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**EVERYDAY PRODUCTS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

Crafts, Consumption and the Individual
in Northern Europe c. AD 800–1600

edited by
Gitte Hansen, Steven P. Ashby and Irene Baug

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Front cover: A Bohemian glass works from the beginning of the 15th century. (Source: British Library. Picture book of Sir John Mandeville's Travels. Add. 24189, f.16r).

Back cover: Everyday products from Western Norway. (Photo by G. Hansen and S. Skare, University Museum of Bergen, Norway).

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Chapter 12

Silk finds from Oseberg. Production and distribution of high status markers across ethnic boundaries

Marianne Vedeler

Silk finds dating to the Viking Age are rare in Scandinavia. Who brought these silks to the North? And what did they mean to people here? This paper is about the exchange of knowledge of silk and its value. Who were the key actors in the distribution of silk to Scandinavian areas? I will try to address these questions, starting with an example from Norway.

The two women in the Oseberg mound in Vestfold, eastern Norway were buried with an extravagance of goods including different types of silk textiles. Typological examinations indicate that the silks were probably imported from Byzantium and Central Asia. There is reason to believe that these fabrics functioned as markers of status and power in the production areas, as well as in the distribution areas, and in the following questions of relationships and interaction between economic networks and the production of status markers will be addressed. The silk textiles are of particular importance, since diverse connotations are connected to products from the silk-producing regions. Silk production and dyes formed an important basis for power in the production areas, and were in part very strongly regulated with regard to usage, gifts and sale abroad. The interaction between production, distribution and consumption of luxury silk textiles in the period between the 8th and 10th centuries is therefore a particularly interesting element in the interpretation of the Oseberg textiles as status markers (Vedeler 2014).

Silk fabrics found in the Oseberg mound

A comparison of weaving technique, colours and patterns gives reason to believe that most silk fabrics found in Oseberg were produced in Central Asia (Nockert 2006, 297–298). Other fabrics were probably made in Byzantium or in the eastern Mediterranean area (Figure 12.1). However, mutual interactions among Byzantine and Persian silk-production centers make the identification of further specific production

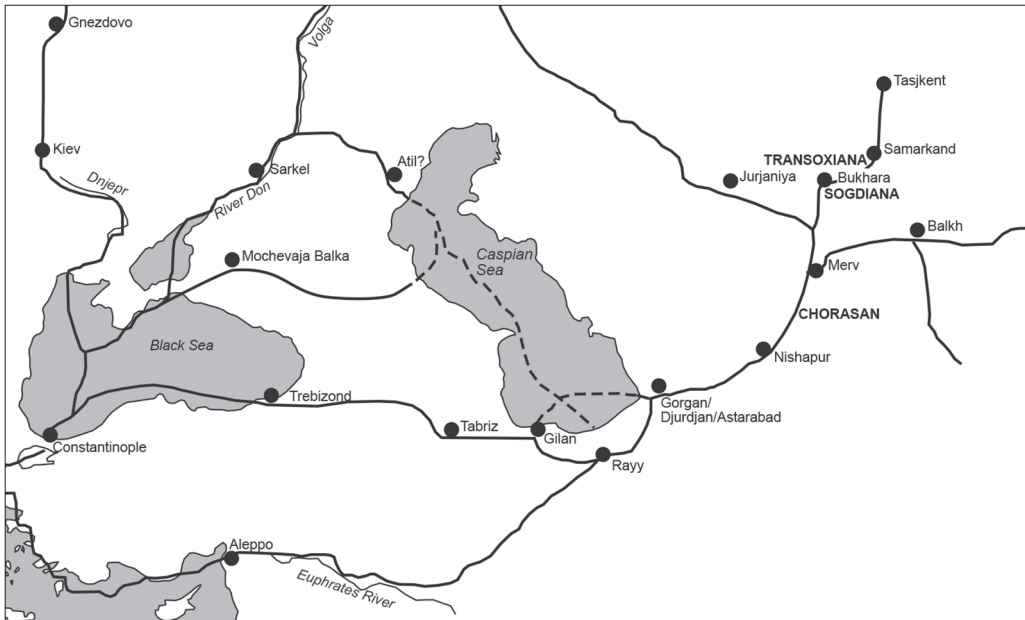


Figure 12.1: Main production area for silk products exported to Scandinavia in the Viking Age. Production and trade sites are marked with dots. Possible trade routes are marked with lines. (Drawing by M. Vedeler and E. M. Hoff, University Museum of Bergen).

sites difficult (Jacoby 2004, 201–204). It is striking that very few early-medieval silk fabrics have been found within their areas of production. Consequently, interpretation of area of origin is first and foremost based on comparisons with other forms of art, on historical sources, and on technical studies of fabrics. Some silk fabrics also have inscriptions connecting them to specific Byzantine or Muslim rulers, but this is not the case for the Oseberg textiles.

