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Anne Hedeager Krag

## New Light on a Viking Garment from Ladby, Denmark<sup>1</sup>

Ladby is a Danish ship-burial of the Viking Period. A grave containing a Viking ship was excavated here in 1935, and the finds included several examples of passementerie in gold and silver thread, as well as gold-thread embroidery. These costume fittings have been described in monographs on the Ladby ship-burial published by Thorvildsen [1957] and Sørensen [2001]. The fragments are thought to belong to a caftan, a coat-like garment with sleeves. It was fastened in front with passementerie, with a fastening either down the middle of the front or at an angle across the front. The caftan was originally a garment characteristic of Central Asia. Other archaeological sources and pictures reveal that the caftan influenced European noble costume in the Late Iron Age and the Viking Period – from circa 550 to 1050 A.D.

The Ladby ship-burial lay under a mound near Kerteminde in the north-easternmost corner of Funen.<sup>2</sup> The grave had been disturbed, possibly soon after the burial, but the surviving finds still testify to a special collection of grave goods. The ship itself was a warship of about 22 metres long, over which a chamber had been constructed for the burial. The ship-burial now remains just as it was found in the mound. The grave has been dated to the beginning of the tenth century. A museum has been built around the ship, with an exhibition of Viking-period finds from the locality.

Only the impression and a few pieces of wood from the ship itself have survived, but its form is clear from the surviving nails. The rich grave goods included dog bridles, riding equipment, the skeletons of at least four dogs and eleven horses, weaponry, and personal items.

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<sup>2</sup> The Ladby ship was discovered in November 1934 by the amateur archaeologist Poul Helweg Mikkelsen. He also participated in the excavation proper in 1935, and it has been possible to obtain a detailed impression of the excavation thanks to his diaries.

Particularly noteworthy is a bronze cauldron of Irish origin and a Carolingian silver brooch. There were also a few fragments of fine and precious costume. These included embroidery in gold and silver thread and small buttons produced in silver-thread passementerie. The fragments of passementerie and embroidery in gold and silver thread from the Ladby ship-burial come from a valuable garment.

The embroidery includes fragments with gold thread, which have been drawn in a schematic manner [Thorvildsen 1957: 80], (Fig. 1). The best piece of gold-thread work is a 5 cm-long, rectangular frame of artificially twisted gold thread filled in by zig-zagging, crossing, spiral-spun gold thread. This must originally have been spun around a thread now lost. The frame is in two parts which are fastened together in a regular manner. The technique is one of sewing metal thread around loose darning, a technique also known from Birka [Geijer 1938: 109ff.; Thorvildsen 1957: 78ff., fig. 67, no. 65]. A gold-thread pattern representing another technique has also been found [Thorvildsen 1957: fig. 68, no. 449]. The gold-thread work from Ladby involves the use of drawn gold thread or tinsel, the latter being used around a textile core that has now disappeared [Sørensen 2001: 73]. In Scandinavia, the distribution of drawn gold thread is heavier in the east. The gold threads belonged to some textile, part of which has now gone, and which could have formed part of a tunic, a hood or a caftan [Hägg 1986: 73; Sørensen 2001: 76].

There are two small buttons of silver-thread passementerie (Fig. 2). Together with a knotted bundle of spiral-wound silver thread [Thorvildsen 1957, fig. 69, no. 501], these are considered to have been knotted borders of silver cord that were used to embroider the dress. A small tab of plaited silver cord (fig. 69, no. 392) is thought to have terminated a narrow band that has now been lost. This piece, which is 1,4 cm in length and width, is plaited from silver threads edged with two-ply gold cord.

Eight buttons with silver and gold decorative appliqués were found (Fig. 3). They vary in form, but

