

FUNERARY TEXTILES IN THE AVAR PERIOD

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Early Middle Age textile remains are few in the Carpathian Basin; moreover, most are impregnated by corrosion and poorly preserved. A systematic collection and evaluation of the related findings, however, might provide the research on fashion, commerce, and funerary rites with a valuable contribution. Coffin-related nails, metal fittings, and decorative mounts from Avar Period graves represent an interesting source of information, as their surfaces often preserved remains or imprints of textiles, thus indicating (by their relative positions in the graves) the covering of the coffins with sheets of fabric. This custom was present in Inner Asia, appearing in burials of the Xiongnu and the Chinese, but also in coeval Europe (see, for example, graves of the Frank and Italian elite); besides, examples can also be cited from the ethnographic record. In summary, covering the coffin with sheets or lining them with silk was in practice at many times and places and cannot be linked only to distinct peoples or areas. While the available analogies suggest that the textiles used for funerary purposes were usually expensive, the examples from the Carpathian Basin are not related to elite burials.

Keywords: textile remains, shroud, coffin, Avar Period, funerary rite

INTRODUCTION

Avar Period textiles are barely researched, mainly because of the quality and quantity of available finds – the soils in the Carpathian Basin are usually unfavourable for the preservation of objects made from organic materials, albeit the corrosion of iron and other metals improves their chances (especially of textiles). A steady anaerobic environment, either wet or dry (bogs, ice, and constant water cover), sodium-chloride, and metal-related inorganic salts can slow the decay of organic materials (RAST-EICHER 2016, 15–32). This paper provides a survey of Avar Period findings that may be interpreted as textiles used for covering a coffin or shrouds. The data set only comprises information on textile remains as they appear in the related literature and does not include technological and microscopic analyses.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRACES OF TEXTILES COVERING COFFINS

Diverse phenomena indicate that coffin burial was widespread in the Avar Period: soil stains around the bodies, wood remains, coffin clamps, -nails, and -fittings. Even the body position can be telling, especially when the skull is discovered in an irregular position or had been damaged by the collapsing coffin lid (TOMKA 1978, 17–20).

The marks hinting at the use of textiles to cover or wrap the deceased or the coffin are significantly fewer; there are some cases in the Avar Period archaeological record of the Carpathian Basin, however, where textile remains or imprints have been observed corroded to metallic fittings of coffins (BALOGH 2016).



Fig. 1. Coffin clamp with a textile remain corroded on its inner surface from Budakalász-Dunapart Grave no. 104 (BÁSTI 2019)

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Three coffin nails with textile remains corroded to the top have been recovered from Grave no. 104 of the Budakalász cemetery (*Fig. 1*). All three textiles were tabby-woven, and they seemingly featured diverse patterns (*Fig. 2*) that can either be results of the of some threads being damaged or were created using the “float weaving” technique when some (warp) threads are skipped during weaving. An electron microscope analysis could determine the cause (BÁSTI 2019).

Most shroud findings have been discovered in the cemetery at Budapest-Rákos-Ejtőernyős torony. Some metal fittings of the coffins preserved not only textile- but also wood fragments, thus enabling us to determine the relative positions of the coffins and the textiles. Altogether 31 iron objects with corroded-on textile remains have been recovered from the twelve excavated graves of the cemetery. Of these, the textile was on the coffin side of the iron fitting in 17 cases, on their top in 12 cases, while their relative positions could not be determined in two cases. According to Margit Nagy, the archaeologist evaluating the cemetery, all textiles were rep-woven (a technique using a very close sett for the warp yarns and two shuttles) save for a tabby-woven piece and another with a non-identifiable weaving pattern (NAGY 198).

A disturbed burial of a man in the cemetery at Hortobágy-Árkus contained two coffin clamps with the remains of two (according to the publication, tabby-woven) pieces of fabric corroded on their inner side (SZENTHE & GÁLL 2022, 32–34, 40).

Two coffin clamps with corroded-on organic remains are known from the cemetery at Budapest-Népstadion; in lack of microscopic analyses, however, one cannot tell more about these findings (NAGY 1998, 109–110).