All the silk strips from Oseberg are made in a weft-faced, compound twill technique, often called samite (Nockert 2006, 279). Samite weave is a relatively complex technology with two warp systems: binding warp and inner warp. The weft is usually divided into a number of colour series. Similar fabrics have been preserved in several European churches and in Nordic Viking graves. Fabrics from the same production areas have also been found in a cemetery in Caucasus, near the northern Silk Road (Ierusalimskaja 1996).

The Sasanian dynasty in Iran (226–651) manufactured distinctive products of valuable silk fabrics in their weaving mills in Susa and Fars, as well as in other regions (Laiou 2002, 3; Lopez 1978). Some of the patterns found on the Oseberg silks are recognizable as typical of Sasanian silks. For example, Sasanian pearl roundels are well known: each encircles a bird with ribbons around its neck, holding a necklace in its beak. The motif on one of the fabrics found in Oseberg is a duck, also with a ribbon, but holding a

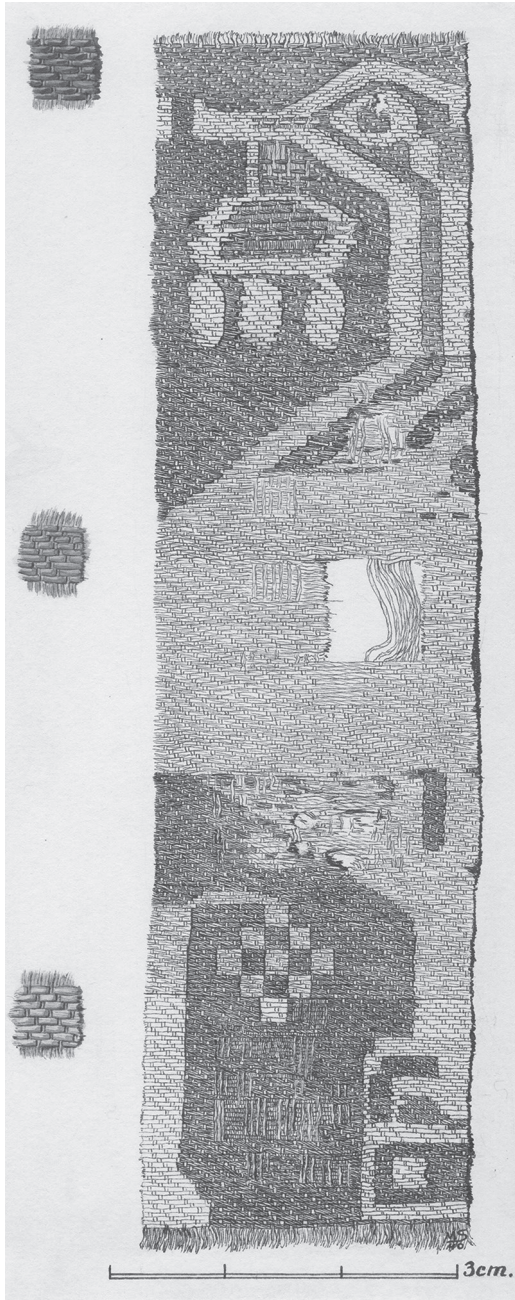


Figure 12.2: Fragment of samite silk with bird-motif, found in the Oseberg mound. (Drawing by M. Storm. Photo by A. C. Eek, Museum of Cultural History, UIO).

pearl necklace (Figure 12.2). Similarly, the ‘bird with pearl-tiara in its beak’ has a special position in Persian art. This motif is present in Sasanian decorative art (in metalwork and wall decorations). However, motifs similar to the Sasanian were picked up and used across a wide area, even after the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the mid-7th century (Sheng 1998, 148–150). In the Sogdian area, now in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, silk fabrics adorned with similar Sasanian motifs were probably produced in the 8th and 9th centuries, and from written sources, we know that there was a Tiraz-fabric in Sogdiana in the Abbasid period (Serjeant 1972, 97). The largest towns in Sogdiana, Samarkand and Bukhara were central nodes of the Silk Road. The Russian archaeologist, Anna Ierusalimskaja sees the ‘duck with pearl-tiara’ motif as a Sogdian syncretisation of the Chinese ‘Tang-duck’ and the Sasanian ‘pearl-necklace’ (Ierusalimskaja 1998, 237).

