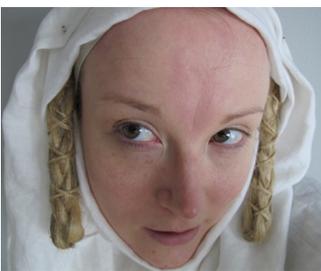




Cornettes - A 14th Century Hairpiece with braids



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The Item

The item is a hairpiece, consisting of a tablet woven headband woven with naturally dyed wool thread with false braids in flax. A similar piece has been excavated from a 14th century deposit in London (Egan & Pritchard 2002, 292-293; Crowfoot et. al. 2001, 132).

Cornettes and false hair in the 14th century

Gillet Li Muisis, the abbot of St Martin's at Tournai criticized the dress of women in 1349:

And what can I say of the dress of the women? [...] And they went to church, through the streets, and, by turns to weddings and to funerals, with their heads decorated with false hair with horns like beasts. (Newton 1980, 29)

In the 14th century, a new hairstyle for women appeared in the fashionable circles, showing more hair than before. This style, cornettes, was characterized by stiff double-backed plaits framing the face on each side. These plaits were seen as horns by those who disapproved of the style (Newton 1980, 29).

Cornettes had originated in France, but became popular also in England. Similar plaits can be seen in works of art from other countries in Northern Europe, i.e. Germany and Austria (Newton 1980, 96-98). These plaits are a well-known characteristic of 14th century fashion, prominent in well-known manuscripts of the era like the Luttrell Psalter and the Romance of Alexander. In these manuscripts the plaits worn are in various ways, with different types of headdresses. (Newton 1980, 103) (Pictures 1-4)



1: Cornettes with a veil
Romance of Alexander
Bodley 264, fol
c. 1338-44



2: With a hood
Romance of Alexander
Bodley 264, fol 59r
c. 1338-44



3: With a transparent veil and
fillet
Luttrell Psalter
Brit. Lib. Add. 42130 fol 202v
c. 1325-1335



4: Without a headdress
Aristotle's Ethics
The Hague, MMW 10 D 1
fol. 150r
c. 1376

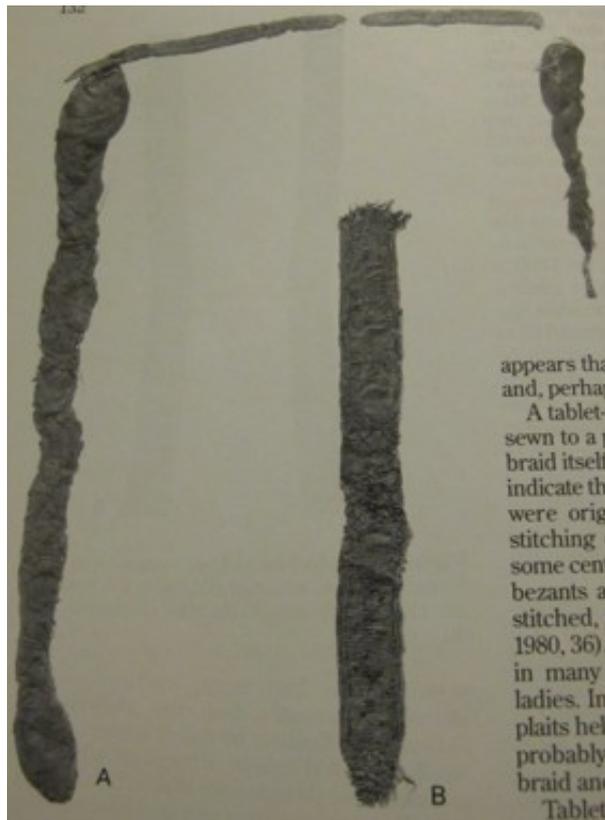
However, only women with long and thick hair could dress their own hair in this style. Others had to do with hairpieces with false hair. (Crowfoot et. al 2001, 292-293)

The use of false hair was criticized and regulated by the church in the fourteenth century (Newton 1980, 12). In 1310 the bishop of Florence gave orders on false hair that provide insight on what materials were used to make hairpieces. His orders state that no one should commit fraud by wearing false hair with the intent to deceive. However, if a woman had hair of her own that was manifestly inadequate, she could wear plaits of flax, wool, cotton or silk attached to her own hair (Newton 1980, 131).

