

6th Century Kentish Gold Brocaded Headband

Background

The textile remains from the Anglo-Saxon era in England are frequently small. They survive because of interaction with a piece of metal they are touching such a brooch or knife. The metal oxidizes and either traps and preserves the fibers or replaces them like a fossil. However, some evidence of textiles has survived because the textile itself is metal. This is the case with some strips of gold, which still bear the impressions of the threads they were woven into.

So little of the other fibers has been found with these bands that it is hard to say definitely that they were card woven and not a rigid heddle type of band which would have been a simple tabby. However there are several reasons to argue that they were probably done with cards. We have an example from Taplow, Buckinghamshire where enough of the wool ground textile remains to show clearly that it at least was card woven. Also, there would be certain advantages to a card woven band. The method of brocading on a card woven band protects the backside of the gold, so it would receive little wear. Some people's body chemistry "eats" or is irritated by metal and having the layer of fiber would prevent this. Also card weaving is a stronger structure, and would hold up better to being used independent of another textile.

Interestingly, in England, the bands with gold found in female graves are typically found at the forehead or at a single wrist. One was found with small gold rings at either end. Card woven bands even in fine spun silk and gold are certainly sturdy enough to need no backing.

Other Works

Sonja Hawkes and Elizabeth Crowfoot give an impressive analysis of these finds. Much of my work is based on their research. I will focus on the bands found in Kent. Crowfoot gives black and white drawings showing the patterns that she has determined based on the marks on these fine pieces of gold which are often less than a millimeter wide. Carolyn Priest-Dornan has published an article on these bands also based in part on Crowfoot's work to which I am also indebted. Her work discusses the appearance of the types of woven bands with metal worked in and finding modern trims similar in appearance for application to costumes for the reenactor.

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Technique

Here I will give an account of how such bands may be easily produced for the card weaver. I will not be giving an explanation of how to do card weaving, but how to incorporate this brocading technique and to illustrate the technique with these Kentish patterns.

Advantages

In my reading and talking to other card weavers, I have often heard complaints about the difficulty of incorporating metallic threads into the weaving. Many available metallic yarns either look too modern or are too fragile to work well as the warp in card weaving. The untwisting and re-twisting and rubbing against the cards is often too much for these beautiful yarns. This technique of brocading incorporates the metal threads as a secondary weft rather than a warp.

Using this technique is also more economical as more of the gold is shown off on top of the weave, rather than hidden inside by the twisting of the warp threads. The weaves typically float over three warps, go under one, and come back up to float for three more. Crowfoot also talks about the likelihood that once the gold was woven in, it was hammered or burnished. This would bring the edges closer together to cover the warp the gold went under, giving an effect more like weaving was covered in a sheet of gold foil with a pattern marked on it. Also, Collingwood describes some card woven bands in the later middle ages where the pattern that will be brocaded over is also threaded into the cards, but in a less expensive or undyed textile. This will be hidden by the brocading, and in the more complex patterns of the later middle ages, would have provided an aid in seeing which warps to pick up to brocade in the pattern.

Structure

Brocading as a technique which uses two weft threads. The primary one provides structure and is usually very similar to the warp threads. The secondary weft is usually showier and will “float” across several warp threads. Each time the primary weft is thrown across, the secondary weft is also thrown across. In narrow woven bands, this picking can be done purely by hand or using a stick to hold the threads up for the secondary weft to be thrown through the shed to give the brocaded pattern. Very long floats may be inclined to snag on sharp objects if worn in a garment. In card weaving, the background weave can be made with any simple turning pattern. I have turned the cards in one direction until the twist became excessive, and then changing direction. The secondary weft will float over the top of the warp threads. Unlike when the pattern is threaded into the cards & produced by the turning of the cards, the pattern in brocading is produced by picking threads.

If you are working with an odd number of cards, thread them ZSSZSZSZS if you are doing a border of 2 cards on either side where the brocading occurs. This is a threading pattern used on the tablet woven bands from St. Cuthbert’s tomb in England which are also brocaded. I used this threading pattern on this project.

Materials

These bands were made with gold strips in the pagan era or gold strips spun around a core of some other material (probably silk or linen) in the Christian era. They were found over a broad area from Italy to Scandinavia to England. Gold wire flattened in a mill for the pagan era style,

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or gold “Japan” thread found in embroidery stores for the Christian era style can be used for the secondary warp for brocading. I have seen silk used in later medieval pieces. I hypothesize that one would not perfect one’s technique on the most expensive materials available. I used gold metallic embroidery thread made with a wrapped core. I tried to find cloisonné wire (very narrow, flat soft gold wire) in gold to use, but was unsuccessful. I also used Gutermann’s silk sewing thread as the warp and structural weft. I chose a vivid red because the gold and red together reminded me of the affect of the garnet cloisonné jewelry that was prized highly in this culture. The quantity of silk required is small and could have been imported from the continent, as were many Kentish luxury goods.

Method

Turn the cards and lay the primary weft in the shed.

Pack it in tight with the beater as normal.

In brocading, work only with the threads that are in the top shed at any given time. Treat the threads in the top two holes of each card as a unit.

In the pattern shown below, for row 1, lay your brocading thread under the upper threads of cards #1, 2, & 3, over # 4, under #5, 6, &7.

When your brocading thread goes “under”, it will lie alongside the primary weft in the shed formed between the two top and two bottom holes on each card. When it goes “over”, it will lie on top of the weaving as happens in an overshot weave. This will often be called a float.

Use the cards to pack the brocading warp in tight. I find this works better than using the beater.

Turn the cards and repeat for the next row.

Tablets:

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
OOXOOOXOO
OOXXOXXOO
OOXOOOXOO
OOOOXOOOO
OOOXXXOOO
OOOOXOOOO
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