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A Horsehair Woven Band from County Antrim, Ireland: Clues to the Past from a Later Bronze Age Masterwork

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Introduction

This paper has as its subject the narrow woven horsehair band from Cromaghs, Co. Antrim in Northern Ireland. It is about two thousand eight hundred years old which places it in the Irish Later Bronze Age. Farming was well established in the country and skilled metal workers were producing tools, weapons and ornaments in bronze and gold. The horsehair ornament merits analysis because of its intricacy and outstanding artistry.

It is also important to explore what clues may lie within the band and the other finds associated with it. These may explain what the ornament represented to the people who made it, and to those who deposited it so carefully into a bog in County Antrim all those years ago. Since the theme of this symposium is *Creating textiles: makers methods markets* it is appropriate to see whether something can be understood of the priorities in these areas of the weavers and users of the Cromaghs band. In the present prehistoric context, *markets* must be loosely interpreted since Later Bronze Age society is far removed from the industrialized and capitalist economies of the late twentieth century.

One factor clouds modern interpretation of the part played by cloth in prehistoric and early historic societies; this is the amazing availability of textiles today. In this late twentieth century people have at their disposal unlimited quantities of cloth of any quality desired. Planning how to make and use cloth, and how to acquire clothes need not take up any serious time and so their former importance is forgotten. To clear away this modern valuation of cloth as a minor ingredient of most people's lives a useful exercise is to consider the role of cloth from the ethnographic standpoint. A review of the properties of cloth may certainly include the following:

In traditional societies cloth is often a standard of value and a unit of currency; as such it becomes part of the treasure of rulers, shoring up their political power. Cloth manufacture itself may have spiritual resonances for its makers linking past and present, the living and the dead. After manufacture ceremonies of bestowal and exchange of cloth, and of investiture underwrite the authority and sanctity of new powerholders. Once cloth has been transformed into garments, it becomes a potent agent to represent or misrepresent images, identities, ranks and values. (Weiner and Schneider 1989, 3-10). In prehistoric societies it is likely that all of these factors also had a part to play.

Description of Armoy hoard

A brief description of the group of objects found with the horsehair band which have all been held in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin since the early years of this century is as follows. The hoard consists of a socketed bronze axe, a 'sunflower' dress pin, a bronze gouge, a tanged 'razor' knife with leather case, some pieces of worked wood, leather straps which did not survive and a further woven textile. This last is a roughly rectangular composite piece of wool cloth c 775 x 1050mm. The narrow horsehair band itself is woven in 2/2 twill with complex ornamental tassels at each end. The wool cloth wrapped up the metal tools and the wood and was pinned with the bronze pin. The horsehair ornament

was on top of the bundle. The hoard is dated to about the ninth to eighth centuries BC and so takes its place amongst many and much larger hoards of the period which may represent caches of personal possessions or votive offerings (Eogan 1983, 7, 12). This dating is based on the style of the bronze finds. The composition of the hoard and its context in the society of the time is described later. The wool cloth which was wrapped around the hoard was woven in tabby (or plain) weave in Z-spun yarn. The technical details of the wool cloth are fully given in the paper on the Armoy hoard published in the proceedings of the sixth Northern European symposium on archaeological textiles held in Borås, Sweden in 1996 (Wincott Heckett 1998).

Technical details of the horsehair band

The technical details of the band are as follows: It is made up of three main elements all constructed from horsehair. The first element is a narrow band in herringbone broken twill 50mm wide, the pattern repeats after each 20 threads. The hairs are unspun. The density of hair threads per cm is 45 in the warp system and 15 in the weft.

This band is now broken into three pieces. The first piece is folded double, one part measures three and an eighth inches (80mm), the other about two inches (50mm). The second piece has nine tassels, and is about two and a half inches (60mm) long excluding the tassels. The third piece has only three tassels remaining and measures four and a half inches (115mm) excluding tassels. This gives a possible length for the twill band of twelve inches (305mm) without the tassels. The extra length from the two sets of tassels would be five and seven-eighths inches (150mm) so that the maximum original length of the band and so of the horsehairs would have been no more than about eighteen inches (460mm).

The next question is to check whether these measurements fit in with reality. To help estimate the possible length of mane and tail hair in horses in the Later Bronze Age the following information is available. A recent study of surviving Bronze Age horse bones showed that the average height at the withers of the remains of twelve Central European horses was judged to be a little over four foot (between 125-130cm) *{the withers being the shoulders of a horse}* (Müller, 1994, 145). Bronze Age horses from Hungary were somewhat larger (Bökönyi 1974, 247). A small modern pony was measured who stands four foot, seven inches (141cm) at the withers, has a tail almost five foot long (circa 1250mm) and mane hair about twenty-two inches (circa 550-600mm). So Bronze Age horses may have had tails perhaps about four foot in length (1235mm) and manes around twenty-three inches long (535-585mm). This shows that the lengths of hair used in weaving the band fall within the probable lengths of mane and tail.

