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A tenth century cloth from Bogstown Co. Meath

Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia nr 50/1, 95-99

2004

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A large wool textile was purchased by the British Museum, London in 1910 from the Reverend William Falkiner, Londonderry, Ireland. It had been recovered from the bog in the townland of Bogstown in the parish of Clonard, the location of an important early Christian monastery sited on a tributary of the River Boyne, Co. Meath. This cloth is still in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities of the British Museum, and I am grateful to Susan Youngs, Curator of the Department for inviting me to undertake this study, and for all the help and support she has given me. Hero Granger-Taylor analyzed and catalogued the textile for the Museum in 1993 and I am most appreciative that she made her report available to me. I am much indebted to Dr. Joan Rockley, Department of Archaeology, UCC, Cork who identified the Rev. William Falkiner, M.A., M.R.I.A., M.R.S.A.I., as a collector through whose hands a number of artefacts reached different museums. She also advised me that in 1888 the Rev. Falkiner was living in the Glebe House, Killucan, Co. Westmeath only a few miles from Bogstown, Clonard Parish. His obituary in the "Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland", 1915, vol. 45 includes this description 'Mr. Falkiner was an accomplished draghtsman, a skilled metal worker, and took a special interest in Irish craftmanship.' It is therefore not surprising that the Bogstown cloth came into his hands.

In 1994 a sample of the cloth, OxA-4866 was radiocarbon tested, a tenth century A.D. date was registered. [Archeometry Data List 21, 38, 1996, 195].

The textile as it has survived is almost square, measuring 100 cm by 113 cm. All the edges have been cut (perhaps after the cloth was found?) so the original loompiece was larger. The weave is tabby, with one tight Z-spun system, thread diameter *circa* 1mm; this is most likely the warp. The possible weft system uses a loose S-spun yarn, *circa* 1.5-3 mm diameter. From time to time this second system carries a doubled thread. The tight Z-spun system has 6 threads to the centimetre, and the S-spun 4, or rarely 5 threads to the centimetre. Faults are visible on the reverse where weft picks have been added to even out the weave.

The yarn in both systems has been combed, producing a firm, lustrous thread. The surface of the cloth has been processed so that a longish nap has been brushed into curls; this has not survived throughout. The brushing is aligned vertically with the ?warp ends all in the same direction, which is perhaps downwards. This effect may well have been achieved by the traditional Irish methods in which the nap was rubbed up with a bag of stones, and honey was used to produce the curled effect [Lucas 1968: 18-67].

An Irish parallel for this type of finish is the textile known as the Mantle of St. Brigid. In 1936 this was held in the Cathedral of St. Saveur, Bruges, Belgium where it was believed to have been a gift to the Cathedral from Princess Gunhild, sister of King Harold of England sometime after 1066 A.D.. Her family is known to have strong connections with both Ireland and Flanders. The tabby weave wool cloth is covered with curled tufts of wool, brushed up from the thick, loosely spun ?weft yarn. In the same article Mlle. Calberg, Department of Textiles, Royal Museum, Brussels also reported that the other system was of finer yarn, with more twist, but with densities of 4 threads to the centimetre in both systems [McClintock 1936: 32].

The most striking feature of the Bogstown textile is easily visible; the whole piece is punctuated at close, fairly regular intervals with small raised round areas of cloth, some 5mm x 5mm, some 10mm x 10mm. The fibres of these bosses are more worn than those in surrounding areas, and are a significantly lighter colour (Fig. 1). It appears that this effect must have been produced by the application at an early date of decorative metal mounts of some sort. On the reverse of the cloth the round impressions are, of course, concave and it can sometimes be seen that something, perhaps a thread, perhaps a metal shank, has passed through their centres drawing the yarns downwards. Domed metal mounts were found from sites in medieval London, with either integral or separate rivets to

secure them in place. One with a single, separate rivet was still attached to a textile [Egan and Pritchard 1991: 162; 179].

