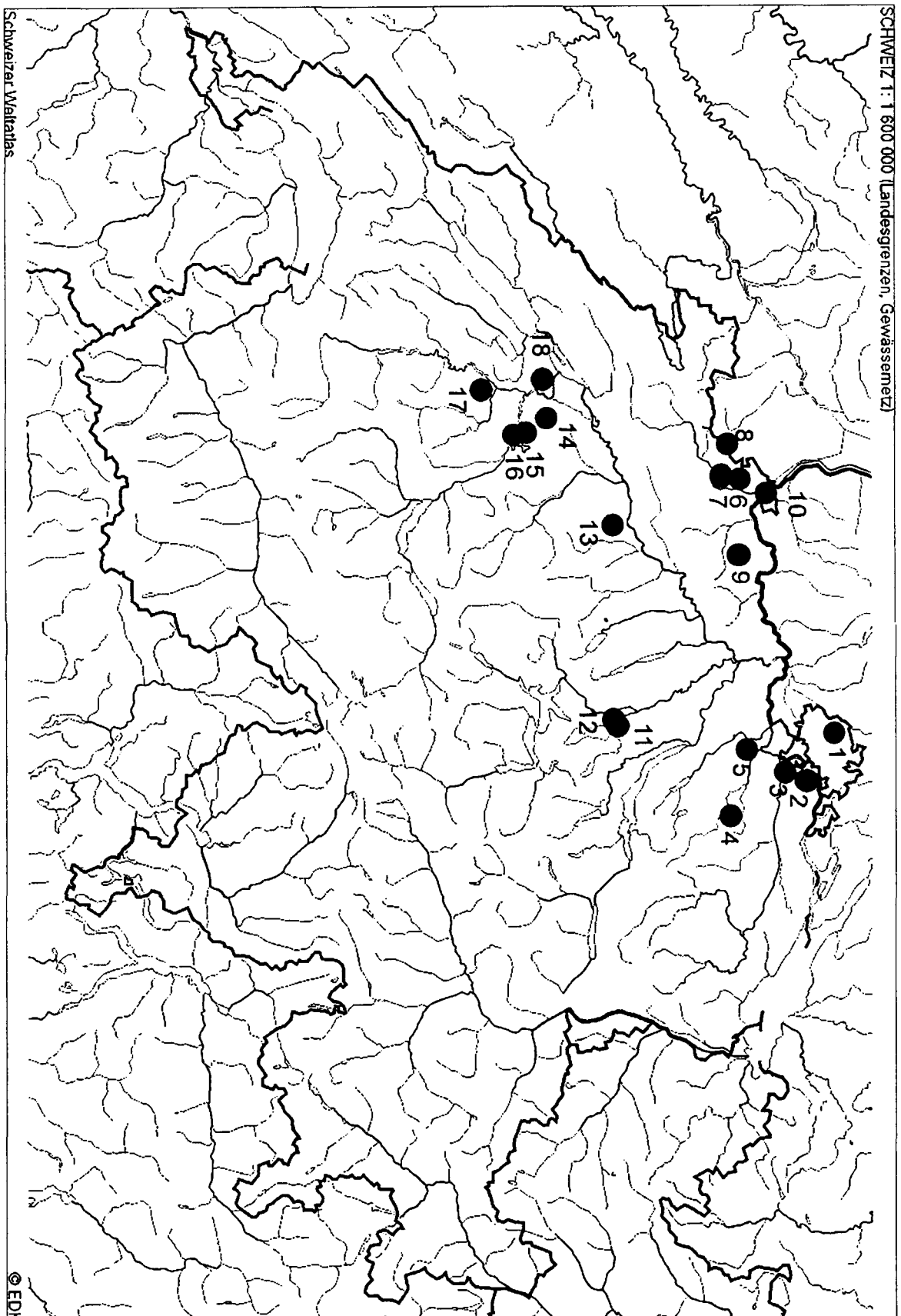


Fig. 1. Map Early medieval textile finds. 1 – Schleitheim-Hebsack SH [Rast-Eicher 2000a]; 2 – Flurlingen-Gründenstrasse ZH [Rast-Eicher 2002b]; 3 – Flaach-Chrumben ZH [Rast-Eicher 2002d]; 4 – Elgg ZH [Windler 1994]; 5 – Bülach ZH [Amrein, Rast-Eicher, Windler 1999]; 6 – Therwil BL [Marti 2000; Rast-Eicher 2001]; 7 – Aesch-Stenacker BL [Marti 2000; Rast-Eicher 2001]; 8 – Rodersdorf (SO) [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 9 – Buus, Kirche BL [Marti 2000; Rast-Eicher 2001]; 10 – Basel St. Alban BS [Helwig et al. 2003]; 11 – Baar-Zugerstrasse ZG [Horisberger et al. 2004]; 12 – Baar-Früeburgstrasse ZG [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 13 – Langenthal BE [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 14 – Melkirch, Kirche [Rast-Eicher 2004]; 15 – Köniz-Niederwangen BE [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 16 – Köniz-Oberwangen BE [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 17 – Bösingen FR [Rast-Eicher in prep.]; 18 – Kallnach [Kissling in prep.].

Tab. 1: North/East and West: Textiles at the back of the buckles and plates in men's graves (w: wool, f: flax).

		tabby f	weft-faced tabby	twill	diamond-twill	Rippenköper w/f	tabby plissée w/f
North/	5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c.	1					
East	7 <sup>th</sup> c.	6	1				
West	5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c.						
	7 <sup>th</sup> c.		4				1

different ways of wearing or depositing this item in a male burial. It can either be included in the burial as part of the costume with the girdle worn as it was in lifetime, or with the girdle added separately. Therefore it is essential to establish not only the position of the textile in relation to the girdle, but also the place of the girdle in the grave. To adhere strictly to the question of costume I have left out all the graves in which the girdles were obviously not worn. There are examples where the girdles are placed under the head together with a bag [Flaach ZH grave 6, Rast-Eicher 2002d], and others where the girdles are put at the side of the dead man with his weapons [Baar Zugerstrasse ZG, grave 24, Horisberger, et al. 2004]. From a total of 59 male graves in the northern and eastern regions with textiles preserved at the back of the girdle buckle or plate, in only 8 (!) cases was the girdle being worn in place and so relevant for costume analysis. In several graves it is clear that the girdle has been wrapped in a textile and placed on or close to the body. In the western part of Switzerland the inhumation tradition seems to be quite different to that in the North-East. Here all the men wore their girdles in the correct place on their costume.