The second element, the two sets of tassels, is a part of the woven band with supplemental threads, according to Henshall (Henshall 1950, 138) During recent examination of the band the extreme fragility of the piece prevented confirming this. However in one instance a tassel has come away from the whole and it can be seen that the top ends of the hairs are doubled over which confirms that at least some of the tassels are made separately. There are many more hairs in the tassels than there are as warp threads in the weave so extra threads have been added to make up the numerous tassels. For example the nine tassels at one end are formed as follows. Eight single cords divide into five smaller cords and each of these divides again into five. One cord at the edge of the band divides into three cords, each of which divides into a further five. It appears that each final bundle contains between seven and ten hairs. This represents in the region of an

amazing 2000 pieces of hair used in the final tassels of one end. Each bundle is tipped with a small bobble which was either made separately and slipped onto the end; or worked on the end of each bundle perhaps with the assistance of a thin rod. The hairs were then fastened in place with contrary-wise strands. It seems the final hairs may have been knotted off and perhaps cut smoothly against the bobble.

The cords making up the tassels have not been twisted or plaited but have a doubled hair wound smoothly around the bundles. This technique is known from traditional cordage making, and in modern terms is known as 'whipping' a rope (Irving 1944, 87-88). On the Armoyn tassels the binding hairs are wound on very neatly and smoothly in a highly professional way. In one instance one can see two hairs lashed in to cord the final smallest bundles; perhaps these cords provided a point of tension for the roving. This would have been necessary to achieve the skillful winding around the horsehair bundles. The whippings have been lashed in behind the thicker part of the cords. The smooth finishing off can be achieved by inserting the end of the hair through a separate loop of thread already temporarily laid into the smoothly whipped hairs. The loop is then pulled out leaving the end of the hair secured firmly and smoothly beneath the whipped area. One final bundle has lost its bobble, there one can see looped ends. The hairs inside the tassels are very straight, very close together, small, thinner and a different colour to those used to 'serve' the bundles.

The third element is a slim tubular weave band, again of horsehair, stitched to the main woven band so that the transition between the band and the tassels is completely hidden. The band is three-eighths of an inch wide (c10mm) and six-eighths (20mm) in the round; no join can be detected. The stitching is also in horsehair and of doubled thread.

It is clear that in antiquity the doubled piece of the woven band was folded over and pinched together in a kind of pleating. This is a distinctive feature of the textile and recalls the type of folding and pleating seen on modern medal ribbons. The total length of the ornament before folding may have been just over twenty-one inches long (circa 535mm). The delicacy and fine workmanship of the piece is outstanding. The impression given is of some kind of insignia or ornament. It would be possible for it to be sewn to a ring or necklet and worn decoratively on a tunic or cloak, or attached to some other object.

Bronze Age society and horses

Now what does this extraordinary piece represent? First of all, it is the *fact that it is made of horsehair* which should be considered. In the present day this may be a little unusual but not a raw material which is particularly difficult or expensive to procure. Until a generation or so ago horsehair would have been part of everyday life; it was a component of many textiles and furnishing articles. However in the Bronze Age in Europe this was not at all the case. This was a totally different society with quite other priorities. There, to the different groups of people scattered across the continent the horse was something new and amazing. The earlier societies which preceded the Bronze Age, the New Stone Age or Neolithic, were made up of farming families who raised cattle, sheep and pigs but did not have domesticated horses. It was only in the later times of the first metal using societies, the Bronze Age that horses were ridden and used to pull carts and chariots. The domestication of the horse seems to have taken place on the Ukrainian steppes about 4,000BC. There is evidence from a habitation site at Derievka of horses which had used bits and so had been ridden (Anthony and Brown 1991, 22). Their use

spread slowly westwards through Europe over the next two thousand years. In Ireland we have evidence for domesticated horses from circa three and a half thousand years ago (van Wijngaarden-Bakker 1974, 347).

