

Elizabeth Wincott Heckett

Ireland

The Lady of Cloonshannagh Bog: an Irish 7th Century AD Female Bog Body and the Related Textiles

The skeleton of a young woman together with many scattered pieces of cloth was uncovered by an operative cutting turf in Cloonshannagh Bog, Co. Roscommon. The turf-cutting machine disturbed and scattered the skeletal remains and the mutilated textiles associated with the body. A textile attached to part of a hip-bone provided a carbon 14 dating to the 7th century AD. No other remains or possessions were recovered then or in succeeding excavations, so the textiles are the only items available for analysis other than skeletal remains. An ancient contemporary bog-road runs close by the site of the finds but there is no evidence as to how the woman died. Seven different types of textiles were found. About 100 small pieces of one type of cloth survived; this is a 2/1 twill embellished with tassels of thick pile yarn at regular intervals. There are two further 2/1 twills, three 2/2 twills and one fine tabby weave cloth. This ensemble of very good quality cloth suggests that the young woman was from a high status family. This is the only textile find of such a grouping in the early medieval period in Ireland where many of the textile finds are of tabby weave. It can be compared and contrasted with other contemporary textiles which are either new finds, reappraisals of older finds or textiles relocated and re-dated having been in storage.

The last ten years have seen an exciting increase in early medieval Irish textiles. These new or recently re-dated textiles have greatly extended our knowledge of the different cloths used in this period. They include the residual remains of a vegetable fibre tabby (?) weave found with the unique 7th monastic psalter at Faddenmore bog, Co. Offaly (2005); two 7th-9th century vegetable fibre pieces (linen?) from a substantial farmer's homestead (Ballyvass, Co. Kildare (2006); six tabby weave, one 2/2 chevron twill, all Z/Z wool from Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, re-dated to the 7th century; twenty-four tabbies and two 2/2 twill pieces, two tablet woven bands, all Z/Z, wool, from Lagore *crannog*, (lake island) Co. Meath re-dated to 7th century; one wool 2/1 twill, Z/Z, Church Island, Co. Kerry, 7th century; six different types of wool Z/Z tabbies, being substantial clothing remains, Clonbenes Co. Galway, recent 8th century re-dating; two repp tabbies, one 2/1 twill, wool Z/Z, four linen (?) Z/Z tabby from a wealthy farmer's *rath* (homestead) at Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim, 8th century; and an impression of tabby weave cloth on the metal interior of the Moylough, Co Sligo reliquary belt, now dated to mid-7th- mid-8th century.

When the Cloonshannagh twill textiles are compared with the other contemporary survivals the importance of this singular cluster of dress remnants becomes clear. In addition, consideration of the textiles described above, when placed with the Cloonshannagh group, significantly enlarges our understanding of textiles in early medieval Ireland.

Contributor:

Elizabeth Wincott Heckett

Ballymore House, Cobh, County Cork, Ireland