There seem to be cloth types specific to male burials in the eastern part of the country. The textile remains show that here men wore a tunic made of a balanced linen tabby of medium quality under the girdle (Tab. 1). There is no use of wool like that found in female graves (see below). This linen textile does not change during time, it is the same in the seventh as in the fifth century. It is interesting, that the weft-faced tabby – the type found mainly in western Switzerland (see below) – has been found only once in the region of Basel [Aesch BL, Marti 2000; Rast-Eicher 2001], in the northern part of the country and not at all in the East (Fig. 1: 7).

Trousers are difficult to find. We need to have objects buried close to the legs and the certainty that these objects were not wrapped in or lying on some other textile. A special textile also appearing in male graves is the *Rippenköper* and another textile with a folded appearance, the *Plissée*. In Switzerland, they have been found twice in seventh century graves, in both cases rich church graves (Buus BL, Meikirch

BE). The one from Buus BL [Marti 2000; Rast-Eicher 2001] was not documented at the buckle, but under the short sword (“Sax”), and is therefore not included in Tab. 1. Unlike the *Rippenköper* or *Plissée* for women (see below), it seems to be a garment worn over the girdle [see also Rast-Eicher 2002c].

Examination of the body of material demonstrates that there are different types of textiles at the front of the buckles. Linen tabby (z/z) is dominant, then 2/2 twill or diamond twill. It is quite difficult to know which one is a mantle or conversely a textile connected with the inhumation. The 2/2 twill seems to have been used like a shroud. There are three cases where a wool twill lies over the tabby as an outer layer. One very fine example of a textile imprint shows that the diamond twill was certainly worn, and was not just used as a shroud in the grave. This is an imprint on a wall in the church of Müstair in eastern Switzerland, made when somebody was leaning on a painting that was still wet (end 8<sup>th</sup> century) [Rast-Eicher 2000].

