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Clothes make the man : early medieval textiles from the Netherlands

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3. Textiles from the Posterholt cemetery

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The cemetery of Posterholt was the second publication of cemetery-textiles in this thesis. Although the find complex of this cemetery is rather small it provided a first opportunity to compare textiles from two different sites (Posterholt and Bergeijk). Moreover it was the first cemetery in which the relationship between certain types of grave objects and the textiles adhered to them were analysed.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Posterholt cemetery yielded several fragments of textiles. Of the 80 examined Merovingian inhumation graves, 15 contained one or more pieces of textile. This resulted in a total of 33 fragments (appendix II). In most cases, the textiles were mineralized and imbedded in the corrosion on the graves' metal objects.

Due to the small size of the dataset, it is not possible to ascertain any developments in the cemetery's textiles over time. Furthermore, many objects in the graves were displaced; most graves had been reopened after burial. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the garments of the deceased.¹⁴⁸ However, most finds can be assigned to a period in the late sixth and/or seventh century, making it a useful body of textiles that can be compared to other cemetery textiles from this same period.

3.2. DATASET

The Posterholt cemetery yielded 33 textile fragments. In some cases, several fragments of the same fabric were present within one grave. These identical fabrics have been grouped together, resulting in a total of 22 individual textiles. Some textiles were very badly preserved, making it impossible to analyse the fabric's technical details. These textiles are listed in appendix II but have not been included in the analysis presented in this chapter. In nineteen cases, the weave type could be established. The weave types are discussed below. Most of the graves contained one or two different textiles; only grave 85 yielded more (3 different fabrics).

Most of the textiles were preserved in the corrosion on the graves' metal objects. The textiles not in contact with metal decayed in the years after the burial. This is why the remaining textile fragments are often very small, measuring between 0.5x0.5 and 3x3 cm.

Many objects had already undergone restoration in the years following excavation; this undoubtedly has led to textile removal. However, there was still a considerable amount of (often indeterminate) iron fragments where no restoration had been conducted. The preservation of the mineralized organic remains on these objects was in many cases rather poor.

3.3 RESULTS

3.3.1 The textiles from Posterholt

During the early Middle Ages, several weave types were in use; in the Posterholt cemetery, fabrics woven in tabby, 2/2 plain twill, and 2/2 broken diamond twill were observed. They will be discussed here shortly.

3.3.1.1 *Tabby weaves*

In Posterholt, 11 fabrics are tabby weaves. Five were made of wool and two of plant fibres.¹⁴⁹ Most tabbies were woven fully of z-spun yarns. One fabric was woven in z- and s-spun yarns, and one in only s-spun yarns. One of the tabbies was woven in a spin-pattern.¹⁵⁰ Spin patterns are created using both z- and s-twisted threads in the warp. The yarn's different twist lends the fabric a very subtle striped pattern. The warp-pattern is: 1z-2s-1z-2s, and it is a rather open weave with 10x10 threads/cm.

148. The possibilities and constraints of textile analysis on cemetery finds has been elaborated in detail in Brandenburg 2012a. However, Posterholt's textile dataset is too limited to enable any conclusions on grave textiles, their function as garments or grave furnishing, or their cultural significance. Nevertheless, the cemetery provides a well dated body of textiles that can be compared to textiles from other regions. In the long term, this will provide a detailed overview of the types of textiles in use throughout the area, which may lead to a better understanding of textile production and (long distance) exchange.

