

WCOB presentations for TM Draco and Serena, AS39

Viking wool embroidery borders based on the acanthus border of the Mammen find, 11th Century Danish.

Historical context:

The Mammen find

The “Mammen find” from Bjerringhøj parish in Denmark is a rich burial of a very wealthy and powerful couple in a semi-Christian context. While they were buried with the rich array of grave goods normally associated with the pre-Christian Viking graves, a candle was found on top of the coffin, and a gold paillete-embroidered cross was originally present on the clothing.

The burial was excavated in the late 1800’s, and so the textiles were not tracked in the manner we are accustomed to today, but they still represent one of the finest examples of Viking textiles we have, and the embroidery is outstanding. Unfortunately it is all in fragments, and so no accurate analysis can be made of what garments the embroidery belonged to.

There are three borders and several individual motifs present, on at least two different garments (based on the quality of the ground fabrics). There is also a needle-bound stole, and two individual sets of cuffs, the larger decorated with applied samite, the other with a brocaded tabletwoven band. These particular items appear to denote the highest strata of society, and come from the Western European ‘royal clothing’ tradition ultimately derived from Ravenna. The stole may be a ‘hlad’, which was worn by men and women, or it could be the stole we also find in Birka, associated with the caftan. A caftan, again of a foreign tradition but this time a more eastern context ultimately derived from Byzantium, is a status symbol found both in Birka, richly decorated with metal, and in Hedeby, although there it seems to be less richly decorated and complex.

The acanthus border

The acanthus border represents a style which is common in several different media over a long period of time in Europe. It is of course Eastern in origin, but it appears in Anglo-Saxon, Frankish and Scandinavian decorative work in the first Millennium or “Dark Ages”. The style then is generic enough to be suitable for any type of ‘Viking’ application, Western or Eastern, or even for Rus.

The original embroidery is fragmentary, but it is possible to discern that one border, slightly curved, ends perpendicular to the beginning of another border. I’ve interpreted this as the shape suitable for a neckline. While this doesn’t give us any clues as to the original garment (it could have been a mantle, a tunic or a caftan) it seems to be suitable to use for either. A spot motif was found on the same base fabric – again it’s not enough information to tell us what the garment was.

The presentation pieces:

Extrapolated use

The embroidery is designed to be used as a decorative border around a caftan, but is flexible enough that it could be put on a tunic or mantle if that suits better. Based on the extant fragments of the acanthus border, I’ve designed it so that it has a separate piece to go around the neck. The embroidery is laid out so that it can be cut into one piece and applied to the garment, or you could cut it into the three separate pieces if that works better.

Materials

The embroidery is executed in Paterna stranded tapestry wools, colours 701, 710 and 420. The background material is a red 2/1 twill by Armani bought at the Fabric Warehouse in Wellington.

Workers:

Research, Design and kit – Marienna Jensdatter (Dartonsire)

Embroiderers – Baroness Sinech ingen Chonchobair hui Briuin, Viscountess Yve