The colour of the cloth now is red/ginger (5YR 4/6 yellowish red, Munsell Color Charts), as so often occurs in bog finds. However it can be seen that this is deeper on the reverse where there is also softer matting of the surface of the cloth. The matting may perhaps be from wear, or it may be a type of processing. Analyses to establish fleece and evidence of dyeing were carried out by Penelope Walton Rogers of Textile Research, York who was most helpful in providing this important information. These analyses established that the wool used for both warp and weft was Hairy Medium with the Z-spun, probable warp threads using lightly coarser fibres than the S-spun, probable weft system. It is very likely that the textile was white and left undyed. Walton Rogers comments that a slight difference in fibres between warp and weft is more usual for this cloth type at the time, and is similar to wool cloth from England and Germany. By contrast, she notes, cloth from the Norse colonies in the North Atlantic has a big difference between the coarser yarns chosen for the warp or the finer for the weft.

Fig. 1. Wool tabby cloth (10th century A.D.) Bogstown, Co.Meath (*copyright: British Museum*).

On the surface of the cloth there are several types of residues. One that occurs a number of times was examined by the Scientific Laboratory of the British Museum to ascertain whether any metals were present, perhaps relating to decorations. It was found to be of vegetable origin and without any trace of metals.

Approximately thirty small pieces of thread were lying on the surface of the textile. Two of these were analyzed and appear to be of silk; one is kinked in a way that suggests it had another thread woven across it. Randomly caught in the weave were approximately thirty-five hairs and at least twenty-nine scraps of

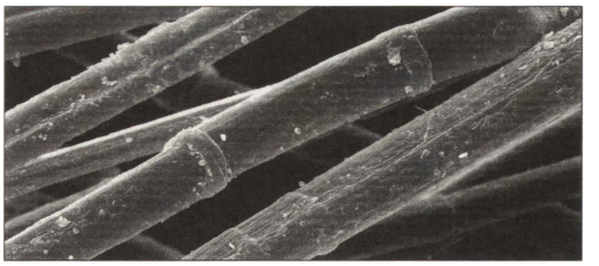

Fig. 2. Linen thread from cloth surface. *Copyright A. Rast Eicher.*

fine threads. I am most grateful to Antoinette Rast Eicher, Ennenda, Switzerland for undertaking scanning electron microscopy on a sample of hair and vegetable fibre thread. Her analysis showed that the former is horse hair, and that the very fine thread was made from flax (Figs. 2, 3). At least two explanations for the presence of horse hairs are possible. One is that in antiquity someone wore a cloak made from the cloth while on horseback, or that the cloth was a prestigious saddlecloth. The second is that after its discovery in the bog, the cloth was carried away on a horse.

The major interest of this piece is the question of the raised bosses on the surface. It seems clear that these must represent some form of regulated decoration. Since the bosses are found right up to all four edges, and since there are no selvedges, heading or finishing borders it is likely that the cloth must have originally been larger. When first examined there seemed to be no pattern in their arrangement. However, it happened that the present writer was studying the piece late one summer afternoon in the Medieval and Later Antiquities Study Room at the British Museum when the sun was slanting in through the window onto the table on which it was laid out. It became clear that there were three straight lines of bosses stretching across the cloth. They intersected at a certain point towards one end fairly much in the centre (Fig 4). Subsequent careful examination of the cloth under an artificial light could not identify any other straight lines among the many remaining bosses. It can be seen how striking these lines could have been if, for example gold or jeweled *paillettes* had been attached along them onto white cloth, and say, silver on the more irregular ones. Careful scrutiny of the line of bosses at the top of the cloth seems to show an indentation running beneath it. That could represent the former existence of a braid that lay underneath the decorations. This interpretation would fit in with what we know of the generous use of braids on dress at the time. For example, the eleventh century chasuble of St.Vitalis of Germany is decorated with tablet woven braids set with pearls and gemstones (Abegg Stiftung, Berne, Switzerland, Inv. 232).