The design and colour of one of the other silk fabrics from Oseberg (Nockerts fabric no. 12) indicate that it was produced in Byzantium or elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean area (Geijer 1972; Nockert 2006, 298). In this case, the red colour used in the weft is of special interest. New high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis shows that a very costly dyestuff from an insect called *kermes vermilio* was used together with the cheaper and more common madder, in order to create a rich red colour as part of the pattern (Van den Berghe 2011, 6). The *kermes* insects live on oak trees in and near the Mediterranean region.

In the 9th century, Byzantine silk production was conducted primarily within the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople (Lopez 1978, 197). Similar designs and techniques were also used in smaller production centres in the eastern Mediterranean area, including the regions presently incorporated by Syria, Beirut, Tyre and – possibly – Egypt (Wild 2003, 144). At present, it is not possible to identify the precise place of production of the Oseberg fabrics within the Byzantine or east Mediterranean region. The early samite silks found in medieval churches around Europe have often been used as relic covers, but also in paraments and clothing. The particular use of samite silks in Viking grave contexts is not fully known, but many of these fabrics must have been in use as clothing or to adorn garments. Many of them seem to have been cut into narrow strips of cloth, among them the silk fabrics from Oseberg.

Silk as a high status marker

Almost all Viking-age samite silks found in Scandinavia have been found in high-status contexts: in mounds and/or in graves with extensive and costly grave goods (Figure 12.3). There is one possible exception, Brista in Uppland, Sweden. In this case, the silk was found in a grave equipped merely with oval brooches and an equal-armed brooch (Bender Jørgensen 1986, 241). Nonetheless, this grave could still be considered high-status according to Bergljot Solberg's criteria for Viking-Age female graves (Solberg 1985). Neither is this situation restricted to Scandinavia; Lise Bender Jørgensen has suggested that silk functioned as a prerogative of rank even in Merovingian continental Europe (Bender Jørgensen 1991, 145). In Germany and France, silks have been found in what one may presume to be royal graves, as well as the burials of high officials such as bishops and commanders (Bender Jørgensen 1992, with references).

In the main areas of production, the status value of silk fabrics is well documented by written sources (See Serjeant 1972, with references). Furthermore, the economic and political importance of silk production in early-medieval Byzantium and other silk-producing centres in can hardly be overestimated. Silk textiles were important as trading goods, as diplomatic gifts, and as regulated markers of official position and wealth. As such, silk products were subject to strict imperial regulation in Byzantium. The Byzantine court developed a distinct hierarchy of clothing, with special designs and qualities for each office. This was used by the emperor as a system for reward and payment (Lopez 1978, 197; Muthesius 1997). A similar system was in use in the Persian Empire, while the Umayyad (661–750) and the Abbasid (750–1258) dynasties seem to have had a particularly large appetite for the consumption of textiles for clothing and furnishings. Caliphate officers and high officials expected an annual gift in the form of clothes and fabrics, and written sources show that silk fabrics were frequently used as honours from the caliph in different contexts. The quality and design of the gift varied according to the recipient's social status and the Caliph's desire to give credit. The distribution of classified textile types and qualities from different parts of the empire was controlled through an institutionalized system called *Tiraz* (Serjeant 1972, 7–15).

