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Irish Viking Age silks and their place in Hiberno-Norse society

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The context: From the beginning of the ninth century AD people from Scandinavia, many from present-day Norway began to settle in Ireland. They founded the modern Irish cities and towns of Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Wexford and developed lively and successful trading settlements that flourished until the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169 AD. We know from the literature that the Irish prized and used silk cloth at that time but at present excavations have not disclosed any remains of silk in what can be identified as specifically vernacular contexts. The situation is different for the Viking Age settlements. In particular Dublin and Waterford over the last twenty-five years or so have yielded up enormously rich organic remains including textiles that have illuminated in an amazing way the lifestyle of these incomers. They were enthusiastic traders and their wealth was well known in Ireland. Probably slave-trading played a major role but there was also much commerce in silver, furs, perhaps foodstuffs, silk and other cloth. An Irish account of the sack of Viking Limerick by local people in The Wars of the Gaedhil with the Gaill contains this passage: 'They followed them also into the fort and slaughtered them...They carried off their jewels and their best property, and their saddles beautiful and foreign; their gold and silver; their beautifully woven cloth of all colors and of all kinds; their satins and silk cloth, pleasing and variegated, both scarlet and green, and all sorts of cloth in like manner. They carried away their soft, youthful bright, matchless girls; their blooming silk-clad young women; and their active, large and well-formed boys...everyone that was fit for a slave was enslaved.' It is interesting that

1 Jeffery Gantz, Early Irish myths and sagas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).
3 J.H. Todd, (ed. and translated) The Wars of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or the Invasion of Ireland by the Danes and other Norsemen (London: Rolls series, 1867), 51.
there are so many references in the passage to silks and beautifully woven cloth; they
must have made a deep impression on the Irish fighters and chroniclers.

The material: Finds of silk from Dublin are far less numerous than those of wool; this is
a pattern that is repeated in excavations in other Irish towns, and indeed in Europe
generally at this time. There are however remains of compound weave cloth, of tablet
woven braids, thread, ribbons, cords and filets. Three types of plain silk cloth were
found, some were made up into bands, scarves and caps.

There are at least twenty-five fragments of weft-faced compound twill of 2/1
construction, with paired Z-twisted main warps, single Z-twisted binder warps and
untwisted wefts. Many are made with red or natural color silk probably patterned, and
survive in narrow strips that seemingly were used to trim other garments.

Four tablet woven braids use gold metal thread with a silk core as does one silver braid.
A second silver braid does not seem to have a silk core but some of the brocading was
executed in silk.

Silk thread to be used for sewing or embroidery was found; some in a small amount tied
to a cylindrical needlecase. Other lengths were wound around thin pieces of wood or in
small skeins. Thread was made up into plied and plaited cords. At least seven knotted
filets or hairnets were found. What may be the earliest example of sprang made from silk
was found in Dublin in single S-twisted silk thread with alternate rows of 1/1 and 2/2
interlinking. This example of interlinked mesh sprang has a finished width of 130mm.

Bands, scarves and caps: The plain silk items, together with similar pieces in wool, all
in tabby weave, make up very interesting, cohesive group of finds. For example, Viking
literary sources record that headbands were worn by men as well as women. When
Skarp-Hedin in Njal's Saga rides to the Althing 'his hair was well combed back and held
in place by a silk headband. He looked every inch a warrior'. Earlier in the same saga
Gunnar was given by King Harold Gormsson in Haithabu 'his own robes, a pair of gold
embroidered gloves, a headband studded with gold and a Russian fur cap'. One find

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4 Frances Pritchard, "Silk braids and textiles of the Viking age from Dublin" in
Archaeological textiles NESAT 3 ed. L. Bender Jorgensen et al. (Copenhagen:
Archaeologisk Institute, Copenhagen University, 1988) 149-61. The analyses of silks in
the two following paragraphs were carried out by Frances Pritchard. Elizabeth Wincott
5 These finds are the subject of the forthcoming publication (Spring 2003) of Viking Age
headcoverings from Dublin, Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, (Royal Irish Academy) in the
series on the Medieval Dublin excavations 1962-81 as quoted in Note 2. Elizabeth
Wincott Heckett, 'Some Hiberno-Norse Headcoverings from Fishamble Street and St.
John's Lane, Dublin' Textile History 18(2) (1987): 159-74. Elizabeth Wincott Heckett,
'Some Silk and Wool Headcoverings from Viking Dublin; uses and origins - an enquiry'
in ed. P. Walton and J. P. Wild Textiles in Northern Archaeology NESAT III York, 1987,
6 Magnus Magnusson and Herman P-hsson, Njal's saga 14th ed. (Harmondsworth:
from Dublin, DHC24 is a complete, short band in very good condition with the ties found in the same bundle. This could certainly be worn as a headband.