Iron bands engirding the waist of the deceased were observed in a grave at Öcsöd, site no. 33. Based on previous research by Tibor Anda, László Madaras, the archaeologist evaluating the record of the cemetery, identified these bands as remains of a hernia support (ANDA 1952; MADARAS 1993). While this hypothesis cannot be confirmed, textile remains are clearly visible on the surface of the bands. One of the remains has corroded on the convex (outer) side of a band, perhaps indicating a shroud.

Iron coffin fittings with corroded-on textile remains have also been discovered in cemeteries at Budapest-Csepel-Szabadkikötő (NAGY 1998, 183), Párkány (Štúrovo, Slovakia; TOČÍK 1968, 21), Üllő, site II (Cs. Sós 1955, 198) and Pitvaros; the weaving patterns are not described in the related publications. Of these findings, the relative position of the textile remain could be determined in only one case: the fabric was corroded on the upper side of the coffin clamp from Pitvaros (BENDE 2017, 100–101).

Metal crosses, identified as decorative mounts on coffins, represent a distinct find group; thus, the related textile remains must also be evaluated separately. Such crosses seem to have been characteristic of the mortuary community of Zamárdi-Rétiföldek, as the record of the cemetery comprises fifteen metal plate crosses with textile remains, attaching mainly to their back (13 cases) and sometime to their front side (two cases; BÁRDOS & GARAM 2009). The phenomenon does not seem to be gender-related but is less frequent with burials of children.



Fig. 2. Stereo microscope image of the textile remain on the coffin clamp from Budakalász-Dunapart Grave no. 104 (BÁSTI 2019)

SHROUDS (SHEETS DIRECTLY COVERING THE BODY)

Several Avar Period burials are known where the body was directly covered with a shroud. Textile remains on the skull and under the body might indicate direct covering or wrapping of the body or the lining of the coffin with sheets of fabric. The front side of belt buckles, usually found atop the skeleton in the waist area,

also frequently preserves traces of textiles, which may also hint at shrouds (due to their interpretation being highly problematic, these finds are not discussed here, akin to the mainly iron objects positioned away from the body in the grave).

The function of the gold sheet fittings with textile imprints from Kiskőrös–Vágóhíd is obscure; according to current hypotheses, they decorated a shroud or a mortuary costume. As the pieces have been discovered above the feet and feature the imprints of various fabrics, they more likely have been fastened to clothing (LÁSZLÓ 1955, 41–43). However, the graves were disturbed by plunder, and the original positions of the gold sheet items could not be reconstructed – thus, neither their function.

Textile remains could be observed on one side of an *obulus* found among the displaced ribs of the deceased in the disturbed Grave no. 32 in the cemetery of Hortobágy–Árkus. It may indicate either a shroud or clothing, but the original position of the artefact cannot be determined, which prevents one from drawing conclusions on the related textile imprint, too (SZENTHE & GÁLL 2022, 68–74).

The gold sheet fragments discovered scattered around the interred man's skull in Grave no. 26 at Zsitvatő (Žitava, Slovakia; BUDINSKÝ-KRIČKA 1956, 279) are also difficult to interpret. They belonged either to a shroud or some kind of headdress.

Textile remains were observed on the back of several bronze sheet fragments in Grave no. 25 at Tatárszentgyörgy–Szabadrét. Although Csilla Balogh described these finds as indicating a shroud, based on the finding positions, the original function of the bronze sheets cannot be determined with certainty, and they could have been fitted just as to shrouds as clothing (BALOGH 2016, 53).

Textile remains were also observed on the nasal bone of the young woman in Grave 17 at Pitvaros and in the left eyehole of the deceased in Grave no. 29 at Nyékládháza. Both findings can indicate a shroud or veil (BENDE 2017, 70–71; K. VÉGH 1965, 182), just like the fabric remains in a grave at Kaposvár, site no. 33, observed both under and above the bones (BÁRDOS 1978, 19). A textile remain observed on a jug recovered from a grave at Kiskőrös–Vágóhíd may also belong to a shroud or a sheet covering the coffin (LÁSZLÓ 1955, 31).

