

Norse Smokkr

with Possament Ornaments

by Anne Elizabeth Morley

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Countess Kitta Ragnvaldsdóttir for her assistance with possaments, to Mistress Agnes deLanvallei for her assistance with period dyes, to Lady Hrefna Ylffva for her beautiful inkle trim and to Mistress Briatiz d'Andrade for all of her help.

Scope of the Project

Early Norse smokkr (apron dresses), worn as an overdress by Viking women, were originally made in the ninth and tenth centuries with rectangular fabric pieces apparently straight off of the loom (Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Apron Dress.) not allowing for shape. The garments found from the tenth century in the Haithabu harbour, located in what is now Schleswig-Holstein in northern Germany, (Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Apron Dress.) show a new style of dress, cut to shape the dress to the body. Some of the extant clothing found at the Birka site (Madejska, Annika. 'Posament, Pretty knots from Birka.') was ornamented with silver wire shaped in elaborate knots called possaments, traditionally found at the top of tunics and at the wrists. It was my desire to explore this later style of smokkr for outdoor and camping events, and to learn to make possaments. (Note: The spelling of these decorations varies; both possament and posament are used.)

Period Construction

As the extant pieces of Norse clothing are so small there is very little information on construction. At the Haithabu site there was an abundance of tar which preserved textile fragments better than some of the other sites. The large piece found at Haithabu, item H14A, has cut edges rather than selvage edges as found at the Køstrup site in Denmark, (Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Women: Aprondress.') one of which is curved implying fitting to the body. This piece of the smokkr is the only full piece found, so much of what we know about the construction is construed from all of the small pieces found at the various Viking archaeological sites, particularly at the ninth/tenth century Birka site in Sweden. (Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Women: Aprondress.') The top is on a selvage and is turned inward and stitched. There is a seam but I have not been able to ascertain details about it was finished. There is evidence of ornamentation of seams to cover stitching (which I chose not to include on this smokkr) and various types of bands of decoration including woven string.

Possaments, decorations of silver or gold strips covering silk threads and knotted into designs (which we might identify as Celtic knots), were used probably by Vikings with higher status due to the expense of the metal threads. They were found at the tops of garments, around the wrists, on hats and bags. (Madejska, Annika. 'Posament, Pretty knots from Birka.') Although no possaments were found at the Haithabu site the use of other decorations found at multiple sites would imply that all such decorations could be used across the entire Viking area and period.

Present Day Construction

Using the Haithabu example, but not knowing exactly how the smokkr of that period were put together, I modified my normal four rectangle pattern. Instead of a front and back rectangle being equal in width and side panels being narrower, I cut the front panel a bit narrower, the back much wider, the side panels very narrow, and inserted godets between the front and sides to achieve a more fitted piece. I chose to make flat felled seams for protection from unravelling and a flatter line allowing for that fitted shape. To avoid the thickness of a turned hem on the top and bottom I used fabric edging as was found in the Jorvik dig. (<https://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/mensgarb.html>) I also created a panel across the chest, held in place with an interlaced herringbone band of embroidery on which to showcase the possaments. The main wool is of a fairly heavy weight and the blue colour would have been created using woad, and the purple would probably have been created with madder over previously woad-dyed wool, or vice versa. (Kathy Keeler. Email of 26 April 2020) The sky blue wool would probably have been a normal colour in Norse clothing, but the purple would probably have been more rare. I chose to use it as a contrast to the blue, and a dark colour to show off the possaments. As a final touch I added a band of inkle trim woven in matching colours above the hem. I also made an underdress of purple linen decorated with a band of inkle trim using the colours of the smokkr. The shoulder bands are the typical loops meant to be fastened with brooches. The extant brooches are turtle-shaped, but when purchasing mine I chose the simpler convex circle brooch. Bead necklaces would have been hung from the brooches.

Possaments were made from threads of silver or gold covering silk. I purchased traditionally made silver threads from a company in Sweden. Learning to make the possaments proved to be a challenge. I had intended to ask Countess Kitta Ragnvaldsdottír to help me, but COVID-19 arrived, preventing that. I am grateful that she provided me with her class handout. None of the directions that I found were drawn in such a way as to be easily understood, especially the patterns for the more typical bands. Following what I found was a pattern that made sense I wove a single strand of silver thread into a knot, tightening the knot once fully made. Many attempts later I started making the knots with two threads using the same process, but with the added difficulty of keeping the threads from twisting. After many hours I managed to be pleased with this triangular pattern. On the smokkr the four large pieces use two threads while the two small ones in the centre use only one. The pieces are laid out to best ornament the given space. The ends of the threads were pulled down through the fabric and sewn down on the inside. The knots themselves were couched down with grey thread. The lower possament couching stitches are more obvious as it did not stay in place as desired. The two small ones would never look exactly right no matter how they were placed.

Unfortunately I did not find this website when making my pieces. It would have helped immensely. <http://www.eithni.com/posaments/instructionals/>.

Future Changes

In future I would add ornamentation of seams and work on increasing my repertoire of possament styles.

Bibliography

Birka Possaments: <http://www.amagyarjurta.com/index.php/birka-posaments/>, viewed January 2020.

Extant Possament Photo: <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=616597#>

Keeler, Kathy. Email of 26 April 2020.

Madejska, Annika. 'Posament, Pretty knots from Birka.' <https://textiletimetravels.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/posamenthandoutfinal.pdf>

Priest-Dorman, Carolyn: An Archaeological Guide to Viking Men's Clothing. <https://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/mensgarb.html>

Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Apron Dress.' <http://urd.priv.no/viking/smokkr.html>, viewed January 2020.

Thunem, Hilde. 'Viking Women: Aprondress.' <http://urd.priv.no/viking/smokkr.html>

Viking Men's Clothing: <https://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/mensgarb.html>

Wassinger, Nikki. 'Possament Class Handout.'