

Textile Finds from the Rhineland, First to Fourth Centuries AD: Roman Customs and Fashion in the North of the Empire

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The Rhineland belonged to the Roman province of Germania Inferior until ca. 450 AD. Although on a northern edge of the Roman Empire, finds from well equipped graves reveal, that Roman fashion was known - either imported or imitated. Textile finds, surviving in small scraps only, provide additional evidence for the links of the Rhineland with the other provinces of the Empire.

Gold thread tapestries

In at least 9 graves of the 2nd/3rd century in the Rhineland, gold threads were observed: at Flerzheim graves 1-3, Rommerskirchen, Weilerswist, Dorweiler, Lommersum, Borschemich and at Cologne St. Severin. When determinable, the gold threads consist of a gold strip wound in Z-direction around a core thread, and the gold thread was used as weft in tapestry technique. At least in two cases, the tapestry included as well violet coloured weft threads, probably from wool. One of the fragments shown on the right (LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, inv. 1985.8001,40-1) from the inhumation grave of two girls at Flerzheim, was analyzed by VIS-spectroscopy by D. Oltrogge at the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences, revealing, that the well preserved violet colour of the tapestry weft most probably resulted from dyeing with real snail purple.

Most of the textiles with gold tapestries from the Rhineland were found in women's graves, but in one case they belonged to the cremation burial of a male individual. The find-positions lead to suppose, that at least in 3 graves the textile with gold tapestry served as a sheet and not as a garment. Textiles with gold and purple coloured tapestries are known from Late Roman rich graves all over the Empire: from France, the Balkans, Greece, Palmyra, Palestine, North-Africa and Egypt.

