



Silk Tablet-Woven Filets With Pewter Mounts

Charlotte Zifcsak (Lady Mathilde)

Northern Lights
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Summary

Throughout most of the 14th century and into the early 15th, English and French women wore circlets, or filets, of varying complexity. These items are a representation of a tablet woven filet, found in a early to mid-14th century deposit in London. Both examples are woven from silk, as is the original; the narrow red filet consists of spun silk, and the wider, golden-brown filet is reeled silk. The extant filet in London was found with small stitch holes, indicating that small mounts were stitched to the original item. The selvages are woven with tablets threaded with four strands of silk, and the weaver achieves a tabby-weave appearance from the use of tablets threaded with only two strands.

Materials and techniques

- Silk thread was often used for tablet weaving: “Silk thread was preferred since its great natural strength and elasticity made it the most adaptable...”¹ The narrow, reddish circlet is made of spun silk, from Halcyon Yarn, at www.halcyonyarn.com. I was not happy with the pilling and lack of smoothness with the spun silk, and the longer I worked with the warp, the worse it got. For the second circlet, I purchased Treenway Silk’s reeled silk in the fine cord size. It’s a little larger than I would have liked, but it was quite a bit nicer to work with, and produced a much smoother product. Next time I will try a finer reeled silk, in hopes of achieving both the correct size and desirable texture. Both spun and reeled silks have an “S” twist. In the medieval period, silk thread produced using quality techniques would have been reeled (thrown), as opposed to spun, creating a smoother, stronger, higher quality thread.²
- The red circlet was made with 25 tablets, as I did not have a 26th tablet of the same size when I began the project. The missing tablet had little impact on the size of the finished piece, and it is almost exactly the same size as the original. The reeled silk example is created with all 26 tablets.
- On each circlet, the two outer tablets on each side are S-threaded through four holes, to give a strong selvedge to the piece (Fig 1). The selvedge tablets were turned forward a quarter turn after each pass of the weft. On the red circlet, two-thirds of the way through, I changed the direction to a backward quarter turn, to unwind the warp. In future projects, I will manually unwind the warp as reversing created a noticeable flaw in the finished project.

¹ Crowfoot et al, p. 130.

² Ibid., p. 19.

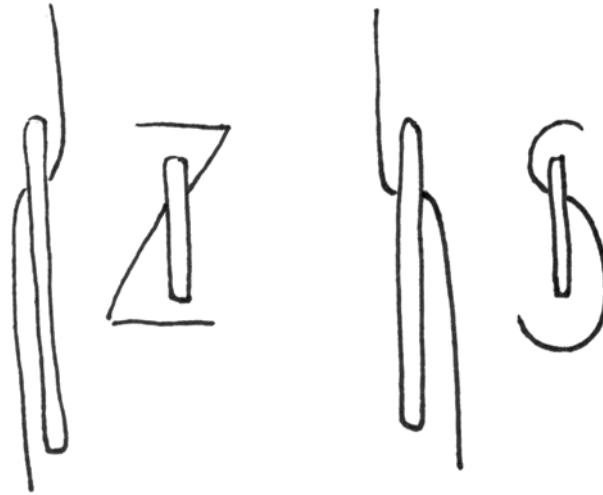


Fig 1 Z- and S-threaded tablets

- All inner tablets were S-threaded through two holes (Fig 2) to achieve a tabby effect when weaving. The original description indicates that the inner tablets were turned a *quarter* turn backward, then a *quarter* turn forward. If this were attempted using four-holed, or rather, four-sided tablets, this would not produce the type of weaving that is shown in the photo of the extant piece. A quarter turn would leave all of the warp threads in a fully down, or fully up position, and the weft thread would float above or below the warp, as opposed to being captured between the warp. To allow for a four sided tablet, I turned the inner tablets first a *half* turn backwards, then a *half* turn forwards.

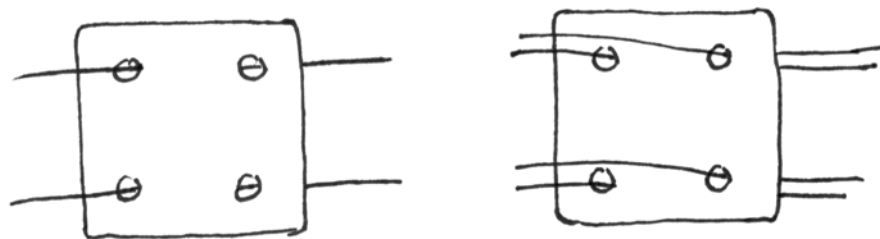


Fig 2 Two- and four-threaded tablets

- The weft thread used was the same as the warp in both examples. Although the Halcyon 30/2 string with 25 tablets produced a band the same width as the original, I speculate that the weft thread may have been a different weight. The description of the original describes that there are “46 picks per cm”. I could not beat my work tight enough to achieve anything near this small. A smaller thread, perhaps 100/3 spun silk, the weight of sewing thread, would allow for more picks per cm.