Further examination of the surface from photographs that show up areas of light and shade, and

Fig. 3. Horse hair from cloth surface. *Copyright A.Rast Eicher.*

wear patterns, may suggest that some circular patterns of bosses exist. This may be so, for example just below and to the right of the juncture between the vertical line, and the slanting line that runs from the lower right hand corner to the upper left. It may be fanciful to suggest something in the order of acanthus type decoration. If venturing in this direction the Clonmacnoise bronze crucifixion plaque (National Museum of Ireland 1935, no. 506) has interesting associations. The tunic-clad figure of Christ has beaded bands running down the length of the garment which are laid over frond or acanthus type *motifs* (Fig. 5). The different panels of decoration were recently described as 'not symmetrical but they are balanced'. It has been proposed that this plaque may be placed in the beginning of the eleventh century, and that similar *motifs* have been recognized on a bone pin (first quarter eleventh century) from the Viking site of Fishamble Street, Dublin [Johnson 1998: 102-5].

A very early find of textiles in County Down in the north of Ireland was made by the Countess of Moira, described in a letter to the Society of Antiquaries in London in 1783. A further description of the finds was presented by Sir William Wilde in 1864 to the Royal Irish Academy in which a piece of hair cloth was said to have on its outer surface rows of elevations, from each knob of which depended a small black tab, so that originally the cloth must have presented an ermine appearance. It seems that the fibres were knotted regularly onto the cloth. This is a possibility for the Bogstown cloth but it would seem unlikely that the additional strands would completely disappear, and also that they would leave behind the very clear rubbing and marking that exist [Wilde 1864-6: 101-4].

It should also be remembered that the cloth has the lustrous curled wool finish between the bosses. A pure white wool cloth with such a finish would show off very well shiny metal ornaments and braids or embroidery. It may be that circular patterns to be faintly discerned on the Bogstown cloth in conjunction with the raised bosses are the shadows of former embroidery, and could be similarly ordered as those on the Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque. Then the tiny remnants of threads still present on the surface of the cloth would be associated with such stitching and embroidery.

What may this cloth represent, and who may have used it? The likeliest possibility is that it is part of a cloak originally of larger size. Since the lines of the decoration are not centred on the cloth as it now exists it seems legitimate to suggest the size could be extended to perhaps *circa* 135 cm x *circa* 133 cm. The intersecting of the lines of decoration with the central vertical line may propose that these would be displayed on the centre back of the cloak. If the cloak was worn clasped at either shoulder the straight line of decoration would be clearly seen at the other arm and lower body. Cloaks on figures shown in the eighth century Book of Kells may well be rectangular in shape, with two straight sides at the neck falling in folds to just below the knee. Many different lengths of cloaks are shown but some can clearly be seen to be square or rectangular. Folio 29r, Matthew I, 1: *Liber generationis*, for example illustrates a male figure holding a book in his right hand. One side of his cloak falls below his arm to a corner. A further corner can be seen lower down the figure showing that the two corners make up part of a rectangle or square (the other side of the cloak is not illustrated) [Henry 1976: plate 23].

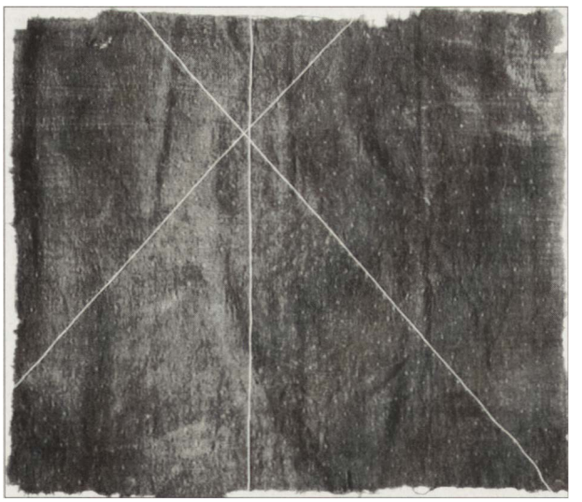

Fig. 4. Wool cloth with thread marking out the vertical lines of the bosses (*copyright: British Museum*).

A second possibility is that it might also have served as a cover for a precious object or as a hanging of some sort. Cogitosus in his seventh century *Life of St. Brigit* describes Kildare Cathedral as having wall hangings, and *sarcophagii* profusely decorated with gold, silver and precious stones containing the bodies of saints [Connolly, Picard 1987: 25-6]. However the fact that the textile is made of wool with the surface processing associated so firmly with cloaks leads one

Fig. 5. Bronze figure of Christ, Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque (early 11th century A.D.?). (NMI 1935, 506). *(copyright: National Museum of Ireland).*

to believe that it is most likely to have been at least initially used in this way.