The largest silk scarf (DHC17) was dyed purple and could almost be worn as a wimple. The Queens in the 12th century Lewis Chess set, believed to be Norwegian and found in Scotland in the nineteenth century, give us an interesting glimpse of how the purple silk might have been worn. They seem to be wearing short veils under their crowns. Another somewhat shorter scarf, DHC12, dyed blue with woad, could have been worn in a variety of ways around the head or shoulders, as a cap or band.

It can be seen that the caps are made to a well-understood pattern; a person setting out to make a cap had a clear internal concept of how this must be done and, with minor variations, kept to that construct. (Fig. 1) The wool caps were made from narrow pieces of material whose average width of circa 160 mm is established by the existence of both selvedges in six out of seven examples. However the silk caps were made from wider material that was specifically cut down to the necessary pattern. This may well mean that the first caps sewn to this pattern were made from wool cloth that was purpose woven to the particular width required. There are twelve caps of which three are in silk and nine in wool. There are also four remnants (one silk and three wool) which may perhaps be recognized as caps by comparison with the complete pieces.

The caps whether in silk or wool were made to conform to this same basic pattern with certain variations in length, width and sewing techniques. The preferred mode of construction was for the front edge of the cap to be rolled, or folded and sewn, or for a cord to be over-sewn onto that selvedge. Then the bottom edges were doubled folded to form a hem, c. 5mm wide, and hemstitched. The two back edges were over-sewn together from the outside after the cloth had been neatly turned inwards to a depth of between 2mm and 25mm. The over-sewing from the outside may not continue to the top of the cap but may change to a running stitch to make a dart curving inwards from about 50-100mm below the peak. This shapes the cap to the contours of the head. The stitched curve is absolutely typical of the cap pattern. The fabric in the peak was not turned inwards to produce a rounded effect on the head. Generally the running stitch seems to have been on the outside of the fabric leaving the peak of the cap standing up and visible to other people.

There are variations within this basic pattern; for example, in DHC32 the back of the cap has been over-sewn on the outside right up to the peak, and the curve dart stitched in afterwards with a running stitch. In DHC40 stitch-holes can be seen marking out the typical curve (the sewing threads have disintegrated). However there are no stitch holes where the back edges would have been sewn together although these have been carefully finished by being individually rolled and sewn. This suggests the back was never sewn together. Ties were sewn to the two front bottom edges of the caps although none are still there. The fabric in these areas, however, is pulled forward from ribbons or braids having been tied in place. As already noted, among other textile remains from Fishamble

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Street/St John's Lane and the High Street pit there are narrow strips of braid and many silk ribbons which could have served as ties. Three different types of silk were used; the yarn could be Z/Z twist, Z/no twist, or have no twist in either weave system. Of the three silk caps DHC37 and DHC39 were made of Z/no twist, DHC40 of Z/Z twist yarn. There is only one selvedge on two of the caps (one Z/Z and one Z/no twist) and none on the other. DHC37 has the edges doubled folded into hems 2mm x 2mm, the front using the selvedge, the back being cut and sewn. It may be that the present length of 390mm does not represent the original since there is no stitching or hemming at the possible lower ends of the cap. The second cap, DHC39 (Pl.) of Z/no twist yarn has double patches reinforcing the tie area; a selvedge occurs on one of them but not on the cap itself. Only one side of the cap still exists to the bottom edge but the back top section has survived showing the characteristic shaped dart sewn from outside, leaving unsewn the back edges of the cap above the curve. The front edges are finished with a double hem of 3mm x 3mm, the back edge has a single folded hem with the raw edge caught down by hem-stitching.

The Z/Z twist silk of DHC40 (Figs. 2 and 3) is a light-weight veil-like weave which does not seem to be suitable for daily wear or to stand the strain of being tied firmly under the chin. Perhaps this cap was worn on dressed hair and pinned in place, or tied loosely at the back of the head. It has been darned in one spot in an irregular, criss-cross fashion and there seem to be stitch holes on the fabric perhaps from a patch. A tie that has been knotted back onto a frayed strand of the cap was made from a strip of the same cap material, folded and stitched and then attached about 140mm from the top. This depth between the cap top and the tie would not be big enough for an adult's head. The original cap size of 270mm would have been sufficient. This shows that the first wearer was an adult and later, when it was much worn, it was re-used by a child. There is a vivid contrast between the fineness of the silk fabric and the 'make do and mend' quality of the later repairs and adaptations.