The most important source and inspiration for this project is a hairpiece excavated from a London deposit dating to the second quarter of the 14th century (Picture 5). This hairpiece gives information on how cornettes were achieved with the help of false hair.

The hairpiece consists of two plaits of human hair, which was originally blonde. The better-preserved plait was bound along its length with a z-spun strand of hair. The plait (382 mm) had been folded in the middle. When worn, the end would hang just below the ear. The plait was stitched to a narrow silk headband, tablet-woven with 26 tablets. The band shows signs of ornamental metal octofoils stitched it. These ornaments

seem to have been removed before the hairpiece was discarded. (Egan & Pritchard 2002, 292-293)



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5: The London hairpiece

6: My hairpiece

My hairpiece (Picture 6) is not an exact copy of the hairpiece excavated from London. I've used different materials; choosing flax instead of human hair and wool instead of silk thread. The most important reasons for these decisions are cost and availability. Instead of opting for cheaper yet modern imitations like artificial hair and DMC floss, I chose materials that would have been available in the 14th century. Wool and flax make this a scaled down, less fancy version of the London hairpiece, something a woman in the middle class may have worn, aspiring to follow the fashions of the ruling classes. This is also why I have chosen to leave out the metal ornaments. Another reason is that mostly wear my coronettes under a veil, without the band showing. This makes the metal ornaments fairly unnecessary.

The original was made of thread in the same colour, now a golden brown. I opted for weaving with two colours.

I've also bound the bended plait with the strand of hair instead of binding the plait and then bending it. I chose to use this technique because it gives a much stiffer plait with a lesser loop to it. I find that binding the plait this way gives it more of a resemblance to the stiff medieval coronettes in the manuscripts.

The London hairpiece is only partially preserved. It gives no evidence on how the rest of the tabletwoven band was – was it sewn together to form a loop or was it tied? My interpretation was to leave the band open. I find that the plain band offers more alternatives for styling. It can be tied and pinned to the headdress in several different ways.

Processing Flax

Linen (*linen usitatissimum*) was the principal bast fibre used by the European medieval textile industry. The linen fibre is obtained from the stem of the linen plant that has been pulled before the seeds are fully ripe.

I processed the flax, starting from a retted linen plant. The process of retting (soaking) the linen plant, which polluted rivers and caused unpleasant smells in medieval towns, has the purpose of rotting the wooden core of the stems of the linen plant. Retted linen is hard to find, but Seurasaari Open Air Museum acquires some each year for those of us who want practice traditional linen processing. The museum also provided the traditional wooden equipment for the process, which has remained practically the same since the middle ages (Crowfoot et. al. 2001, 18) (Pictures 7-9).



7: Linen

8: Scutching

9: Heckling

Women processing flax in a mural, Kanonikerhaus, Konstanz Germany, ca 1320

First, the linen is broken (Picture 10) with a flax break, to break the hard bark that surrounds the fibre. The retting and drying process has made the bark sufficiently brittle to be broken. Then the plant is scutched (Picture 11), using a wooden scutching board and knife. Scutching is the first step in the process of removing the boon from the flax.

After scutching, the fibre is hackled (Picture 12) using a wooden board set with steel teeth. Hackling separates the coarser tow from the finer flax. There are coarse, medium and fine hackles, determined by how tightly together the teeth are set. The scutched fibres were first hackled with a coarse hackle and then with a medium hackle. To finish off, the flax was brushed with a boar bristle brush to remove even the smallest pieces of boon from the flax.

The result of this process is a 'line' of flax (Picture 13), ready for spinning or other uses, like false hair for hairpieces. Flax is a good option for false hair, since it looks very much like blonde hair.



10: Breaking

11: Scutching

12: Heckling

13: Two lines of flax

Dyeing the Thread

Many plants can and have been used for dyeing, but only a few were used commercially in the middle ages. Mordants such as alum and iron were used in the process. Craftsmen and merchants specialised in the commercial dyes, such as woad and madder. Dyeing was also done at home, although it became less common in the later middle ages. (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 19-20)

These yarns were dyed at a workshop on natural dyeing. The yellow wool thread was dyed using fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*) and the green with nettle (*Urtica dioica*). Both plants are native to Europe and the Northern hemisphere and were also available to the medieval dyer (Kurtto & Rätty 1986, 267; 276).