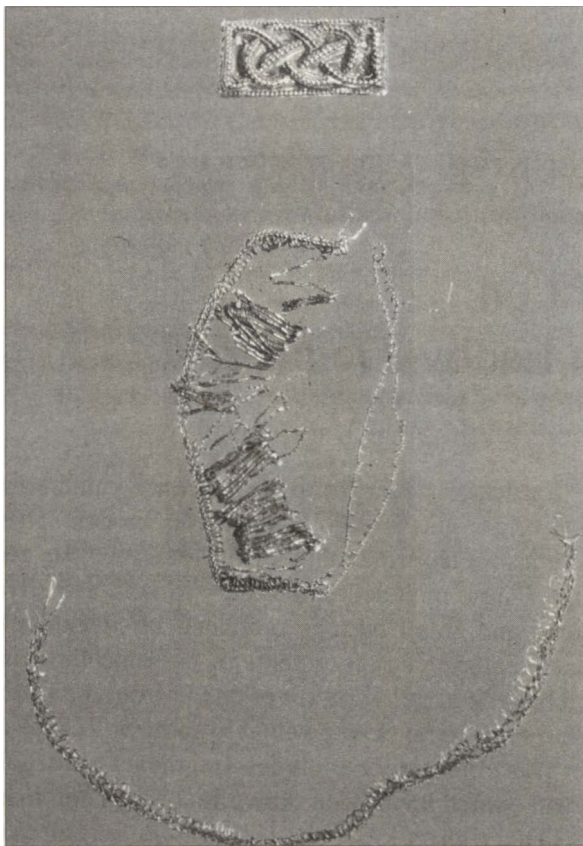


Fig. 1. Gold-thread ornamentation was found in the area of the grave, probably a part of the clothing belonging to the buried person. Photo: John Lee, *The National Museum of Copenhagen*.

are all made of gold and silver threads twisted together and sewn on to small plates of horn and leather. All of these pieces have been furnished with a loop. By this means they could be sewn on to the garment. They are identified as some sort of buttons for the caftan. On three small buttons (nos. 392, 255 and 407) a ring of plaited silver thread has been laid around a circular, gilt plate. On the outside, this ring is attached to a thin, two-ply gold thread, which is formed into point to produce a star shape. Two small buttons (nos. 119 and 199) were complex, with three roundels placed at the corners of a triangular central field. These pieces were about 2,5 cm across. On the best preserved specimen (no. 119) two of the corner rosettes are linked by a thick silver thread which holds a small silver loop. The silver cords that ring the plate are so excellently preserved on these two examples that the form of the plaiting can be made out. It appears that the silver thread was formed into the same pattern that is found in several graves from Birka [Geijer 1938: 116 f., fig. 30].

There are finally two triangular pendants (nos. 316 and 357). These are about 1.75 cm across, and have the form of equilateral triangles with glittering triangular plates in each corner and a gold plate in the middle. Silver-thread borders are found around the plates. Both examples have a small silver loop at one end.

In Denmark, thirteen grave finds of the Viking Period containing gold and silver threads have been recorded, including only one with passementerie in both gold and silver thread, namely the Ladby ship burial [Hedeager Krag et al.] From Norway, four grave finds of the Viking Period containing gold and silver threads are known, including two with gold-thread passementerie, namely the Gokstad ship burial and Vangsnes. In Sweden there are 128 recorded grave finds of the Viking Period containing gold and silver threads. Ninety-five of these are from Birka, and the other thirty-three are from the rest of Sweden. Furthermore, forty-seven of the Birka graves include passementerie, while there are seven examples from the rest of Sweden. There is thus a great preponderance of passementerie in eastern Scandinavia.

In Sweden, a series of richly furnished graves on Adelsö in the Mälars region close to Birka show that this was an important area in the Viking Period [Ambrosiani 1985: 114]. At the cemetery of Ormknös two of the graves contained applied costume ornaments in silver wire and silver-thread passementerie, namely graves 1:a and 1:b [Holmquist Olausson 1993: 43 ff., fig. 5.3, g-k, fig. 5.5, g]. These are thought to date to the ninth century, and one of the pieces of passementerie [Holmquist Olausson 1993: fig. 5.3.g.] is nearly the same as Ladby, no. 501.

A number of major barrows at Skopintull on Adelsö have been excavated, and one cremation grave included a number of pieces made of gold thread together with belt fittings and riding gear [Rydh 1936: 115, fig. 295]. They were initially dated to the tenth century on the strength of the artefacts, but it has subsequently been argued that the site might equally well be assigned further back into the ninth century [Arrhenius 1978: 52].

There are striking similarities between the precious textile remains from the Danish Ladby ship burial and the Swedish finds from Skopintull on Adelsö [Rydh 1936: 164]. The fine gold-thread products from Skopintull and the silver-thread passementerie from Ormknös indicate that there were people living at Adelsö who were of high social status at the beginning of the tenth century, and that this was a place where men wore a costume that was fastened with buttons.

We also know of passementerie from a number of graves at Birka, forty-seven examples in all [Geijer 1938: 101]. Analyses of the silver-thread passementerie have revealed an oriental origin [Geijer 1938; Hägg 1984]. There are examples of oriental caftans in five graves at Birka (grave 716, 752, 944, 985 and 1074) [Jansson 1989: 594]. These five caftans represent a range of oriental male garments at Birka. They are believed to have been made of silk, with silver passementerie. These garments and their decoration