Similar silk caps have been found in Viking Age York and Lincoln, England and just possibly in Danish London. These headcoverings, together with unused silk sewing thread and sewing implements found in Dublin, Waterford and York have also yielded much information on Hiberno-Norse sewing practices and technology. This has enabled comparisons with sites like Haithabu, Germany, Viborg, Denmark and York so that a clearer picture of skill levels the repertoire of techniques is emerging. There is evidence of sewing on eight silk pieces. Many different sewing techniques were used. The sewing skills used in the headcoverings were not the only ones current in Viking Age Dublin.

Other pieces show techniques suitable for fabrics of heavier weight intended for different purposes. There was therefore a repertoire of sewing skills from which people chose the one that suited their purpose.

The types of hems are rolled, folded and over-sewn. The rolled hem is still generally used today as a finish on silk scarves since it gives the finest edging possible on a light material. On the Dublin pieces the selvedges have been lightly rolled and carefully sewn often with a whip-stitch. A narrow hem size was chosen which ranged between 2mm and 5mm and probably reflects the different properties of the cloth. Oversewing a hem from the outside is chosen to close the back of a cap and is also used to join two narrow pieces of material together along the selvedges to make a bigger piece. Running stitches are used to sew the curved darts on the caps. They are stitched from the outside through the two thicknesses of folded cloth making up the cap.

**Stitch size and type:** On the silk pieces there is a higher number of stitches per centimeter than the wool, with a smaller average stitch size (between three and six per centimeter, stitch size between 1mm and 2mm). This is probably a function of the fabric being sewn; it may also reflect a greater degree of care being taken with a precious material.

**Piecing of fabrics:** DHC38 is interesting since it is constructed or patched together from five different pieces of silk. Three parts have been pieced together to form a rectangle and two patches added to cover worn areas. In another example, DHC59 can be described as almost a sampler of sewing techniques, although it cannot be identified as a particular type of headcovering. Two narrow strips probably from the same long thin off-cut appear to have been cut in half and pieced together selvedge to selvedge with two different methods, over-sewing and flat fell seaming. The two outer sides of the fabric have been further extended by flat fell seaming cloth onto them. Although only tiny remnants of these extensions remain the flat fell seaming and shreds of silk can be seen clearly. The other two edges are hemmed using two different hemming techniques. One edge and part of the second were double folded and hemmed, the second part of one end was rolled and whip-stitched. On one corner of this piece the hem has been turned under at a 45° angle to neaten the two edges and form a mitered corner.

**Sewing thread:** Both wool and silk sewing thread was used on the textiles. In DHC31 (wool cap) a silk thread has been used, and also possibly in one other piece, DHC42. Seven of the silk pieces were sewn with silk thread. The silk threads are both single and double stranded (S-plied).

Some of the sewing techniques are complex. The skills displayed on the textiles are still known and employed today. For instance, as we have seen, flat fell seaming which produces flat, strong joins with no raw edges in material was used. It is still current today for shirts and jeans, clothes that take a lot of hard wear at the seams. Flat fell seaming, piecing cloth and mitering corners are advanced techniques. In general the work on the Dublin pieces gives a clear impression of competence, skill and the ability to draw on the most suitable method for the task in hand.
It is clear that the people making these clothes were not novices. Many other types and variants of seams were employed underlining the fact that the art of dress making in northern Europe was certainly well established by the tenth century if not long before.

**Waterford City:** There are eleven silk items from Waterford.\(^{10}\) These consist of two rich compound weave silks, two knotted mesh filets and seven braids (£527:478:6, *samitum*; E435:1160:6, *lampas*). Tablet weaving and plaiting were used to make cords for various uses, including perhaps an archer's bowstring (E343:5368:285). The delicate hairnets are beautifully knotted and have survived surprisingly well (£527:1648:2 and 1667:2).

**Dunmore Caves, Co. Kilkenny:** A very recent find in Dunmore Caves, Co. Kilkenny is a small but important Viking Age hoard containing a scrap of fine weave, colored silk not yet analyzed, ornamented silver and intriguing silver wire pendant dress or head ornaments. It seems likely that the silk only survived through interaction with the silver.

