

THE TEXTILES

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Summary

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Between 1975 and 1977, 411 samples of textiles, fabrics, yarns and cordage were excavated from medieval deposits at the High Street, Perth. Most of this material was recovered from levels dating between the early 12th and the later 14th centuries; only seven samples came from unstratified contexts.

In addition to wool (the most commonly represented fibre), goat hair and probably horse hair were detected. A total of 31 items are of silk. The absence of linen is attributed to the acidic soil conditions, which do not favour the preservation of bast fibres.

The largest group consists of loom-woven textiles. Under this heading, 2/1 Twill without nap, ZS is the most abundant type of weave. Also well represented are the categories 2/1 Twill with nap, ZS and 2/1 Twill without nap, ZZ. 2/2 twills are present in much lower numbers, but they maintain a much more consistent presence throughout all five periods. In contrast, there is a tendency for the 2/1 twills to undergo a marked increase from the first half of the 12th century onwards.

Most of the textiles are woollen and monochrome in colour. It is estimated that approximately 30% of the cloths were dyed. Madder and kermes were identified among the red dyestuffs, the former being more common. Indigotin and a further, unidentified blue dye were also recognised. The yellows identified in the textiles were kaempferol, quercetin and rhamnetin, perhaps from residues of plant crops such as onion skins. *Reseda luteola*, or weld (Dyer's Rocket), was not detected, but some of its seeds were recovered from the site. Patterned weaves are rare in the Perth textiles. Examples of patterning include a 2/1 twill check, which employs yarns of different weight and colour (Cat No 93/A10193c). This is notable as the only recorded check fabric in Scotland between a check from Falkirk, belonging to the mid-third century AD and another from the Dava Moor burial dated c1600. High Street 2/2 twills with pattern effects are a diamond twill (Cat No 18/A12340a), and a fragmentary fabric with a single reverse in the direction of the line of the weave (Cat No 105/A10057). In a further 2/2 twill, the diagonal line of the weave is emphasised by using a dark warp and a light weft (Cat No 82/A12553b). This cloth has been identified as wadmál (*vaðmál*); it is probably an import from Scandinavia.

Another characteristic exploited in a few textiles is the use of yarns with different spin directions in the same system (either warp or weft), as in Cat Nos 259/A09-0104 and 337/A09-0041, both 2/1 twills. A homogeneous group of textiles consists of tabbies woven from two ply yarns. They occur in all periods of the site, but with a concentration in Period II (1150–1200). These textiles, with a low warp and weft count, are similar to examples

found at many other European sites. At the High Street, there are tabbies with 2S ply yarn and tabbies with 2Z ply yarn; the former occur in greatest numbers.

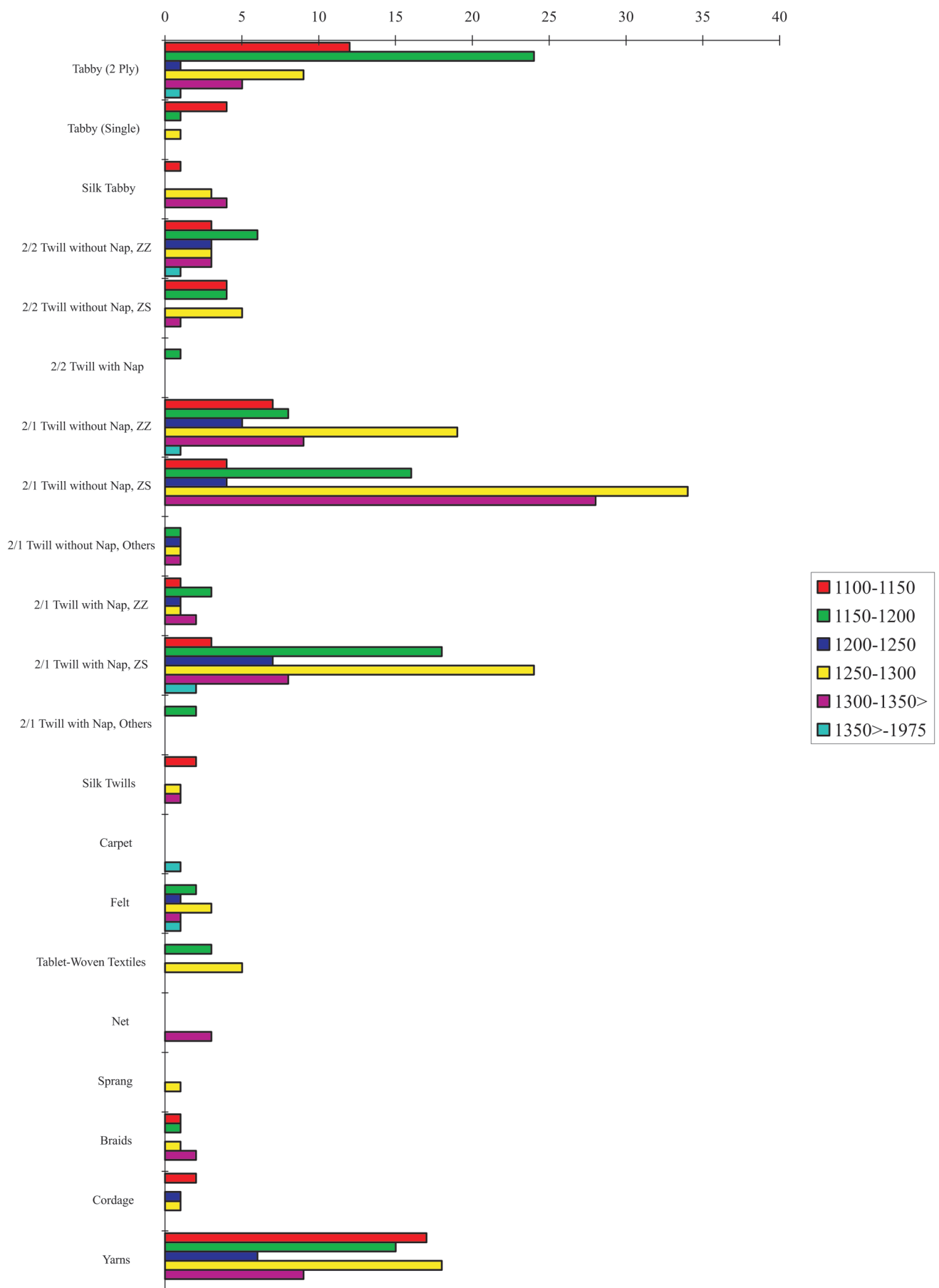
Positive evidence for the use of the warp-weighted loom has been noted among the High Street material. This includes textiles with a starting edge and pin beaters. In contrast, no parts of horizontal looms appear to have been found.