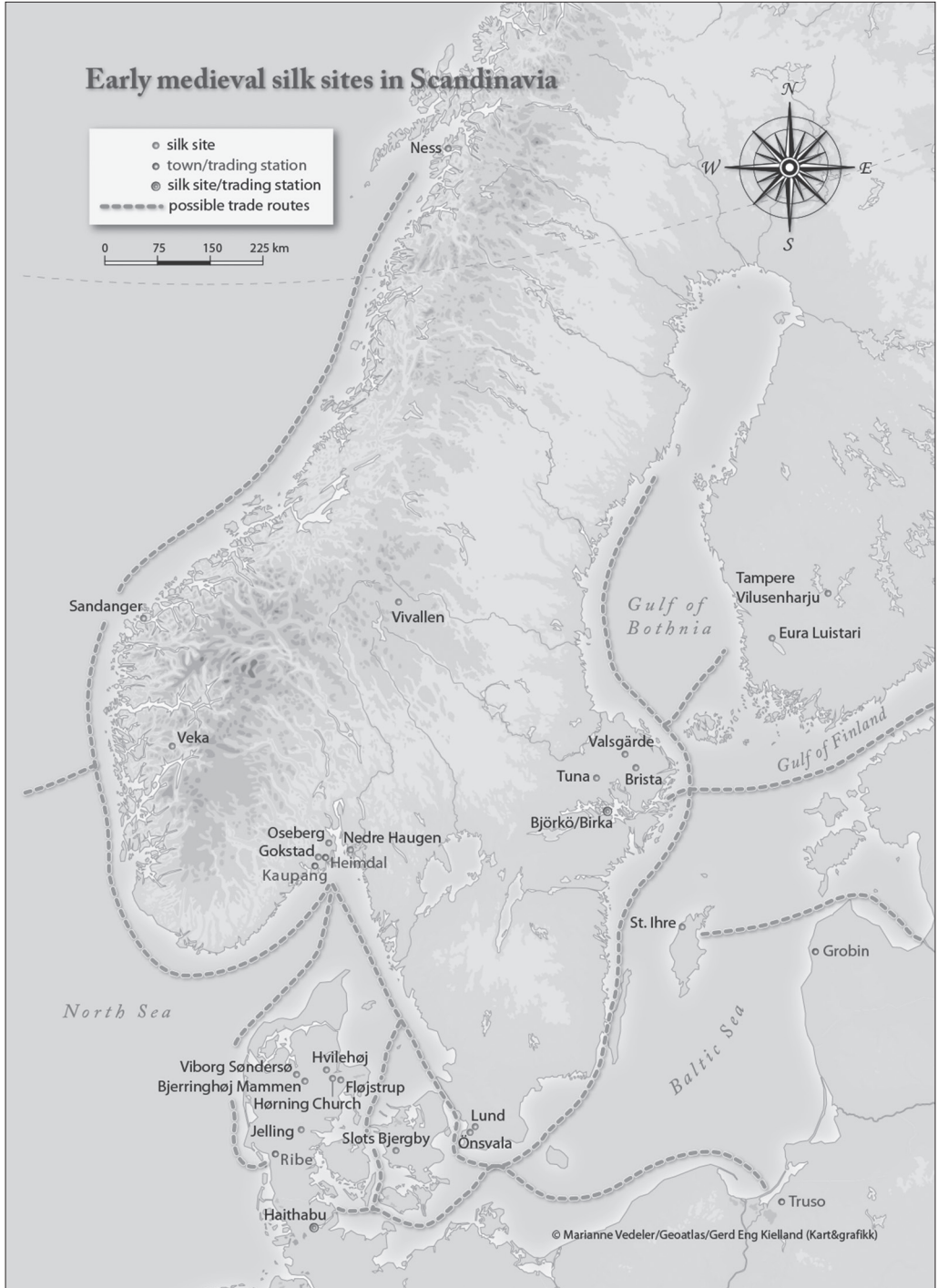


Figure 12.3: Distribution of early medieval samite silks found in Scandinavia. (Map by M. Vedeler and G. E. Kielland).

In a broader sense, a large proportion of the silk products were consumed in or near their areas of productions. However, the relatively large quantity of preserved eastern silks in Europe shows that their export was extensive. Written regulations for sale and export can also tell us a great deal about the flow of textiles from east to west in the early-medieval period.