FUNERARY “CARPETS”

In some cases, textile remains or soil stains indicating organic substances were discovered under the body. Some of these could be identified as part of a piece of thick fabric or a mat that was probably spread under the deceased. Textile remains and soil stains of organic origin were observed under the body in some graves at Szeged–Kundomb (SALAMON, Cs. SEBESTYÉN & TÖRÖK 1995, 15, 33, 35), while the textile remain amongst the coffin's traces in Grave no. 17 at Párkány (Štúrovo, Slovakia) was the part of either the shroud or a piece of fabric spread out under the deceased (TOČÍK 1968, 14). The traces of some mat were found under the bones of the deceased in Grave no. 29 at Őcsöd, site no. 33 (MADARAS 1993, 191).

SHROUDS FROM INNER ASIA TO WESTERN EUROPE

Well-preserved textile coffin covers are known from Inner Asia, the area where the Avar elite and part of the people came from. In the 3rd century BC–1st century AD, the Hsiung-nu covered the coffins with embroidered silk sheets decorated with butterfly-shaped precious metal mounts on a wooden base (POLOSMÁK 2015, 74). The coffin in Grave no. 20 at Gol Mod (Mongolia) was covered with a silk sheet with diamond-, moon- and sun-shaped mounts on top (CSIKY 2007, 59; 2008, 58). The coffin in tumulus no. 22 at Noin Ula (Mongolia) was also covered with a silk sheet to which wood-based butterfly-shaped gold sheet mounts were fastened (POLOSMÁK 2015, 74). The princely graves of the Hsiung-nu in the Tsaram Valley (Russia) contained coffins with organic traces that the archaeologist identified as felt or fur remains (MINIAEV 2011, 166). High-quality, probably imported carpets seem to have been frequently placed into the grave chamber, spread either next to the grave, to cover the chamber floor, or under the coffin (KARPOVA & POLOSMÁK 2016, 76–77).

Textiles seem to have had a special role in the Wei Period (AD 386–535) cemetery at Yihe-Nur (Northern China, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region): both the bodies were wrapped in and their