Eleven of the loom-woven textiles are of silk, and a further tablet-woven fabric is a composite piece which incorporates two sections of tabby ribbon (Cat No 271/A09-0097). While most of the silk textiles are of tabby weave, four of the samples are twill weaves. The latter comprise weft-faced compound twill (three samples), and a 2/2 lozenge twill which may have been manufactured in 13th-century Spain (Cat No 233/A09-0122).

Among the non loom-woven fabrics are tablet-weaves, felt, sprang, knotted net and braids. The sprang (Cat No 227/A09-0121), belonging to Period V (1300–1350), is notable as the technique is extremely rare at medieval sites in Britain. Three examples of knotted net, constructed from two ply silk yarn, were obtained from levels also dated to Period V. Two of these nets have embroidered designs executed in varieties of darning (*lacis*). They are comparable with cushion covers from the royal burials at the convent of Las Huelgas, near Burgos, Spain, and with hair-coverings from Germany. These nets contribute to the evidence obtained from other finds represented among the High Street finds for trading links with the Continent.

Many of the High Street loom-woven textiles have cut edges; they are probably discarded offcuts. Confirmation for tailoring activities was found at the site in the form of shears, scissors and needles. From an examination of different categories of finds from the site, including metalwork, illustrations depicting clothed personages, and other contemporary material in Scotland, it is suggested that the inhabitants of 12th- to early 14th-century Perth wore long woollen garments with soft, loose folds. The basic garments adopted by women and men were similar. Differences may be observed in the variable length of men's tunics, while women's garments always reached the ground. It is assumed that the wealthier inhabitants of Perth would have worn dyed clothing and the finer qualities of cloth, but most people would have worn natural shades of brown.

Despite the apparent homogeneity in colour, a closer study of clothing in Perth, considered in the light of what is known of the history of the burgh, shows that the outward forms of dress reveal the articulation of more complex internal social organisation.



Illus 1 Bar diagram showing frequencies of the different categories of textiles, fabrics and yarns from the Perth High Street Archaeological Excavation.

Introduction

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The High Street excavation recovered 411 samples of textiles and fabrics, 403 of which were found within deposits that had been laid down within a period of little more than two and a half centuries dating between c AD 1100 and c1350. They were present in significant numbers in all periods, preserved by the damp and slightly acid environment. Over 7.5% (31) are of silk, the remaining 380 being animal hair, usually sheep's wool. There are, however, also at least two examples of goat hair in addition to what could be a number of specimens of yarns and cordage of horse hair.

Of these samples, 318 are of loom-woven cloth, varying in quality from fine, often highly-finished fabrics suitable for the clothing of the wealthy, to coarse, heavy weight pieces which may have served as matting and packaging. In addition non loom-woven fabrics such as felt, tablet weaving, net, sprang, braids, yarns and cordage are also well represented.