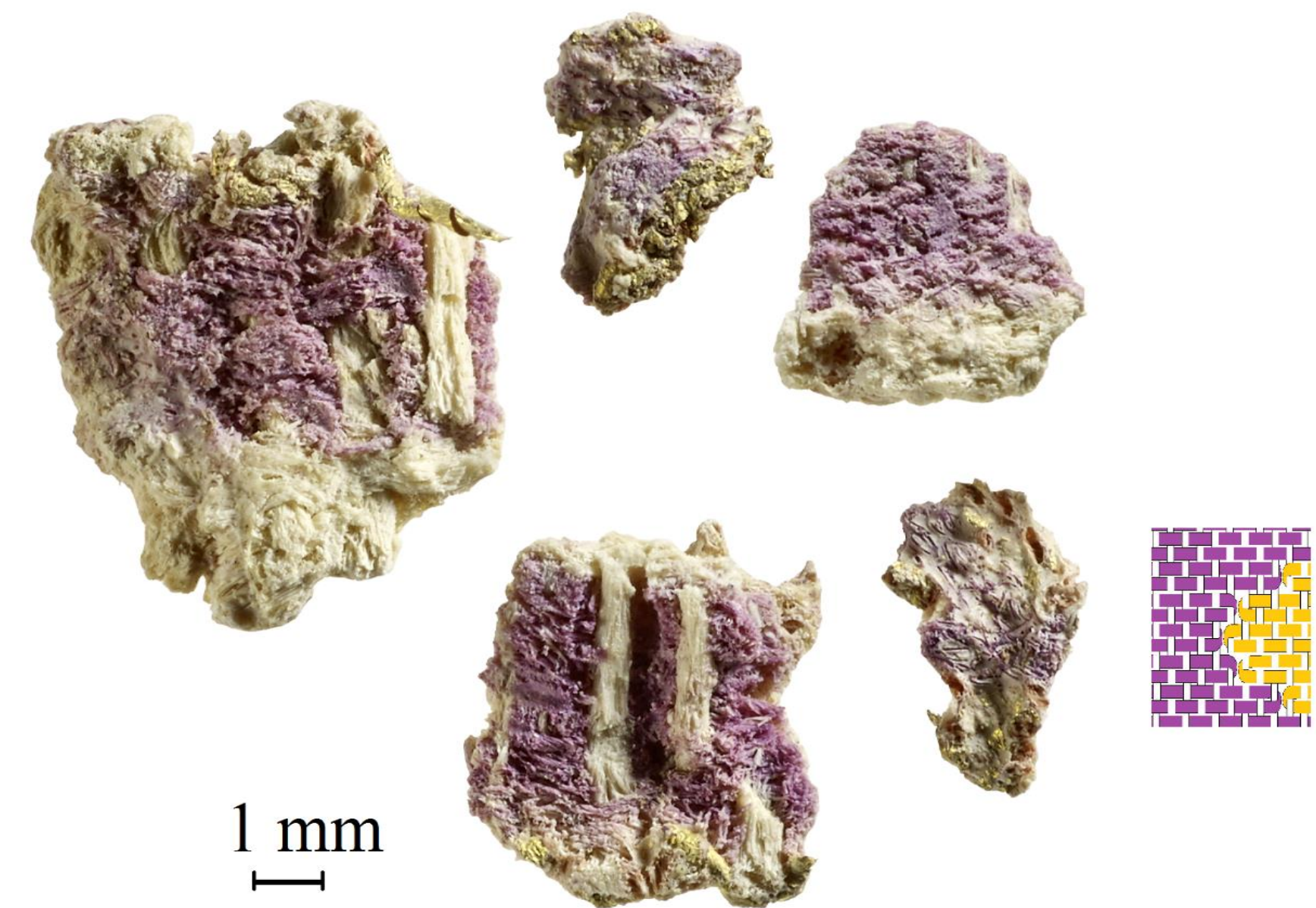


Foto: LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, Jürgen Vogel
Drawing: P. Linscheid