**Silk roads, other roads - trade and economy**

There were several routes by which silk thread and cloth may have come to Ireland. One of these would be the sea route from Norway round the outer Scottish islands like the Hebrides and the Orkneys where there were Viking settlements to Dublin; trading then went on to Iceland. In Scandinavia well-known trade routes ran from centers like Haithabu, Birka and Kaupang to the eastern Baltic, and then down through Novgorod and Kiev to Byzantium. The compound silks found in Dublin and Waterford may very well have come from there.

Other trade roads linked Dublin with Chester and York. Anglo-Saxon coins found in Dublin point to trade with England, and there were historic ties between the Norse kingdoms of York and Dublin. As noted above, similar types of silk have been found in Dublin, York and London so it is likely there was interaction between these centers. In the eleventh century the Norse rulers of Dublin went on pilgrimages to Rome, and may well have brought back luxury goods with them. ‘Souvenirs’ of such visits have been found in Dublin. When they were traveling they may also have visited the fairs at places like Pavia in Northern Italy.\(^{11}\)

As noted the Irish were using silk materials too in their churches, and for clothing. There is a reference to a market in the twelfth century in Dublin in what is now known as the Cornmarket. The twelfth century *Life of St. Kevin* contains an allusion to a market held in the monastic site of Glendalough to the south of Dublin.\(^{12}\) In the *Oenach Carmain* text (305) describing the triennial fair of Carmun it is said that there were three markets taking place over seven days, one of which is one of which is ‘margad mór na nGall

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ngréca/mbid or is arddétach' (the great market of the Greek foreigners where were found gold and fine raiment/cloth). Perhaps such luxuries were not always traded through the Norse, although they may have attended the markets.

It seems that the Vikings were quite at ease moving through different milieux and traveled widely between them. For example, Harald Haardraade served in the imperial Varangian Guard in Byzantium, married a daughter of Yaroslav, king of Kiev in Russia and died in England at the Battle of Hastings fighting for the Saxons in 1066 AD. There were many others like him. The silk remains from Viking Age Ireland open a window through which we glimpse their world in many of its different and intriguing aspects.

**Figures**
1. Pattern for cap construction*
2. DHC 40, silk cap (textile)*
3. DHC 40, diagram of construction*
4. Silk filet, Waterford City (author’s photograph)

*Figures 1, 2 and 3 are by kind permission of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin from its forthcoming publication, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, Elizabeth Wincott Heckett (Spring 2003).
Fig. 1

Along one side of a rectangle of silk, c. 450x160mm, a tiny rolled hem was formed. This was the front edge of the cap.

At other end, 5mm was folded over and over again to the same depth to form a hem, both hemstitched. The rectangle was then folded in half, 20mm of fabric was turned under along the unseen side, the back of the cap.

The back edges were over casted together from the bottom up for c.140mm.

From there on, a line of running stitches was sewn, following the outline of the head. To a point 70mm from the side, the running stitches were continued in a diagonal line. The remainder of the 150mm of the back cap was over casted up to the top. Finally, ten pieces of ribbon of equal length were attached loosely to the corners.

Fig. 2

Many pitch holes in this area. May be from patch.

BACK

Brown worsted thread stitched from outside in hem stitch. Thread 2 mm apart, 30° from seamline, 0.5mm diameter. Also stitch hems.

Curve stitched from outside to fit shape of head. Running stitch used.

No evidence that back was ever together.

HEMLINE

Hems whipstitched and cut to length of trim. Hemming stitch used.

Fig. 3

DHC40 CAP

TIL

Top: Plain material has been knitted and then hemmed or hemmed at one end.

Two pieces double, H 160mm, W 140mm. 2 threads, 5-plied silk thread, 0.5mm in diameter. Random running of 7-10 length at right angle on main section. 40 threads per cm.

FRONT

Selvedge: 39 thread warp ends in thickness c. 15mm deep.

Patch with rolled and whipstitched hems. c. 4 pitch holes to form.

Gives impression of having been overlapped with whip stitches. Original position unknown.

Hammered edges from deep fabric, rolled, tacked and stitched, hems applied.

Fig. 4

It is then folded inwards on both sides and stitched together. Stitched c. 3mm long (from pitch holes). 3 stitches to the cm. Stitching and attached top right to lower left.