Textiles are rarely durable, and for a piece to survive over several centuries, either above or below ground, special conditions are required. Consequently, examples of medieval clothing and soft furnishings, or the materials used in making them, were very rare in Scotland before the High Street discoveries. Of all medieval textiles it was those which had been used as vestments, or for other ecclesiastical purposes such as wrapping relics, which were most often preserved, usually in the safe-keeping of church treasuries. Nevertheless in Scotland there are barely half a dozen such pieces which can safely be said to pre-date the Reformation. These, of which the so-called Fetternear Banner of c1520 is the best known (McRoberts 1956), all belong to the late Middle Ages and appear to be the sole survivors of the wholesale destruction of vestments which took place during the Scottish Reformation. Amongst the few medieval vestments to have survived are remounted orprheys (embroidered bands) which were kept clandestinely by Catholic families (Dransart and Bogdan 2004, 465–6).

Until the High Street excavation, textile material from archaeological sources had scarcely been more plentiful. When, in the 1950s, Audrey Henshall (1952; et al 1956) examined the early textile finds from Scotland, those of possible native production which could be placed between the 10th century and the middle of the 16th century were limited to six. These consisted of scraps of woven wool or linen, mostly preserved by contact with metal, and the enigmatic woollen shirt of possible 14th-century date from Rogart, Sutherland, which had been buried with its owner in peat (Henshall 1952, 17–21). Fragments of silk from a grave at Dunfermline attributed to Robert I (the Bruce, d 1329), and the tombs of Archbishop

Gavin Dunbar (d 1547), in Glasgow Cathedral, and an unknown early or mid-16th century bishop in Fortrose Cathedral, were all that remained of imported goods (Henshall et al 1956).

Since the High Street excavation, work in other Scottish burghs – Aberdeen (Bennett 1982; Gabra-Sanders 2001a), Elgin (Bennett nd a), Leith (Bennett and Habib 1985) and elsewhere in Perth (Bennett 1987; Bennett 1995; Harrison and Janaway 1997) – have produced further examples of woollen and silk fabrics. They have been found on a few other medieval sites: Fast Castle, Berwickshire (Ryder and Gabra-Sanders 1992; Gabra-Sanders and Ryder 2001), Threave Castle, Kirkcudbrightshire (Bennett nd b), Sillerholes, West Lothian (Gabra-Sanders 1997), Dairsie, Fife (Dransart forthcoming), and The Biggings, Papa Stour, Shetland, which produced a few textile finds from medieval phases and a greater quantity from more recent phases (Bennett nd c; Walton Rogers 1999). In addition, the remains of a leather shroud and wool cloth wrappings were recovered from a grave at Coldingham Priory, Berwickshire in 1972 and are now in the National Museum of Scotland. The grave was covered with a slab inscribed with the name of a prior of Coldingham who died c1198, but the interment may not be the original. The main fabric is a fine 2/1 diamond twill of high quality, woven from very firm, combined Z spun yarn, with a count of 33 by 10 threads per 10mm. Apart from Sillerholes, most of these medieval fabrics are present in relatively small quantities.

The finds from the High Street, therefore, remain by far the largest corpus of medieval textiles from Scotland. Indeed they are still one of the largest assemblages recovered from a single site in the British Isles. Dating in the main from the early 12th to the first quarter of the 14th century, they bridge the important period between the major collections from Anglo-Scandinavian York (Hedges 1982; Walton 1989), the predominantly 14th-century material from various sites in London (Crowfoot et al 1992) and the 15th- and 16th-century textiles from the Castle Ditch in Newcastle upon Tyne (Walton 1981).

While our knowledge of textile use and production in Scottish medieval burghs on the basis of documentary sources has been extremely patchy, the High Street assemblage presents detailed information. The High Street finds take the form of offcuts, rags and scraps. A few finds – Cat Nos 351/A7577a and 370/A10112, both recognisable as decorative hair-coverings, and 406/A9821, the felt lining of a boot – are identifiable entities (see Net and Felt below). In view of this lack of complete objects, the finds are considered according to their method of manufacture. The fragments of loom-

woven textiles are considered first, divided according to the fibre, type of yarn used, the weave, and the method of finishing. They are followed by the non-woven fabrics, again divided according to structure but with no distinction as to fibre. Finally there is a General discussion and sections on the Hair and wool, Textile tools and Dress in medieval Perth: the evidence from the site.

In general, to assist non-specialists, technical terms have been explained (see also the Glossary of textile terms). For further elucidation of terms relating to fabrics and, more specifically, textiles the reader is directed to Burnham (1980), CIETA (1964) and Emery (1980). Technical works on the non-woven fabrics are mentioned in the relevant sections.