Silk production and dyes formed an important basis for power in the production areas, and were in part very strongly regulated with regard to usage, gifts and sale abroad (Lopez 1978; Muthesius 1997). The find contexts of similar silk fabrics throughout Europe suggest that these objects also suited the purpose of signaling high social status in the areas of consumption. Sasanian and later Sogdian silk textiles, as well as Byzantine and east Mediterranean varieties were favoured as covers for the relics of Christian saints, and comparable silks exist in many European churches. One important reason for using silk fabrics to cover holy relics was the notion that the precious cloths constituted a show of honour to the relics, and absorbed sanctity through contact with them (Muthesius 2008, 86). Thus, fabrics of samite silk seem to have had a similar role as status marker and authoritative strengthener in both areas of production and consumption, notwithstanding considerable differences in use and meaning. It is reasonable to ask if the presence of samite silks in Scandinavian high-status graves reflects a wish to be associated with the social structures to which these silks were connected in the areas of production and in other consumption areas, such as church centres in central Europe. This does not mean that the symbolism of silk patterns was equally understood everywhere. Nuances in the mode of production, in patterns and in colours were probably used to signal regional identity within the production areas, and it is reasonable to assume that these nuances were not so well understood by more distant consumers. Nonetheless, cultural meetings encouraged by trade must have functioned as an engine for the exchange of knowledge about silk as a marker of status and authority. Exchange of knowledge about the value of the raw materials, the complex and labour-intensive production of the fabrics, and their aesthetic expression provided the basis for this role.

The wide range of silk quality observed in the production areas indicates a complex use of silk as a status marker within several social groups, though it has been suggested that high-quality silk has been preferentially preserved in the burial material (Jacoby 2004, 205). In this regard, it is interesting to note that a variety of weaving defects and irregularities in the silks from Oseberg show that in certain respects these textiles are not of the highest standard. On the other hand, the presence of the Kermes dyestuff shows that very costly dyes were used. On reflection, the silks from Oseberg should undoubtedly be considered among the most precious luxury products in this consumer area.

The use of silk fabrics as status markers in the production areas as well as in Scandinavia indicates an exchange of knowledge about the value of silk, both economically and culturally. How did such knowledge exchange take place? It is assumed that the social elite in Norway were an integrated component of a broader

aristocratic network in northern Europe (Carver 1989; Bender Jørgensen 1991; Myhre 1993; Glørstad 2010). It is, however, unclear to what extent knowledge of symbolic value was communicated between elites. I think it is reasonable to assume that this knowledge exchange was not the sole preserve of the rulers themselves, but rather that early-medieval merchants played a key role in such communication, as well as in the physical exchange of the silk fabrics.

Trading with silk

It is difficult to determine how the silk fabrics found in Oseberg and other Scandinavian graves came to end up there. It has, for example been suggested that the Oseberg silks could have been looted in Viking expeditions to the west (Nockert 2006, 298), but they may equally have come to Vestfold through a trade network, or as diplomatic gifts. The form and cutting of the fabrics may provide a clue that helps us to address this issue.

The fabrics have been cut into narrow strips (the longest is 56.5 × 1.8 cm: C55000/377 fabric no. 1, No. 43), unlike many of the relic covers in European churches, which are cut into rectangular pieces to make suitable containers. The narrow strips from Oseberg have been creased along the edges, and the needle-holes produced when they were sewn on to other fabrics are still visible. Similarly cut and perforated silk fabrics have been found in a number of Nordic graves, such as those at Mammen, Haugen Rolvsøy, Birka, Tuna, and Hvilehøj (Geijer 1938, 176–179; Bender Jørgensen 1986, 227; Østergård 1991, 134–135; Nockert 1994, 114; Nockert 2006, 295). Archaeological finds from Moščevaja *Balka* in the northern part of Caucasus revealed that local tribes had buried their dead in a dry cave, clothed in samite silks probably made in Persia, Byzantium and China (Jerusalimskaja 1996, 17–20). Most of these burials have been dated to the 8th and 9th centuries. Many of the graves contained clothing that was exceptionally well preserved, including men's caftans and woman's dresses, headdresses and mantles, amongst other garments. Most are manufactured using linen fabrics, and trimmed with strips of silk-textiles (Figure 12.4). Several garments are made of a variety of different fabrics, sewn together to form a single piece. There are, for instance, examples of sleeves that feature strips of silk textiles composed of four or five different qualities sewn together. Narrow strips of silk are also used as trimming on sleeves, around the edges of kaftans, and as applications on the front of the garments. Apparently no care was taken to ensure that patterns or colours matched. These silk textiles seem to have been treated in the same manner as the strips found in the Oseberg mound.

