

Marianne Vedeler

Norway

New Light on Samite Textiles from Oseberg

The ship-grave from Oseberg has been an active part in forming Norwegian identity for more than a hundred years. However, the two women buried here had with them an overwhelming luxurious variety of silk textiles produced far away from the mound in Eastern Norway. This paper focuses on some new documentation of the fading patterns on these silks.

The Oseberg grave-mound contained an extravagance of goods including at least 15 different fabrics of samite silk textiles. The colors, once so bright on the textile surface, have faded considerably, and today it is very difficult to carry out visual studies on the patterns. In the years after the excavation of Oseberg in 1904, it was still possible to see many of the original patterns, and these were documented in the form of aquarelle sketches made by the illustrator Sofie Krafft (Krafft 1955, KHM's photo database). She put the textiles in baths of water, and drew the patterns as she saw them through the water surface. In the following years, the patterns faded quickly, in spite of the fact that they were not displayed. The aquarelles by Krafft have therefore been of great importance for later studies (Christensen and Nockert 2006). As with all other drawings and texts, these aquarelles are to be seen as an interpretation, bearing with them the visual understanding of their present time (Vedeler 2007). Studies of patterns are one of several important criteria to draw light on the production and provenience of these textiles. It is therefore important to try to find new methods for studying and documenting the patterns that are still preserved on the fabrics. On this background, the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo decided to carry out a documentation project in 2010, using photography with infrared and ultraviolet light, exposing the textiles for only a very short time-frame. We used the data program "Artist", often used for documentation of polychrome medieval paintings. It turned out that the infrared light photography is a good tool for studying complex weave-structures, but it did not reveal color patterns on the surface of the textiles. The dim ultra violet light, however, revealed patterns that are no longer visible by optical observation in daylight. Unfortunately, we could no longer see the great wealth of patterns Sophie Krafft once discovered, even with the help of ultraviolet light. However, there are certain types of patterns that now present themselves very well. Among these, the motives of so-called double-axes and rows of hearts are particularly visible. In this paper I will focus especially on these motives.

Literature:

Christensen, A.M and Nockert, M. (red) 2006: *Osebergfunnet bind IV, Tekstilene*, Oslo.

Krafft, S. 1955: *Fra Osebergfunnets tekstiler. Fragmenter av billedvev og silkestoffer med rekonstruerte mønstre*, Oslo.

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Museum of Cultural History photo base:

<http://www.unimus.no/foto/#/P=kulturhistorisk.swf>

Contributor:

Marianne Vedeler

Museum of Cultural History

University of Oslo