149. Positive fibre identification of the other four tabbies was not possible due to damage of the fibres.

150. Find numbers 62-III-13. Unfortunately, a positive fibre identification was not possible for this fabric.

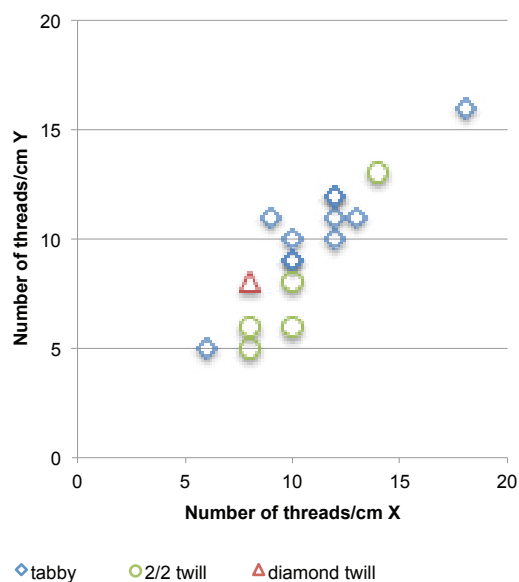


Fig. 3.1 The quality of the different fabrics in Posterholt in number of threads per cm in warp (horizontal) and weft (vertical).

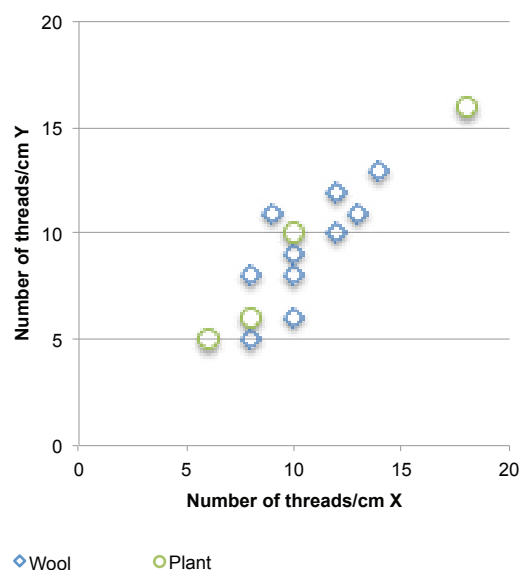


Fig. 3.2 The quality of the fabrics made out of wool and plant fibres in number of threads per cm in warp (horizontal) and weft (vertical).

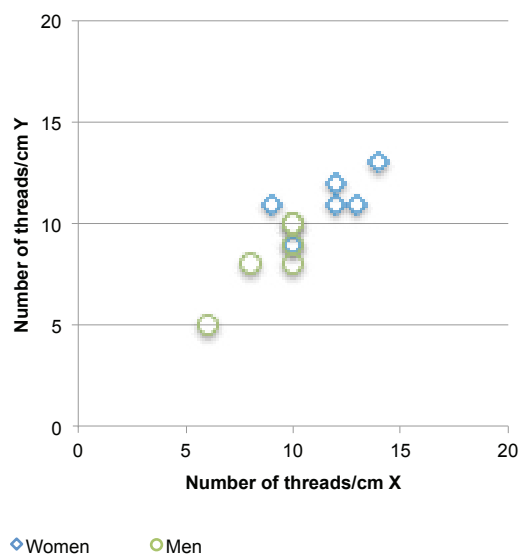


Fig. 3.3 The quality of the graves of men and women in number of threads per cm in warp (horizontal) and weft (vertical).

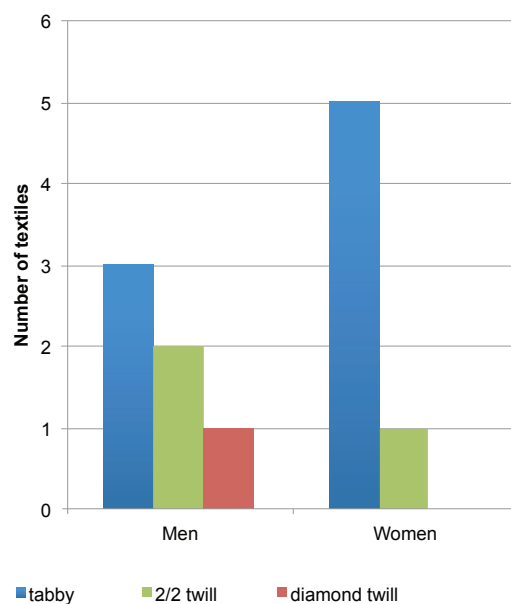


Fig. 3.4 Distribution of the different weaves in graves of men and women.



Fig. 3.5 Buckle (23-34) from a juvenile in grave 23 (10-20 years) with fine tabby folded over the front side of the buckle.