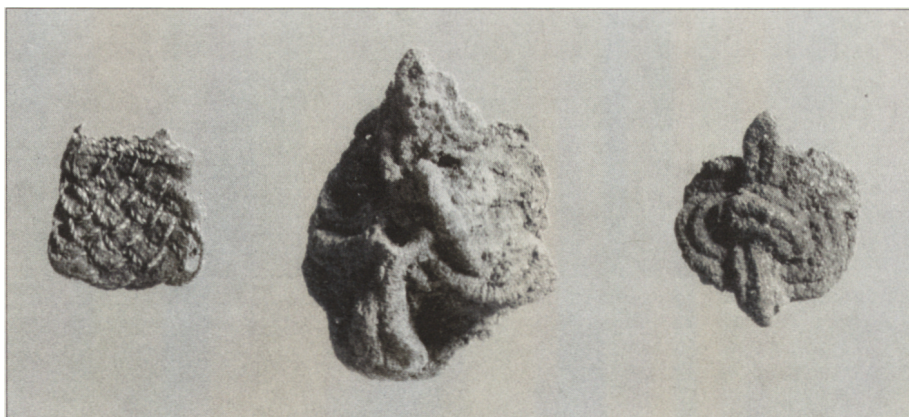


Fig. 2. Small buttons of silver-thread passementerie, from the Ladby Ship, nos. 501, 81 and 392.  
Photo: John Lee, *The National Museum of Copenhagen*.

obviously indicated the wearer's rank [Jansson 1987: 796]. They probably come from the east, given out by rulers and chieftains as honorary gifts to visitors and members of their guard.

The costumes also reflect Byzantine influence, presumably transmitted via the royal house of the Rus in Kiev. These can consequently be regarded as some form of official or court dress that was directly inspired by the Kievan court [Iversen, Näsman 1991: 51]. In the Byzantine manuscript, *The Homily*, of Johannes Chrysostomos, produced in Constantinople around 1078, one can see the Emperor Michael VII (1071-1078) surrounded by his courtiers [Cutler, Spieser 1996: 333, fig. 268]<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 4). Of the four men around the Emperor, three are wearing tight red capes that are fastened at the front with gold edging, gold embroidery and laces, over long blue tunics edged with ribbons at the bottom and bearing rectangular patterns. Is this a court dress, or an official uniform? In the Byzantine Empire a caftan with silk strips and passementerie was the fashion for the leading class in the tenth century, and the Russian river routes could have transported the Byzantine caftan with passementerie and silk bands further north [Jansson 1989: 605].

The Arab envoy, Ibn Fadlan, described in a travelogue how he met Vikings in 922 by the River Volga. Amongst other things, he gave a detailed description of a Viking chieftain's funeral. Ibn Fadlan was a member of a delegation that had been despatched from the caliphate in Baghdad and therefore gives a detailed description of the delegation's route. This is of interest as the only eye-witness account we have to shed light upon this particular area during the Viking Period,

<sup>3</sup> The Emperor is dressed in a noble costume consisting of a long blue tunic with a *segmentae* (i.e.a. Byzantine status symbol, corresponding to the Islamic *tiraz*), a ribbon that was always worn on the upper arm. Over this is a dark blue *paludamentum*, a cape that is decorated with large geometric motifs, and with a large gilded *tablion* worn in front.

which is otherwise only revealed to us through archaeological evidence. One detail of the description is that the deceased chieftain was dressed in a caftan with silk brocade and gold buttons [Bæk Simonsen 1981: 56]. Archaeological finds of silk brocade and golden buttons in two chamber graves at Gnezdovo in the Dnieper region of Russia confirm that the Vikings wore a caftan-like garment [Avdusin, Puskina 1988: 28 ff.; Shepard 1995: 250]. These may have been made by the Rus [Hägg 1984: 208]. It is important, in this regard, to make a close comparison with the Bulgarian Danubian graves of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, where tablet-woven brocades and passementerie are often found.

Archaeologists have traced contacts between Scandinavia, Finland and the south-eastern Baltic region back as far as the Bronze and early Iron Ages [Melnikova, Petrukhin 1996: 206f.]. Such contacts intensified around the middle of the first millennium A.D. and into the Viking Period.

Surviving caftans are rare among archaeological finds of textiles, and reference has therefore to be made to the caftans found in a cemetery associated with one of the trading stations on the Silk Road, Moscevaja Balka in the northern Caucasus, between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. These graves are dated from the seventh century to the ninth centuries, which is of interest as it was in this period that silkworms and the complicated weaving of silk spread beyond China and Persia.