Beside the twills, I would propose that a leather mantle or outer covering was also worn. Of the fragments of leather found in association with the girdle buckles and plates found in Flurlingen ZH [Rast-Eicher 2002b], those at the back of the plates can obviously be interpreted as girdle leather. There remains, however, a series of buckles and plates with leather preserved on the front, too. This must be the remains of a leather cover or mantle, perhaps like the second to fourth century example found in Ireland [Wincott Heckett 2001].

The western tunics are somewhat different. Unfortunately for the fifth and sixth centuries there is not enough evidence, but in the seventh century graves (both early and late) men wore a weft-faced tabby tunic made of wool (Tab. 1).

### Female Costume of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

During the fifth and sixth centuries women wore the so-called “Vierfibeltracht”, a costume with four brooches; two small and two large. The small ones are usually placed around the chest or neck, the large ones, the so-called “Bügefibel” lie on the hip or upper legs. There are unfortunately no representational

Tab. 2: North/East: Textile types hold by the pin of the brooches (V: twill variant, probably diamond twill; w: wool, f: flax).

	tabby w/f	tabby spinpat.	tablet weaving	2/2 twill	twill
5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c. small fibula	11	1	2	3	1
5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c. „Bügel-fibel”	10		1	2 (V)	
7 <sup>th</sup> c. single fibula	4	1			

sources for this costume. In archaeological research there has been a on-going discussion about the function of these “Bügel-fibel” (Martin 1994). We can deduce from the position in which they are found in the burial, that the two small brooches (“Kleinfibeln”) fastened a veil or a light mantle. It seems clear that they did this as a pair. The two larger brooches, the so-called “Bügel-fibel” are likewise thought to act as a pair, holding in place the same article of dress. Tab. 2 shows the textiles found at the small brooches (“Kleinfibeln”). They are mostly woven in tabby (wool or flax) of medium to very fine quality. Some borders in tablet weaving are preserved. But there are also pairs of brooches which do not fasten the same textile: the first brooch fastening a 2/2 twill, and the second brooch a wool tabby [Flaach ZH, grave 8, Rast-Eicher 2002d]. Another example of a non-matching pair in the same grave is grave 4 of Basel St. Alban, where a linen tabby was found with one brooch, and wool fibres were found on the pin of the other [Helmig et al. 2003].

The textile evidence now makes it clear that the two larger brooches of this period, the “Bügel-fibel”, are in some cases used as a pair, but in others not. The textiles fastened by this type of brooch are usually tabby (in wool or flax), in two cases we found a 2/2 twill, one of them a diamond twill. The 2/2 twill of the Basel St. Alban grave 4 had tablet weaving borders at the back. The other brooch (“Bügel-fibel”) in this grave fastened a linen tabby corresponding to the tabby found on one of the small brooches. How can we interpret this dress? The grave from Basel shows that the fine mantle must have been quite long, pinned on the chest by a small brooch and lower down on the hip by a “Bügel-fibel”. The 2/2 twill at the other “Bügel-fibel” lay under the mantle because remains were visible on the finger ring and on the arm ring, both close to the body. The remains of this twill with tablet weaving borders seems to have come from a dress which was open in the front, but which could be closed by a brooch.

Beside the brooches, fragments of a fine tabby preserved on the inner side of an arm ring in Flaach ZH, show that an under-tunic with long and narrow sleeves was also worn.

Not a lot of work has as yet been done on material of this period in the western part of Switzerland, and excavations have not been carried out recently. From

a first glance at the textiles from Riaz in the Canton of Fribourg, it seems that those preserved on the brooches are comparable to the cloth types of the fifth and sixth centuries coming from the North-East.

### Female Costume of the Seventh Century

Women throughout the whole country wore a mantle closed by a single brooch placed on the upper chest during the seventh century. This type of costume is shown on various representations coming from this period and later on. Archaeologically the finds stop after the conversion to Christianity, when the burial practice changes.