So how did people feel about horses, and how did they use and value them in those first days? It is likely that horses must have had a similar impact on society as the automobile has had today. With horses you can move much faster than people on foot. You can sweep down on a village or farmstead, raid and leave again. You can travel far greater distances more quickly. You can move women, children and baggage more easily and safely. You can make war more ferociously. However, horses take up a lot of space and need big pastures so they are luxury, very often being the mark of a hierarchical society. The phrase 'to eat like a horse' is not an empty one and reflects a truth known to many farmers. Although horses can provide meat and milk they are not an economic proposition in way cows and sheep are so you need to have resources to spare to keep horses. Certainly it seems that European societies became less equal at this time, and that different ranks of people developed.

Now the picture in the minds of the weavers of the Cromaghs hoard begins to be established. Horsehair was a prestigious raw material associated with wealthy and powerful people. From the evidence of horse bones in Ireland at the time we can see that horses were quite widely distributed but at Newgrange, for example, represent only circa 5% of the faunal remains (van Wijngaarden-Bakker 1974, 330). This would suggest a widespread but sparse access consistent with the limited use of an expensive and recently introduced animal.

Contemporary perceptions of the horse

Did horses have functions that were other than practical? It would seem that they did. A survey of horse remains of Bronze Age Central European sites supports the proposition that horses were scarce since there too horse bones make up only around 5% of all animal bone finds. Beyond this, the places where the bones were found are interesting. They were not found in garbage dumps. Of the twelve horses from six sites four were buried in their own graves, three were in sacrificial pits, there were four head and hoof burials and one was in a refuse pit but where other parts of the horse could have represented a sacrifice. All the horses were adult and two-thirds were over ten years old (Müller 1994, 143-5). In Egypt in the second millenium three horses have been found, one buried in its own coffin (Clutton-Brock 1974, 93). In Ireland at Navan Fort, Co. Armagh a few horse bones dating to the fourth and third centuries BC were found in a pond close to royal site (McCormick 1995, 182). All this evidence underlines the singular position which horses in general held in Bronze Age societies.

Comparisons

Are there other similar objects from that time? Another notable horse-using society of that time was located far from Ireland in Mesopotamia in the land of Babylon. The Assyrian empire of the tenth to the fifth centuries BC is elaborately documented in numerous bas-reliefs. The British Museum in London holds a treasury of amazing carvings showing the Assyrian kings hunting and making war in horse-drawn chariots. These reliefs portray horse trappings of the eighth and ninth centuries BC (Reade 1995, 45, 51, 53, 63). Here are displayed elegant and elaborate tassels and fringes with interesting resonances for the Cromaghs find. As far as can be seen on the bas-reliefs some of the tassels show constructions like those of the Irish textile. It is perhaps too far-

fetched to draw a direct parallel but the fact that similarly complex workmanship existed in the extreme west of Europe is exciting. It may well suggest that such ornaments in organic materials were widespread in many cultures but have just not survived. Of course, given the known record of far-flung trade in Ireland at the time it also has to be possible that the Irish material is an import from a distant country (Eogan 1990, 162-163, McCormick 1995, 183).

Another comparison with extant organic remains is with the horse-using tribes of Siberia of the sixth to fourth centuries BC. Excellent survivals of wood, leather and cloth are of course found in the burial tumuli of Pazyryk in the Altai mountains in Southern Siberia. Here one finds none of the complex tassels of Assyria but horsehair is used to ornament boldly conceived and lively felt and wool horse trappings - so the use of horsehair on horse-trappings is acceptable in that culture (Artamonov 1974, plate 56). The recent find from Al-Alakha of a noble woman buried with six horses includes a belt and complex horse trappings. These appear to be braided and have tasselled ends. From the preliminary illustrations they are intricate constructions but not made with the same techniques as the Irish piece (Polosmak 1994, 6-8). The time period is very broadly within the Cromaghs range. An interesting continuity is seen in the construction of a mid twentieth century camel trapping from Pakistan, on view earlier this year at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Askari and Crill 1997, figs 65 and 66, 42).

The ornament in the context of the hoard

Now that we have a little understanding of these Late Bronze Age people we must go back to the discovery of the Armoyn hoard early in this century. Since this was in 1904 we are dependent on the written description published by George Coffey in 1906. The hoard was dug up by chance in a bog by turfcutters, and was not immediately reported. The horsehair textile was described by the finders being set in place like a cross with splayed ends (ie 'maltese') on top of the bundle. It is said that a piece of the horsehair textile was seen in the neighbouring village of Ballycastle after the find. In his publication Coffey states 'in using the spade three of the pieces composing it were injured, and the piece forwarded to the Academy was the only perfect one remaining.' (Coffey 1906 119-120) If this is correct it means there were either one or three more similar ornaments which could indeed be arranged so that the pieces would form a cross of the 'maltese' type. It should be noted, although Coffey's original 1906 drawing shows the textile in the Museum in three separate pieces he writes that "the piece...was ..perfect" which suggests it was originally a single piece. So it is possible there was originally a set of two tassels (or even a set of four).