Whole garments are preserved that once belonged to a local population which had learnt how to levy tolls upon those who used the Silk Road. The textile finds from Moscevaja Balka include various sleeved coats, the so-called caftans. These were characteristic of male dress in this community. They were often decorated with small strips of patterned silk that were sewn on at various places, for example the sleeves, the collars and the hem [Riboyd 1976: 21 ff.; Jerusalemkaja 1996: 48 ff.]. In just one case there is a splendid caftan with a



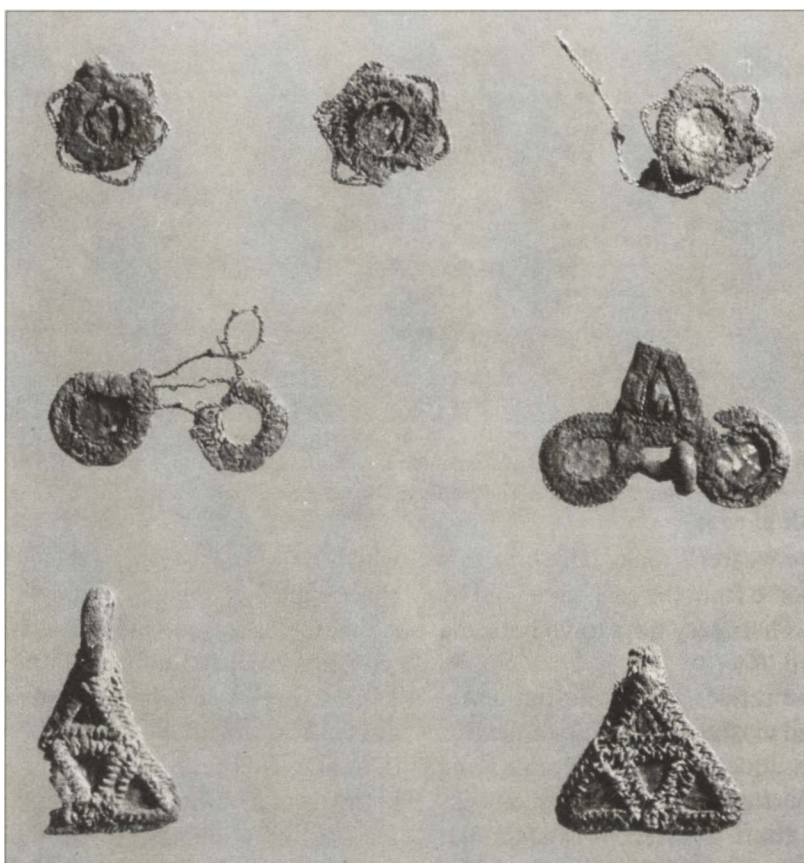


Fig. 3. Buttons with silver and gold decorative appliques. Photo: John Lee, *The National Museum of Copenhagen*.

large, Byzantine pheasant motif. It was unquestionably rare for one individual to be given a whole piece of silk.

The word "oriental" is used to cover the Islamic world and further east, but Byzantine costumes are also classified as oriental. The oriental-inspired caftan is known from the Viking Period primarily through documentary sources and pictures.

From the third century A.D. we know of a caftan-like over-garment from mural paintings (Fig. 5). In the synagogue of Dura Europos, near the Euphrates in Syria, there are some valuable depictions of Parthian costume, especially worn by the horsemen and the king. The pictures illustrate the Esther Cycle from the Bible. These are now on display in the National Museum in Damascus [Dura Europos 1999].

The current scholarly opinion is that there was a style of costume worn by chiefs in Viking-period Scandinavia. The remains of the dress from the Ladby ship burial are of this type. Moreover the passementerie on the Ladby man's costume can be taken as belonging to an outfit that had points in common with the oriental caftan. Several of the buttons were similar to buttons found at and in the area around Birka in Sweden. There were close contacts between here and the areas of Russia along the great rivers Volga and Dnieper. The river routes brought goods from the Byzantine Empire and the caliphate in Baghdad. Archaeological

discoveries in Russia bear witness to Scandinavian influence in burial practices, and there are also traces of oriental items of clothing in graves with Scandinavian grave goods in Russia. Some items of dress from the Birka graves can be identified as having belonged to caftan-like garments. For instance there are some applied, crossing, decorative silk bands placed on the chest, and buttons. Garments fastened by long rows of buttons apparently belong to a style of costume that had come in from elsewhere, from the lands of the East.

It is clear that male costume with passementerie and buttons often had models derived from areas lying to the south-east in and around Russia which were closely linked to Scandinavia in the Viking Period. This adds to the image we otherwise have of male dress. The pictorial evidence gives a general impression of the style of costume which is confirmed, as regards several details, by grave finds in which textiles with gold and silver threads are frequently preserved. The Ladby man had grave goods that reveal connexions with both the Carolingian Empire on the Continent and Anglo-Saxon England, as well as the oriental items of clothing [Hedeager Krag 1999: 434]. The style of dress for men of high status and power apparently conformed to an international fashion subject both to oriental influences as well as others from the great centres of power in Europe.



Fig. 4. Byzantine costume as shown in *The Homily* of Johannes Chrysostomos, Ms. Coislin 79, fol. 2r, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

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Fig. 5. The Persian king wearing a caftan-like overgarment with sleeves, and standing beside him Esther as his Queen. This type of overgarment is also called *scaragmanion* after a Persian word. Dura Europos, Damascus.

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