There are few items of dress as well known as that closed by the single fibula. Four single brooches fix the same type of linen textile (Aesch BL grave 37 and 55, Bülach ZH, Reigoldswil BL grave 42), an unbalanced tabby of medium to fine quality, sometimes with spin-patterning (Tab. 2). In another grave this type of linen textile was found as a top layer over the girdle accessories [Schleitheim SH grave 504, Rast-Eicher 2002a]. In two graves, Bülach ZH [Amrein, Rast-Eicher, Windler 1999] and Schleithem SH 504 the length of this mantle could be traced. It is quite long, and nearly reaches the ankle. What did they wear underneath? There seem to be a number of different possibilities: Tab. 3 shows the variety of textile types found at the back of the buckles. One type is a simple wool or linen tabby, another a *Rippenköper* and a further one a tabby *Plissée* [Rast-Eicher 2002c].

In the western part of the country women, like the men of the same region, wore a tunic in weft-faced tabby. *Rippenköper* was possibly found in one grave. This piece is unfortunately not well documented, but it was certainly found in association with the buckle (Kallnach grave 86, Kissling in prep.). In Kallnach there are also remains of a single large golden fibula with a linen tabby at the back, of the same type as we have found in the North-East.

A recent find (April 2002) from La Tour-de-Trême (Canton of Fribourg, not shown on Fig.) has, however, been made of a fragment of tapestry weave material preserved on the back of a large golden fibula [Graenert, Rast-Eicher 2003]. This type of textile is very rare in Europe [Bender Jørgensen 1992, p. 144f.] and goes back to the Coptic textile tradition. It is inter-

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Tab. 3. North/East and West: textile types at the back of the buckles in women's graves (in brackets textiles under the girdle accessories).

		tabby w/f	weft-faced tabby	twill	diamond-twill	Rippenköper w/f	tabby plissée w/f
North/	5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c.	3		1	4	2	1
East	7 <sup>th</sup> c.	16 (6)		(1)		4 (1)	1 (3)
West	5 <sup>th</sup> /6 <sup>th</sup> c.						
	7 <sup>th</sup> c.	2	4			1?	

esting to find such a textile fragment in western Switzerland, which once again proves the close relationship of the region to Roman tradition. The seventh century textile fragment found in La Tour-de-Trême is one of the most recent examples of its type to be found in Europe, and to judge by the spinning (Splied warp and z-spun weft) it seems to be of local and not Coptic production.

Looking at the textiles preserved on the front of the girdles and girdle accessories, tabby is the dominant textile, but there is also some 2/2 twill such as that found in male graves. In two cases twills are found as an outermost layer on top of a tabby. As women could have worn a dress made of tabby weave, and also a mantle of material with the same weave, it is quite possible to find the same material preserved at both back and front of a small buckle.

**Interpretation**

Archaeological finds can to a certain extent show which textiles were used for the costume of the early medieval period. In eastern Switzerland men wore a tunic made of a balanced linen tabby. Over the tunic they could wear a mantle in diamond twill or 2/2 twill, or even one made of leather.

Women wore a dress made of linen or wool tabby, or one with fine folds (*Rippenköper* or *Plissée*). It is not yet known what status was indicated by wearing one or the other type of dress. During the fifth and sixth centuries a fine, long mantle made from linen tabby with narrow tablet woven borders in wool was placed over the dress. To have an idea of how such a costume would have looked, we can perhaps refer to the image of a women (as in Ravenna shown traditionally without brooches) on the sixth century mosaic in the church of St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. These ladies are wearing a long under-tunic with narrow sleeves, a coloured dress and a long white veil.

In the seventh century the mantle worn over the dress was made from an unbalanced linen tabby, in quality and size very much like the seventh century mantles found in the Black Sea region [Ierusalimskaja 1996, p. 43-45].

During the seventh century the costume in western Switzerland shows one big difference to that of the north-eastern part of the country; men and women wore the same tunic made of wool weft-faced tabby. The facing of the threads is always in the vertical, following the line of the body. This leads to comparisons with garments in Egypt where the weft-faced Coptic tunics with weaving starting at one sleeve look very similar (e.g. Verhecken 1994). Politically western Switzerland was part of the "Burgundia" region, north-eastern Switzerland part of the region of "Alamannia". In western Switzerland Late Roman dress obviously persisted for much longer than in the north-eastern part of the country. The cultural differences of the metal finds seem to be reflected in the textiles as well.

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