The plants were picked the day before the actual dyeing. The leaves and the stems were soaked overnight in water. The next day, the plants were boiled (approx. 1h). What was left of the plants was sieved away and the resulting dye bath was left to cool. The white wool yarn was premordanted with alum and then put in the dye bath, which was heated to approximately 80-90 C. The yarn was left in for 45 minutes (Picture 14). Afterwards the yarn was taken out of the dye bath and a mordant was mixed in: (8g of copper and 5 g of iron per 100g of wool for the green and 3g of iron per 100g of wool for the yellow) The yarn was returned to the bath for an additional 15 minutes. The green yarn was then left to cool in the bath and the yellow yarn was taken out and put in warm water and let cool down. After this, the yarn was washed and rinsed with cool water and let dry (Picture 15).



14: Yarn in the dye bath



15: The finished results: Fireweed and nettle 2nd and 3rd from the left

Tablet Weaving

The dimensions and construction of the tablet woven band of the London hairpiece are described as follows (Crowfoot et. al 2001, 136-137):

Dimensions: (i) l 150mm, w 10mm; (ii) l 90mm, w 10mm. (i) is sewn to a plaited hairpiece. At intervals of c. 10mm along the braid there are groups of holes indicating that ornaments were formerly attached to the braid

Warp: silk, golden-brown (negative), Z/S-ply

Weft: silk, golden-brown, Z/S-ply, 46 picks per cm

Weave: 26 tablets, the 2 edge tablets on either side were four-holed, threaded in S-direction, and given continuous ¼ turns forward after the weft was thrown. The centre 22 tablets were two-holed and given ¼ turn backwards followed after the next pick by ¼ turn forwards to produce a tabby weave.

Following these instructions, I threaded my 26 tablets. I used a wooden loom and tablets made out of playing cards. The two outer tablets on each side are S-threaded through four holes. This gives a strong selvedge to the braid. These tablets are turned forward a quarter turn after each pass of the weft. To unwind the warp, I changed the direction I turned the tablets in a few times. This hardly shows in the weave and makes the weaving much easier to manage.

All of the inner tablets were S-threaded through two holes. Crowfoot et. al describe that the inner tablets have been turned a quarter turn backward, then a quarter turn forward. However, this didn't seem to work. Using four-holed (of which only two holes were threaded), four-sided tablets, a quarter turn left the warp

threads in a completely down or up position, with no shed to pass the weft thread through. Experimenting lead to discovering that turning the tablets a half turn backwards, then a half turn forwards produces a weave similar to that seen on the pictures of the extant piece.

Turning the tablets back and forth gives weave has the look of a tabby woven fabric. The technique and result are similar to double-weave (*dubbelväv*) a predominantly Icelandic tablet weaving technique (Geijer 2006, 85-86).

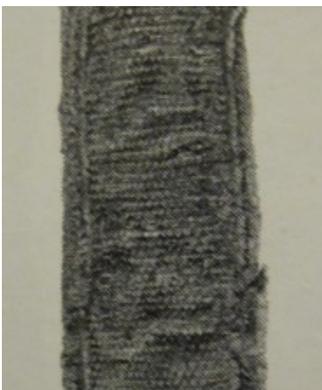
The original piece has 46 picks per centimetre. My braid is not beaten nearly as densely. It would not even be possible, since the thread I used is much thicker, being wool instead of the finer silk on the original.



16: Tablet weaving: loom, tablets and shuttle



17: Finished braid with picks (in yellow) visible



18: The original band



19: My band



20: The original plait



21: My plait

Constructing the Hairpiece

Once I had the finished braid and had the lines of flax at hand, it was time to put the hairpiece together. I braided the flax into two plaits measuring approximately 38 cm. I bent these plaits in the middle and bound them with fine z-spun strands of flax. I stitched the braids onto the tablet woven braid with linen thread.

Summary

Making this hairpiece was a fascinating project that involved learning and trying out new or fairly new skills. This was the first time I'd processed flax or dyed yarn naturally. This was also my second tabletwoven band and the first time I worked out a tabletweaving pattern by myself - and the first time I'd done it from an archaeological source. It was thrilling to see my weave turn out looking like the weave on the original piece. Once my weaving skills develop and the weave gets neater, it's likely I'll do another hairpiece in silk.

For pictures of me wearing the finished piece, see cover.

Sources

Mural showing the processing of silk and flax at the Kanonikerhaus in Constance, Germany, c. 1320 www.bildindex.de (19.3.2010)

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