One question to be examined is whether the textile was worn or used by the Irish or by the Hiberno-Norse. Bogstown, as noted above, lies close to the important monastic settlement of Clonard and ecclesiastical figures in the Book of Kells are shown wearing square or rectangular cloaks. The straight and slanted lines of decoration centred at the back of the neck would be clearly visible down the back and sides of the cloak. There is plenty of Irish literary evidence for shaggy pile cloaks, and for the embroidery of garments [Gantz 1983, Wincott Heckett 1992: 158-168].

There are also specific words to describe cloaks made from white wool; in Cormac's Glossary (p.104) *lend*, the name for a white *brat* or mantle, comes from *lee-find*, "white wool" [Joyce 1903: 195[. In his *Life of St. Columba* Adomnán of Iona (*circa* 628-704A.D.) describes how the monks of Iona on one special sacred occasion chose to dress in white clothes. These were deemed appropriate for major religious feast days [Sharpe 1995: 215]. Another example is the long-standing wearing of the white wool *pallium* or stole that is still worn by the most eminent churchmen of both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian faiths [Berthod 2001: 14-25].

It is of course, a time when Norse incomers were well established in this part of Ireland, and the tributaries of the River Boyne constituted an easy route to and from the sea. There is an interesting reference, apparently from the later eleventh century, by an Arab geographer, Al-'Udhri, in Spain to the dress of the Vikings in Ireland.

'The Vikings have no capital save this island in all the world ... Its people have the dress and customs of the Vikings. They wear valuable hooded mantles, one of which is worth a hundred dinars. Their nobles wear mantles adorned with pearls" [James 1978: 7]. It is not proposed that the Bogstown cloth was ornamented with pearls on their own since such decoration would make indentations rather than raised areas (of course they could be placed into a mount setting). However, it does suggest that heavily decorated cloaks were known to be associated with the Norse, and also with Ireland.

As to how the cloth came to lose its decorations the following story referring to St. Molaise may afford an explanation. It seems that a farmer of Devenish

killed seven armed intruders on his land. Four clerical students were sent by Molaise to Diarmait, son of Aed Slane at Tara to enquire what would be the King's share of the gold and silver collected from the dead men's "garments, necks, swords and spears" (The King said it should all go to the saint.) [Lucas 1986: 12]. If the ornamentation was valuable it could have been stripped off at some point in the life of the textile either in antiquity or when it was found in the bog.

The cloth may have had either a secular or ecclesiastical function. An interesting line of enquiry is suggested by Anna Muthesius in "The 'Cult' of Imperial and Ecclesiastical Silks in Byzantium" [Muthesius 2001: 43] where 'both stellar motives and bells are found on surviving silk vestiture. In this case it is a *Latin* (author's italics) and not a Byzantine Emperor's vestment that has survived. This is a mantle of Emperor Henry II (d. 1024 A.D.) at Bamberg Cathedral, Germany. The silk is embroidered with signs of the zodiac, sun and moon, and Christ, and the Virgin depicted as *Stella Maris*, as well as bearing celestial spheres and images of constellations. The *Libellus de ceremoniis aula imperatoris* of *circa* 1030 A.D. describes the "emperor's golden mantle" as being decorated with "a zodiac made of gold and pearls and precious stones". This source also describes a fringe on the cloak embellished with "three hundred and sixty five golden bells".

There are obvious differences between the Bogstown base material of white wool and the imperial silk used by Henry II, although, as discussed, white wool cloth has been used in sacred ceremonies over many centuries. It seems clear that the Irish piece was carefully processed after being woven to present a luxurious finish. It was then heavily decorated with a planned design with an emphasis towards the back, if worn as a cloak. It had further designs, perhaps circular in the interstices. Presented with such a substantial cloth with so much evidence of former decoration, the conclusion must be that it represents a most unusual and valuable relic of Ireland's past.

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