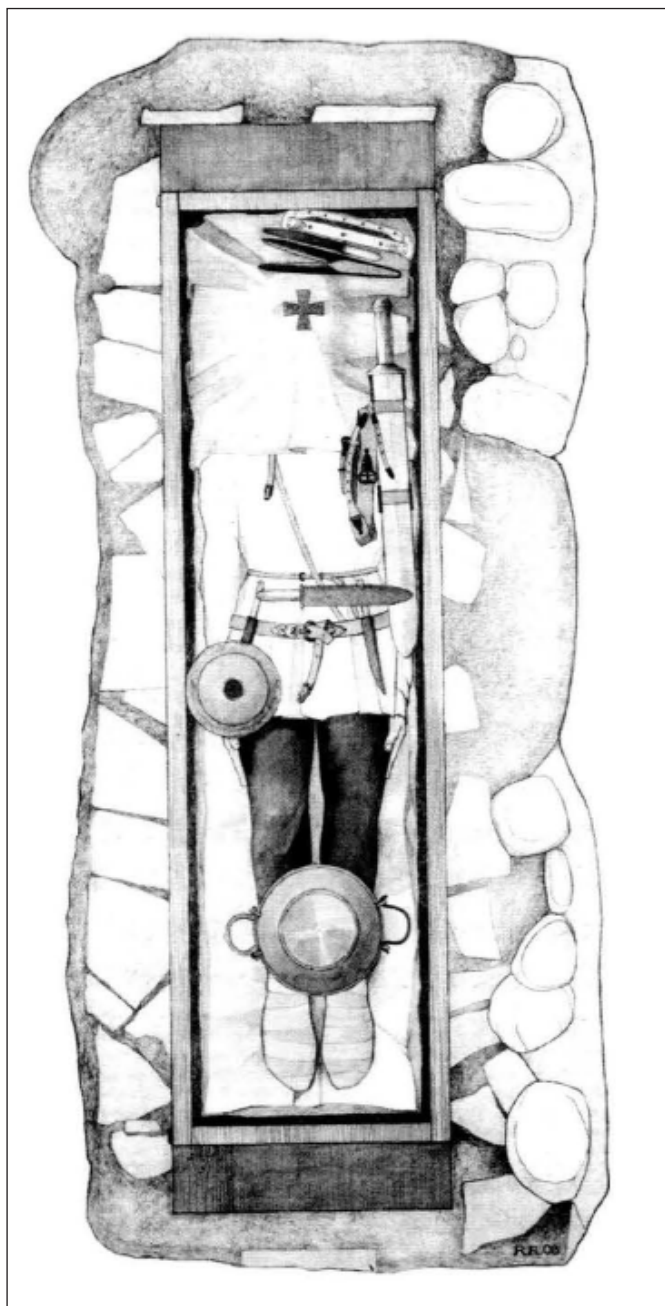


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of a grave in the cemetery at Trezzo sull'Adda, with a cross on the shroud (AUGENTI 2016, Fig. 6.13, 221)

(BORZACCONI & GIOSTRA 2018, 237–238). Unlike the metal sheet crosses in the Carpathian Basin, these were not used to ornate coffins: the small holes at the end of the crosses' arms suggest that they were sewn up to a piece of textile that covered the head or the body (Figs. 3–4). The use-wear analysis of these gold crosses revealed that none of them had been worn, making it probable that they were made especially for funerary purposes (GIOSTRA 2014).

SUMMARY

Textiles could have been more than clothing and practical accessories of everyday life throughout history; they could bore a ritual meaning, having special roles in funerary rituals, where they were used in different ways. The observed quality differences are likely linked to the degree of representation.



Fig. 4. Burial scene in an 11th-century Italian manuscript, the *Sacramentario del vescovo Warmondo di Ivrea*. The deceased is covered with a shroud decorated with crosses (AUGENTI 2016, Fig. 6.11, 216)

painted coffins covered with silk (YONGZHI et al. 2016, 44–45).

Textiles also played an important role in funerary context in Western Europe: shroud was a regular accessory to the burials of the Frank and Langobard elite. The burial of a nobelwoman was discovered under the floor at the sanctuary-side end of the nave in the Cologne cathedral; she was identified as Queen Visigarde, daughter of the Pannonian King Wacho. Several textile remains have been found in her grave, with a palm-sized piece of woollen fabric, probably an import from the Mediterranean, at the foot end of the coffin among them. The field documentation being lacking, one cannot determine with certainty whether the burial comprised a coffin, but its character makes it unlikely that this fabric was part of the mortuary clothing (DOPPELFELD 1959, 41; BENDER JØRGENSEN 1984, 85).

Decorated gold sheet crosses are known from several graves of Langobards throughout Italy

In Avar Period graves, most textile remains were corroded on the coffin side of clamps, indicating that covering the coffin with a sheet first and closing it shut with clamps only afterwards was a more widespread custom than covering the closed coffin with a sheet. The distribution of the occurrences of textile coffin covers does not reflect a pattern, and the custom does not seem to be linked with any grave good type. They seem to be more frequent with men's burials, although the picture may be distorted by the randomness characterising the persistence of organic materials.

Textile remains on metal crosses bear witness to the practicing of a similar funerary custom in a different cultural environment. While in the cemetery at Zamárdi, these appear in graves containing artefacts with Merovingian connections, those burials do not differ from the rest of the cemetery in any other respect. The use of metal coffin crosses cannot be linked to wealth either. The coffins had been covered with the textile sheet before they were nailed shut (with nails or clamps) in all cases but two.

The interpretation of textile remains observed under the body is highly problematic, as these could equally be parts of the mortuary clothing and other funerary textiles; in that case, ethnographic analogies may help interpret archaeological phenomena.

The collected textile remain findings may be classified into the following:

A, clothing remains from inside the coffin (e.g., Kiskőrös–Vágóhíd, Hortobágy–Árkus, Zsitvatő, Tatár-szentgyörgy);

B, other types of funerary textiles

a, veil or shroud covering the deceased (e.g., Pitvaros, Kiskőrös–Vágóhíd, Kaposvár site no. 33);

b, coffin covers added before nailing the coffin shut (e.g., Zamárdi, Budapest–Rákos, Budapest–Népszabad, Hortobágy–Árkus);

c, coffin covers added after nailing the coffin shut (e.g., Öcsöd site no. 33, Pitvaros);

d, “funerary carpets” under the body (e.g., Öcsöd, site no. 33, Párkány/Štúrovo, Szeged–Kundomb).

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