The burial ground of Moščevaja *Balka* was located on the Iranian-Georgian branch of the Silk Road. To pass Caucasus, tradesmen had to pay tribute in return for guiding and support services for the horses and caravans. Most likely, they paid with some of the goods that they transported for sale, which would have included strips of silk. Witness reports by travelers from the 18th and 19th centuries show that at this time tax was paid in linen, according to a strict system based on textile units. Anna

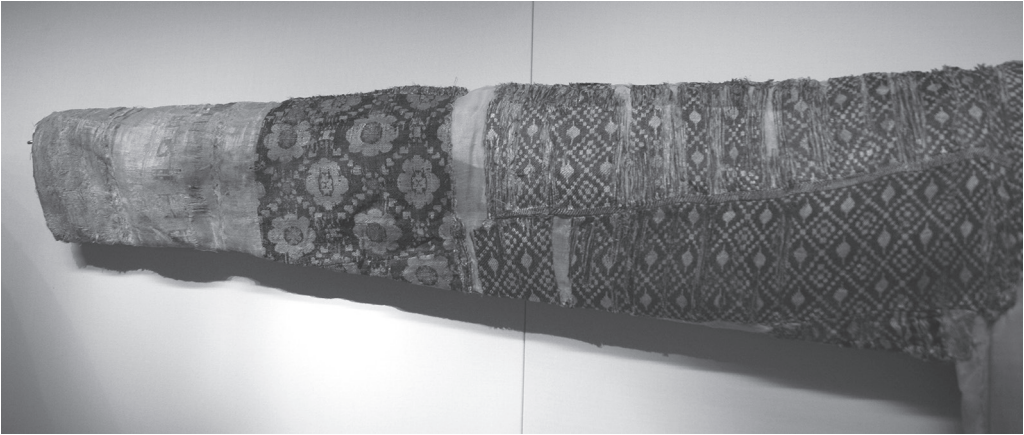


Figure 12.4: Sleeve from garment decorated with strips of silk characterized by many different qualities and motifs. Found in Moščevaja Balka, northern Caucasus. The State Hermitage Museum collections, St Petersburg. (Photo by M. Vedeler).

Ierusalimskaja has argued that linen here played the same role as that of silk in medieval times, when strips of silk of various qualities functioned as tax and payment (Ierusalimskaja 1996, 120–122).

The cutting and mixing of silk strips at Oseberg suggests that they were sewn on to clothing, as in Moščevaja Balka. This does not necessarily suggest a similarity in fashion, but it certainly indicates that the silk strips from Oseberg could have been traded along the Silk Road.

The political situation in central Asia between the 8th and 10th centuries was unstable and complex. Continuous warfare and conflict must have threatened international commerce in this period. Indeed, the central Eurasian economy undoubtedly suffered from depression from the late eighth century, but the extent of the recession in trade is not fully known. From the 820s onwards there seems to have been a remarkable drop in new-minted dirhams within the caliphate. According to Chinese written sources, the economic situation worsened further during the late 830s, as a result of climatic change (Beckwith 2009, 157–158). To carry out business and to trade along the silk roads in this period must have been dependent upon knowledge of local geography and up-to-date political insight, as well as opportunities to build alliances. Merchants from Sogdiana probably dominated parts of the trade on the silk roads in this period; in some places the name Sogdian became synonymous with trade, and the Sogdian language was used as a *lingua franca* on parts of the silk roads. It is therefore reasonable to believe that Sogdian tradesmen were an important factor in cultural exchange between east and west in the early-medieval period. Written sources suggests that sogdian merchants delivered silverware from Persia, glass vessels and beads from Syria and Babylon, and Baltic amber and Mediterranean

coral (amongst other things) to markets in China (Wood 2002, 65–67). A revolt against the Tang dynasty in the years between AD 755 and 763, however, led to a slaughter of Sogdian men, women and children (Bechwith 2009, 157). This incident must have affected trade on the silk roads in the following years, and the precious Persian silks must have been even less accessible for people in Scandinavia under such conditions. In this perspective, the silk strips from Oseberg are not only high-status objects by virtue of material, labour and skill, but also because it must have been extremely dangerous to bring goods safely through areas of war and economical collapse. Still, over 1000 fragments of silk produced in Byzantine, Persian/Islamic and Chinese areas are preserved in central parts of Europe (Muthesius 1990, 126–128).

