

CHAPTER 6: FABRICS

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INTRODUCTION

At least eighteen possible fabric types were recognised at Wolverton, present as impressions on metal artefacts or as mineralised remains. Those which could be identified with some certainty are listed in Table 6.1. Evidence of fabrics was also present in the form of braid and cord: these are also listed. Impressions and surviving fragments of leather were also recorded, mostly in connection with weapons, knives and buckles, but also as the possible covering of the wooden box in Grave 2360. Fabric identifications were provided by Graeme Morgan of the Conservation Laboratory in the Archaeology Department, University of Leicester.

LINEN

The majority of fabric evidence from Wolverton related to a range of linen tabby fabrics, mostly zz-spun, ranging from 17x17 to 20x20 and 24x24 threads per cm respectively. In one case of the latter weave the individual linen fibres were found to be 5µm-15µm thick. Penelope Walton Rogers (*in* Houghton & Powlesland 1999, 146) notes that the thread-count does not always reflect the weight of the fabric, as some pieces with lower counts might be open-weave fabrics in finer thread. These fabrics were mostly



Figure 6.1 Linen tabby, wrapped around part of chatelaine 89

found in association with buckles or the component parts of chatelaines (Fig 6.1), and probably represent undergarments. Other linen fabric recorded was mostly in the form of 2/1 twill between 10x10 and 20x20 threads per cm, spun in a variety of ways, and was also found predominantly on parts of chatelaines and in one case on a knife, suggesting that the implement had been carried thrust between belt and garment, without a scabbard.

Table 6.1 Summary of fabric types identified at Wolverton

<i>Weight</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Spin</i>	<i>Threads per cm</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Obj no.</i>
heavy	tabby	linen	zz	17x17	buckle	13
light	tabby	linen	zz	20x20	buckle	29
					chatelaine	54
					buckle	67
					workbox	59
heavy	2/1 twill	linen	z	16x18	chatelaine	144
heavy	2/1 twill	linen	zz	10x10	knife	6a
heavy	2/2 twill	indet.	ss?	10x12	chatelaine	54
					chatelaine	144/147
					iron ring	119
light	2/1 twill	linen?	indet.	20x10	chatelaine	8
light	tabby	linen?	indet.	26x32	bucket fittings	18
light	tabby	linen	indet.	20x20	chatelaine	144
heavy	tabby	wool	indet.	‘wide weave’	chatelaine	102/103
-	cord	linen	z	?	balance	17/24
-	cord	linen?	z	?	chatelaine	144
-	braid	linen?	-	-		



Figure 6.2 Linen suspension cord round copper-alloy ring 144, part of chatelaine 139

As noted above, linen was also found in the form of braid and cord. The pans of the copper-alloy balance (17/24) from Grave 2027 appear to have had z-spun suspension cords, probably of linen. Suspension cords and braid (the latter probably made from cord) were found in association with chatelaines 102/103 and 144 (Fig. 6.2). Both are likely to have been linen, though conclusive identification was not possible.

Flax was grown in Britain as early as the Bronze Age, though evidence for its use in textile manufacture prior to the late Iron Age is slight (Walton Rogers, *op. cit.*). Linen production probably became more common in the late Iron Age and Roman periods, and textile evidence recovered from cemeteries of early to middle Saxon date in Britain and Europe suggests that zz-spun tabbies, mostly linen, account for one-quarter to one-third of the textiles present (*ibid.*). A flax-retting pit dated to the late 7th to early 8th century was found in excavations at Westbury-by Shenley, Milton Keynes (Ivens, Busby & Shepherd 1995, 71–79), indicating that flax was grown locally. There seems little reason to suppose that the linens found at Wolverton were anything other than common fabric types, locally made.

WOOL

Only two woollen fabrics could be identified with any certainty at Wolverton. Both are heavier-weight fabrics; a 2/2 twill, possibly ss-spun, with 10x12 threads per cm, and a wide-weave woollen tabby. Both were found in association with chatelaines – one in association with a lighter linen tabby – and could have derived from outer garments.

Wool was a common clothing fabric through most of north-west Europe from the late Iron Age to the 10th century, and its relative scarcity amongst the fabric evidence from Wolverton is surprising. Given the poor state of preservation of the cemetery as a whole it may be simply that wool garments were more susceptible to decay than linen, or that fewer were close to metallic objects in the burials, allowing fewer opportunities for preservation by reaction with the metal and mineralisation.

LEATHER

As noted above, traces of leather or surviving leather fragments were found primarily with buckles (13, 29, 45, 67, 89, 106, 150), belt ends frequently surviving between the buckle plates, providing evidence for the width and thickness of the belt. Evidence for leather scabbards was also present on some of the knives, seaxes and the sword (Fig. 6.3).

Traces of embossed leather were present on the rear surfaces of the iron fittings of the wooden box in Grave 2360. The embossed pattern appears to have comprised a series of indistinct vertical and diagonal lines with crosses at intervals, though insufficient remains to attempt reconstruction. While iron-bound wooden boxes are relatively common finds in mid-Saxon cemeteries, research has so far failed to come up with another example of one with evidence for leather covering or embossed decoration.

Fragments of mineralised leather (143) were also recovered from Grave 2360, close to the elbows of its middle-aged female occupant. It has been suggested that these represent the remains of a small bag or purse, but their function remains uncertain.



Figure 6.3 Traces of leather scabbard on blade of sword 102