Ethnographic parallels

It is interesting that the ornamental band was so carefully arranged on top of the cloth wrapping the hoard. In many societies woven bands and cloths represent the definition of separate realities or zones. For example, Russian ethnographic material has many examples of threads, ties and bands used in *the rites of passage* of marriages, births and burials (Lysenko and Komorova 1992, 14-18). It is not possible to expand this area here but one might speculate that the Cromaghs band represents a linking or bridging of the middle world of reality with another reality perhaps represented by the waters of the bog? It is far finer and more ornamental than is needed for the practical purpose of tying up the bundle. Unless a much longer piece has been lost it is way too short to tie around a bundle.

In so many cases the organic elements of the Bronze Age hoards have disappeared; we see very little of the leather, wood and cloth that must have accompanied the metal and stone artefacts. That is another reason why the Cromaghs textiles, the leather case and wooden remains are so important. They illuminate what we have lost.

Literary and archaeological connections

Perhaps understanding of the band and hoard can be improved by looking at other collections of objects of the period. In the early Irish literature (the writing down of an even earlier oral tradition) there is a description of a magical and mythical collection of objects described as the *Crane Bag of the Fianna*, the Fianna being some of the warrior heroes of the myths. (The bag contained *the shirt of Maannán* [the water deity], *the girdle of Goibhniú* [the god of metal-working], *a smith's hook, shears belonging to the king of Scotland, the King of Lochlainn's helmet, a quantity of pig bones and a belt made of whale bone*). This text has been analyzed by Ronan O'Flaherty who makes the point that the Crane Bag is very likely a hoard and draws attention to the belt included in the contents of the bag. Perhaps the Cromaghs hoard was similarly important to its previous owner who placed it so carefully in the bog.

There is another Irish collection of personal objects of the Later Bronze Age, the Rathtinaun hoard, Co. Sligo where some organic pieces are, as so often happens, missing but again we can glimpse what may have been there. This hoard, found in a wooden box, includes possible dress ornaments of bronze and gold, tweezers, boars' teeth, amber beads and a bronze pin. (O'Flaherty 1996, 27-29). It may be that in some cases these collections bestowed power and authority on the people who owned them and were linked with magical or religious purposes.

Earlier in the Bronze Age in Denmark important people, both men and women were buried under earth mounds in oak coffins. Here again, exceptionally the organic elements have survived (indeed the earliest evidence for northern European clothing comes from these graves) (Broholm and Hald 1940). However what is of interest here are the remains from a male burial at Hvidegård, Kongens Lyngby where a leather bag closed with a bronze pin was found. Inside were the following collection of items: an amber bead, a conch shell, a cube of wood, a flint flake, bark, a grass-snake's tail, a falcon's claw, tweezers, a flint knife in a leather case, a bronze knife in a leather case, a razor with a horse's head handle in a case, a squirrel's jaw in a leather case, dried roots and a small bladder (Glob 1974, 116). This looks like the 'tool-kit' of a priest/chieftain, soothsayer or divine with specific connotations for that society. It is amazing that these fragile items have survived. How few of the organic elements would have been preserved under different soil conditions and how rare it is to see the past so clearly! Is it possible that the horsehair band and the Armoy hoard were similarly 'special' things with clear meanings for their owners?

Conclusions

In so many cases the organic components of Bronze Age culture have disappeared; very little of the leather, wood and cloth that must have accompanied the metal and stone artefacts has survived. That is another reason why the Cromaghs textiles, and the leather case and wooden remains are so important. They illuminate what we have lost. The Cromaghs ornament cannot have been unique but we can only guess at what other treasures once existed.

To draw together the elements of this exploration of the makers, methods and 'markets' of the horsehair band the following points have been considered. The first is the rarity and prestigious nature of the raw material. The second is the extremely high quality of the workmanship. The third is its possible original use, perhaps for personal adornment or as a horse trapping. The fourth is its meaning in the context of the deposition of the whole hoard. If the hoard is a votive offering or collection of 'special' objects, is this interpretation strengthened by the presence of the horsehair ornament? These points show that a small woven artefact, surviving quite by chance, can demonstrate much about a world far removed from the present. A world from which there are no written records but whose textiles can reveal a wealth of evidence from within themselves to throw a strong light onto the people who once lived there.

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