Alongside regular mercantile trade, gift exchange must have been an important factor in the export of silk from Byzantium to Europe's consumption areas. Byzantium ranked silk alongside gold and silver as a diplomatic gift (Muthesius 1992, 237), and several historical sources document the use of silk fabrics in early-medieval gift exchange (Muthesius 1992, 244; Cutler 2008, 80–101). It was also customary for Muslim rulers to exchange precious gifts of silk. Still, David Jacoby has showed that in the 12th century, Byzantine diplomatic envoys used ships engaging in commercial transportation when sailing between Constantinople and Egypt (Jacoby 2004, 213; 2000, 100–101). Thus there has not always been a clear distinction between economic relations and diplomatic gift exchange. The historian Anthony Cutler has recently addressed this question for the early-medieval period. He uses a number of early medieval Byzantine and Persian written sources to illustrate a clear link between trade and diplomatic gift exchange between east and west. A number of sources indicate the participation of traders in gift exchange. An example is Liutfred, a rich merchant from Mainz, and described as the bearer of royal gifts, who presents Constantine VII with gifts from the Italian King Berenger, in return for the gifts that the emperor had sent in the year 949. Cutler goes so far as to say that the term 'ambassador' or 'merchant' was given according to the purpose of the visit, and does not necessarily reflect a clear-cut distinction in attitude or mind of the representative (Cutler 2009, 266).

Cultural meetings and social and economic networks

Presumably, a small network of traders and travellers were able to communicate the economic, cultural and political importance of silk amongst each other and their clients across Europe. This could be the key to understanding how the appreciation of samite silks as high-status markers was spread in early medieval Europe.

It was first and foremost within this small group of merchants, and between members of the upper social strata, that this knowledge was exchanged. It can be argued that the effective but fragile network of international trade in the Viking Age was also a key contributor to the development and use of status markers in the areas covered by the network.

Several researchers have suggested that network theory could make a significant contribution to the study of ancient exchange and communication, and that exchange proceeds mainly between a few particular nodes, rather than randomly among neighbors. Søren Sindbæk points out that very few sites actually played the role of hubs, and suggests that there was a relatively small and exclusive group of people who travelled recurrently between these few sites. *'The oft-celebrated global connections of Carolingian and Viking Europe, then, were held together by a tiny core of travellers, passing between an even smaller number of locations'* (Sindbæk 2007, 71). It is certainly a question whether this theory should be applied to all kinds of trade and goods, but combined with theories of identity markers this could be an important approach to the study of prestige products like samite silk.

Sian Jones stresses the value of cultural meetings as catalysts for ethnic markers. When people from different ethnic groups meet, this leads to self-reflective cultural comparison. It is through such meetings that diverse cultural ideas and praxis are passed down in the material culture, and thus become objectified ethnic differences (Jones 1997, 120). Consciousness about belonging thus appears through encounters with others. One could envisage that also trans-cultural encounters, for example between individuals of a particular social status, promote the same kind of consciousness. A meeting between high-status groups of different ethnicities could thus lead to exchange of status markers across ethnic boundaries. In the case of the exchange of silks, such goods were probably not used as a signifier of ethnic identity, but rather as a social marker that spanned ethnic boundaries.

We should look further into the cultural meetings that most probably took place between Viking-Age traders from Scandinavia and merchants delivering silk from the production areas. Cultural encounters promote consciousness of one's own belonging, but at the same time they also promote change. Consciousness of difference can show the way to new possibilities that had not previously been recognised. In this way, cultural encounters become both self-acknowledging and dynamic.

Conclusion

Textiles of silk found in Scandinavian graves from the Viking period should be regarded as high-status markers of the most superior level. In spite of great differences in use and meaning, there is reason to believe that precious silk had a role in underpinning authority in the far-northern areas of consumption, in Christian European centres, and as in the areas of production in the east.

There is also reason to believe that silk fabrics found in the Oseberg mound came to Vestfold in eastern Norway either through a network of trade and goods-exchange, or as diplomatic gifts. A small network of merchants was probably key to both transportation and to the mediation of the cultural understanding of silk as a high-status marker in early-medieval Europe. In a society with a small, tight network of exchange, there may not have been a clear distinction between economic relations

and diplomatic gift exchange. It may be argued that knowledge of the social, aesthetic and economic value of status products such as silk was communicated across ethnic boundaries through economic interaction.

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