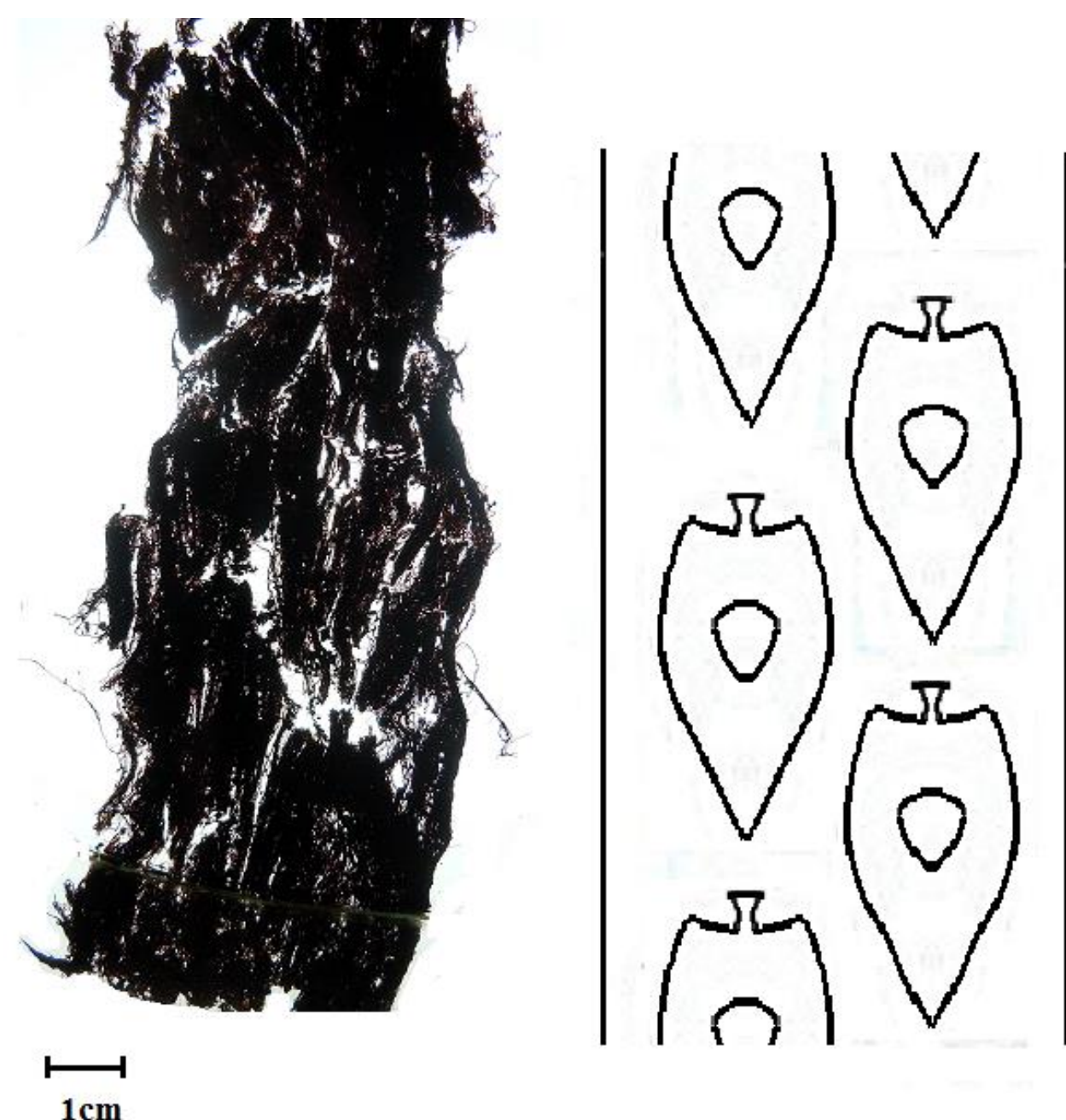


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Patterned clavi

A stone sarcophagus at a cemetery in Xanten preserved the skeleton of a male individual, dating to the 4th century AD. At the chest and shoulder area of the deceased, remnants of the woolen weft of a tapestry were observed, but the linen ground fabric deteriorated nearly completely. The high density of the woolen weft threads (85 threads/cm) provides evidence for the high quality of the fabric.

The turning points of the weft threads in the tapestry help to reconstruct a tapestry band, 5 cm in width and at least 24 cm in length, patterned by two vertical rows of leaves or buds in staggered arrangement. According to the positions of the tapestry fragments, they served as clavi and shoulder panels of a tunic, which - judging from the remains of the ground weave - consisted of linen.

A patterning of clavi with floral tapestry was common in the Late Antique Mediterranean, and there are many intact finds from Egypt. In the western provinces instead, patterned clavi are encountered quite rarely (Trier, Naintré, Conthey, Dorchester); the Xanten find is the northernmost example so far.

Hairnets in sprang technique with gold tube beads

At 4 sites in the Rhineland remains of hairnets were found in women's graves of the 2nd/3rd centuries AD (Flerzheim, Borschemich, Krefeld-Gellep, Rommerskirchen). While the textile parts of the hairnets deteriorated, the decoration consisting of small golden tubular beads survived. The beads consist of rectangular gilded bronze plates, rolled up into tubes measuring max. 1 cm in length and 0.2 cm in width.

In between the ca. 200 gold tubes from a cremation burial at Flerzheim, shown on the pictures to the right (LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, inv. 82.275.16) remains of threads could be observed inside and in between the tubes. The raw-material of the thread was indeterminable, but the threads themselves were Z-spun and S-plyed. Interlinking of threads reveals, that the textile base of the hairnet was made in sprang-technique, a plaiting technique well suited to create elastic fabrics and widely used for hairnets in the Roman and Late Antique world. The gold tubes must have been threaded in before the plaiting started, and during plaiting the beads were placed at regular intervals between the sprang meshes, probably arranged as a pattern.

Roman Hairnets with similar gold tube beads were found in Italy, Spain and Austria.



Foto: LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, Regine Vogel



Foto: LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, P. Linscheid



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About the project: <https://www.christliche-archaeologie.uni-bonn.de/forschung/archaeologische-forschungsstelle-fuer-textilien/roemische-bis-fruehmittelalterliche-textile-bodenfunde-im-bestand-des-lvr-landesmuseums-bonn>