Fig. 3.6 Back plate (81-1) with a woollen 2/2 plain twill on the outside of the belt. This means this fabric belongs either to a garment worn over the belt or the person was lying on a mattress made out of this fabric.

3.3.1.2 2/2 twills

In most cases where the fabric was evidently woven in 2/2 twill, it was not possible to ascertain whether the twill was plain or a variety of this weave, such as diamond twill. The twill pattern only becomes visible in fragments of considerable size. Consequently, most of the smaller fragments are assigned to the 2/2 plain twill group, making this group considerably overrepresented. Seven of Posterholt's textile fragments were woven in a variety of 2/2 twill.¹⁵¹ One of these textiles was woven of plant fibres, with z-spun threads in both thread systems. Five textiles were woven with woollen fibres, with either z/s, z/z, or (in one case) spin pattern z/z&s-spun threads.

3.3.2 Quality of the fabrics

A fabric's quality is commonly measured by the number of threads per centimetre in both warp and weft. As visible in figure 3.1, there are some quality differences in the Posterholt's textiles, with most tabbies being in the higher quality groups and most 2/2 twill in the lower quality group. This distribution differs from textiles excavated in settlements in

the Netherlands. In settlements, the majority of textiles had thread counts below 12 threads/cm.¹⁵² In cemeteries such as Posterholt and Bergeijk,¹⁵³ the fine and coarse groups are more evenly represented. This difference is not caused by the fact that the settlements only contained woollen fabrics. Both woollen and plant-based fabrics in Posterholt are present in a variety of qualities (fig. 3.2).

3.3.3 Textiles throughout time

The graves in the Posterholt cemetery have been grouped into four phases. Phase I consists of graves from the middle of the sixth century I (510/20–580/90) Phase II spans the end of the sixth and the first half of the seventh century (580/90–640/50). Phase III is relatively short, from 640/50 to 670/80, and phase IV lasts from 670/80 to 750. It is not possible to analyze the textiles strictly according

151. For one fabric it was not possible to ascertain the twill type, because the weave was very decayed. This fabric is indicated as 2/? twill in appendix II.

152. Brandenburg 2010a.

153. Brandenburg 2012a.

to this chronology, since many graves (and with that, most textiles) could not be ascribed to a single phase but to a longer period of several phases; some graves (containing nine textiles) could not be dated at all. Furthermore, some phases, such as phase I, are represented by only one grave. Its textiles do not reflect the totality of fabrics of that particular phase. Moreover, the dataset from Posterholt is too small to support any conclusions about textile development through time. All phases show a variety of textiles in small quantities. Diamond twill is only present in the cemetery's earliest phase.

3.3.4 Textiles from graves of men, women and children

Conservation of skeletal remains in the graves was very poor. As a result, the sex of the people buried could only be ascertained in a few graves, and only one of these graves (grave 21) contained textiles. Many other graves were distinguished as 'male' or 'female' based on the presumed gender associations of the objects found in the graves. A total of 17 textiles could thus be assigned to gender (four female graves and four male graves), but several of those were difficult to analyse, resulting in incomplete technical data.¹⁵⁴

The graves of women and men from Posterholt bear some differences, but considering the small dataset, these differences are not significant (fig. 3.3 and 3.4). Graves of women contain predominately tabbies and only one example of 2/2 twill. Men's graves show a more equal share of tabbies and twills. More textile research is needed on Dutch cemeteries to provide a larger gender-related dataset and to enable comparison with other regions and periods. Some quality differences between fabrics associated with men and women are visible as well. Textiles from men's graves are slightly coarser than those found in women's graves.

Few graves contained enough skeletal remains to ascertain the age of the deceased, but nevertheless it is clear that several children or juveniles were buried

154. In the case of five textiles, weave and/or thread count could not be ascertained.



Fig. 3.7 Belt part (58-11) with a coarse tabby (z/z 5x6 threads per cm) on the outside.

in the cemetery. One grave from a juvenile individual contained mineralized organic remains (grave 23). Unfortunately, this grave could not be dated and yielded only one textile fragment. Nevertheless, this information inaugurates a juvenile textile dataset, making future comparison with other datasets possible. The textile present in this grave was a fine tabby of plant fibres (fig. 3.5). The garment was folded over the front side of the buckle, which means it was probably worn over the belt. The textile found in this juvenile grave is by far the finest fabric in the Posterholt cemetery.

