

Embroidery of an Anglo-Saxon Tunic

I like T-tunics. They are comfortable, easy to make and can be used to create many different looks. With a little effort on my part, I can chose colors and fabrics which could have been produced in the 7th century and make a t-tunic which is as historically accurate as is possible, without an extant garment in hand. That part of my project was easy, finding out about embroidery on early period clothing was not. I started my search for embroidery patterns on the internet. I found a wonderful site (by Jane Stockton) which had information on Anglo-Saxon embroidery stitches and came with patterns, plus a bibliography. The site referred to a number of finds which I was unfamiliar with, for example the Maaseik embroideries. I then started to research the different finds. It was fascinating, as my search lead me through a variety of books and web sites, (not to mention my personal library had to be expanded) I was forced to come to the conclusion that we just do not know what the embroidery looked like. Having said that bold statement, there are a number of things that we do know and experts in the field are willing to make some assumptions.

I was surprised that many of the articles and books written about Anglo-Saxon embroidery are not written as a chronological history of embroidery. Many of the books refer to finds outside of England, which cover almost a thousand years. Part of this I can understand, because there are so few extant examples, but styles change over time, so is it reasonable to assume that all Anglo-Saxon embroidery should look like the Bayeux Tapestry?

When planning an embroidery project a few basic questions need to be answered. What stitches were used? What fiber was being stitched with? What dyes were available at the time? Where was the embroidery located on the garment? What designs were popular? Some of those questions have straight forward answers, while others do not. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to answer all of these questions and comment on what choices I made.

The following stitches were used as embroidery stitches; Bayeux tapestry stitch, laid and couched work, stem stitch, outline stitch, chain stitch and split stitch. Many of these stitches can be found on the famous Bayeux Tapestry and Mammen Embroideries. The exquisite work on Queen Arnegunde's cuffs is laid and couched work (c.570), while the work on Queen Bathilde's linen shirt is chain stitch (c.680.) The common denominator on these stitches is that the majority of the decorative thread is on the front of the garment and not on the back where it would not be seen. This makes a lot of sense if you have to spin and dye your own yarn. Embroiders used knots. It is a fast and easy way to anchor your thread. (The back of the Bayeux tapestry is a mess and not as neat as you would think.) I have chosen to work as neatly as I can, use a knot at the beginning and end of my thread before I weave the tail end back through a few stitches. I plan to wear this garment and I want the embroidery to survive the cleaning process.

Answering the question about what fiber was used to stitch with is less straight forward than one would think. Protein fibers are more likely to have survived the ravages of time then plant fibers, which means that wool and silk embroideries are more common then linen pieces. Having said that; a fragment from the Museo di S. Ambrogio (Milan) and the Mammen embroideries are pieces that contain multiple fibers for stitches. The Mammen embroidery with the faces is a piece which has a lot of small round holes which are sometimes referred to as beetle holes. That is probably the evidence that linen was used to embroider (Thor Ewings theory). I have chosen to embroider in wool on a wool ground. I like the way a wool thread glides through my project. It is also the fiber which requires the least amount of processing before it can be spun and dyed. It was also a common fiber, which did not need to be imported like silk.

A whole paper could be written about dye colors. Modern archeology is starting to prove the presents of different dyes by the chemical residue left behind. These tests are very expensive and usually require a very small sample from the original garment be destroyed. As a result, not a lot has been tested. I looked at dye books and chose colors which I thought looked like weld, woad and a weld over dye with woad (green.) All of those dye plants were known to the Anglo-Saxons. I chose colors which had a high contrast from the background of my tunic. I used the weld colored wool to outline my design, because the Mammen embroidery with the faces used a light color for an outline. I feel the contrast of the weld and woad colors against each other make the design stand out.

The location of embroidery on the garment can and probably did vary. The Bayeux tapestry shows men with detailing around their collar and cuffs. A number of written records survive about the high skill level of Anglo-Saxon Embroiders, as does the Queen Bathilde linen shirt. These references tell us that the Anglo-Saxons did indeed embroider their clothing.

To chose a design for my garment was the hardest part of this project. My research has lead me to agree with the conclusion that embroidery designs were probably very similar to designs on illuminated manuscript pages and in architecture. Acanthus leaves, architectural elements and animals are repeated motifs. I chose a page from the Codex Aureus of St. Emmerana (folio 98r) for my inspiration. I then drafted my design, transferred the outline to the neckline of the garment and began my stitching.



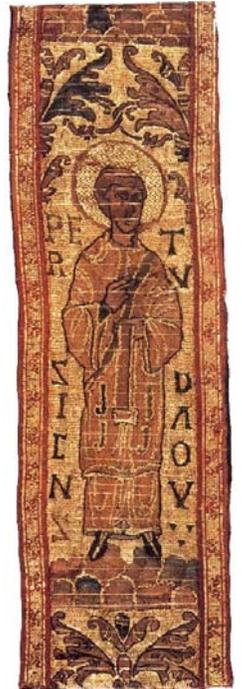
Queen Arne-
gunde's cuff



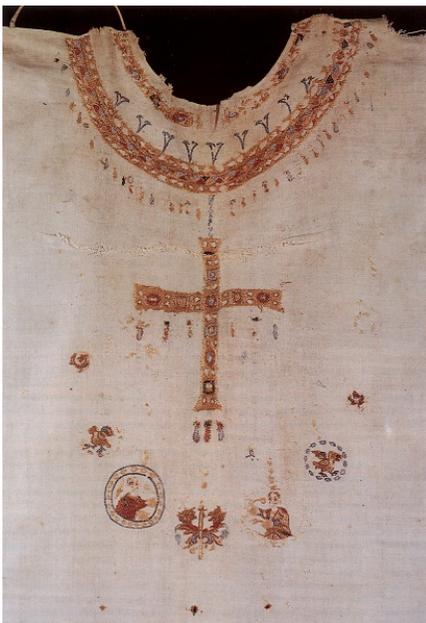
Maaseik embroidery



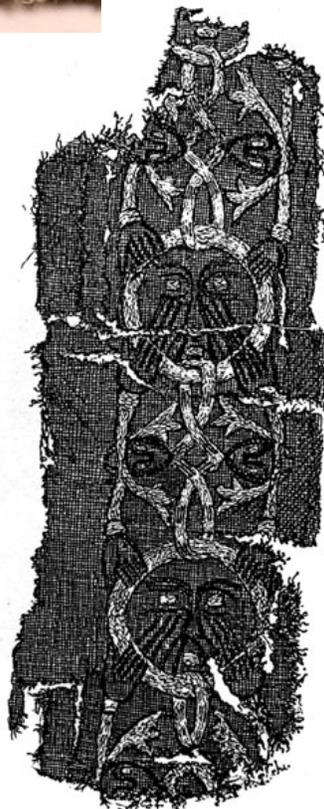
Mammen faces



St. Cuthbert Stole



Queen Bathilde's shirt



Mammen large masks



Codex Aureus of St. Emmerana
(folio 98r)