3.3.5 Textiles related to belt parts

It has been mentioned that most of Posterholt's graves had been reopened. As a result, many objects have probably been removed from the graves while the remaining objects were displaced. This situation has had great effects on the amount and conditions of the excavated organic remains and consequently results in limited textile analysis. Two of the textile-containing graves (grave 21 and 23) had not been disturbed, but these graves yielded too few fabrics to make any assumptions about the garments and burial textiles within the graves. However, in some cases it is possible to establish which fabrics were originally worn under or over specific dress accessories. Many textiles were found in association with parts of belts. In practically all these cases, the textiles preserved in contact with the belt were tabbies of varying quality. The finer tabbies seem to have been worn as a garment or shroud over the belt. One example of a back plate (81-1, see fig. 3.6) shows the deceased was lying atop a 2/2 plain twill of medium quality. This may have been an outer garment, but could also have been a mattress cover.

The belt in grave 58 (fig. 3.7) was probably not worn on the body but placed beside the deceased. During excavation, the belt was found near the deceased's head, but the grave had been reopened; the original deposition location is thus inconclusive. However, remains of straw adhered to several parts belonging to this belt; these could only have been embedded in the metal's corrosion during the first months after inhumation. Therefore, the belt was probably lying directly in the straw on the grave's bottom, not worn by the dead. It may be considered as an extra object placed in the grave, or probably a displaced object.

Comparing the textiles associated with belt parts from Posterholt with those from Bergeijk results in noticeable differences. As mentioned above, tabbies are predominately found covering belt parts in Posterholt, whereas in Bergeijk we find mainly 2/2 twills or diamond twills.¹⁵⁵

3.4 THE TEXTILES FROM POSTERHOLT IN A BROADER CONTEXT

The 22 textiles found in Posterholt are a rather uniform body of textiles with only a few basic fabric types and no special or fine weaves. Since most graves had been reopened and only a very small amount of textiles has been preserved, it is not possible to attempt a reconstruction of the buried garments or an analysis of temporal changes within the burial ground. However, considering Posterholt's textiles as a building block in a larger dataset of cemetery textiles, the textiles may provide information on the use and development of textiles and clothing in the region's burial-context.

In many respects, the Posterholt cemetery is comparable to the Bergeijk cemetery: it is a rural cemetery with a similar number of – if not more – reopened graves and a chronology which may begin earlier but follows the same phases and ends at about the same time. When comparing the textiles from Posterholt with those from Bergeijk, it is apparent that the fabrics of both cemeteries are of similar quality. Very fine luxurious textiles are absent in both cemeteries, befitting the general characteristics of burial assemblages. Bergeijk, however, contains a larger variety of weaves, which may be related to the larger body of textiles found in that cemetery. There are other differences as well: Posterholt has far more tabbies compared to Bergeijk and the distribution of weaves among men and women also differs. Women from Posterholt seem to have been buried often in tabbies, whereas men were buried equally in twills and tabbies. In Bergeijk, tabbies were less represented and differences between men and women are shown in the use of diamond twills and plain twills. The presence of different fabrics on belt parts from Posterholt and Bergeijk suggests that people were dressed differently – or at least used different fabrics - in these two cemeteries.

155. Brandenburg 2012a, 130.

Some developments observed in Bergeijk cannot be compared to Posterholt, such as the changes over time in the use of different fabrics. This is clearly due to the small size of the dataset from Posterholt. Noting the characteristics, similarities, and differences between the two cemeteries is the first step towards understanding the differences between these cemeteries and the people buried there. However, textile variation within the cemeteries probably does not only reflect the changes and differences within the living population but also the role textiles played in the burial practice, both practical and symbolic. Insight into these processes requires more data on the cemeteries and their textiles. This topic will be addressed in more detail in future publications.