- The loom this was worked upon was a modern shortcut; I used two c-clamps at each end of a 2x4.
- Unfortunately, the ends or rear fastening of the extant examples have completely been lost, so we need to extrapolate how the item might have fastened in the rear. On the red, spun silk circlet, I left extra thread at the beginning and end of the weaving to fingerloop into a tie to secure the filet. The reeled silk example is a gift, and the recipient prefers that it not tie on, but is otherwise secured. I plan on stitching the ends stable with silk thread, then stitched the ends together. This will allow it to sit on the head like a “normal” circlet.
- I purchased pewter cast mounts from Fettered Cock Pewters, www.fetteredcockpewters.com. I had them remove the prongs, and drill a small hole into the leaf mounts. The mounts are stitched on with 100/3 Au Ver a Soie (spun silk) thread. The original had

“...pairs of stitch holes [that] indicate that ornaments, probably of octofoil form, were originally attached to it at intervals. The stitching of the ornaments is revealing since in some centres, such as Paris, regulations required bezants and ornaments of precious metal to be stitched, rather than riveted, on to silk.”³

The mounts that I chose for the red filet are in a lozenge shape, much like ones found in the London finds. The London mounts discovered can be found in a lead-tin alloy, commonly called pewter. The spun silk filet will be embellished with small leaves, as its future purpose will be a laurel circlet. Lead-tin mounts in leaf and plant shapes have also been found in the London deposits.⁴

- The extant piece also had plaits of false hair attached. As both circlets are for ladies with long thick hair, these false plaits are unnecessary. The false plaits allow a woman to wear their hair in the “ideal” of the time, which was characterized by braids at the side of the face, starting at the temples, and braids crossing over the back of the head.

Inspiration and examples

The main inspiration for this piece is an extant filet found in a London deposit, dating to the second quarter of the 14th century.⁵ Based on contemporary artwork, this style was common throughout much of the 14th century and into the 15th. See below for plates representing the filet in period illustrations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain whether some filets in illustrations were tablet woven or made of some sort of metal; however, the style with either will look relatively the same, and the artwork can be used to determine that the basic look remained popular throughout this time.

³ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴ Egan et al, pp. 17, 198-201.

⁵ Crowfoot et al, p. 132.

The dimensions and construction of the original piece (Fig 3) are described: (pp 136-137):

Dimensions: (i) l 150mm, w 10mm; (ii) l 90mm, w 10mm. (i) is sewn to a plaited hairpiece. At intervals of *c.* 10mm along the braid there are groups of holes indicating that ornaments were formerly attached to the braid

Warp: silk, golden-brown (negative), Z/S-ply

Weft: silk, golden-brown, Z/S-ply, 46 picks per cm

Weave: 26 tablets, the 2 edge tablets on either side were four-holed, threaded in S-direction, and given continuous $\frac{1}{4}$ turns forward after the weft was thrown. The centre 22 tablets were two-holed and given (sic) $\frac{1}{4}$ turn backwards followed after the next pick by (sic) $\frac{1}{4}$ turn forwards to produce a tabby weave⁶



Fig 3 The (A) remains of extant filet found in the London deposits, and (B) a close up image of the woven band⁷

⁶ Ibid., pp. 136-137.

⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

Other braids have been found, but without the false plaits of hair attached, it can be difficult to determine the intended use, “There are four examples from 14th -century deposits in London and two from deposits dating to around the second quarter of the 15th century; it appears that they were used as hair filets, girdles, and, perhaps, spur leathers.”⁸ Tablet woven bands that could have been used as hair filets date to the second quarter of the 15th century, and artwork shows filets being worn into the early 15th c. It is possible then, that these tablet woven bands from the early 15th c. were being used as filets, although there is no definitive proof.

Plates



Plate 1 Luttrell Psalter, c. 1335



Plate 2 Luttrell Psalter, c. 1335

⁸ Ibid., p. 132.



Plate 3 Luttrell Psalter, c. 1335



Plate 4 Luttrell Psalter, c. 1335



Plate 5 Also from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1335, an excellent example of jewels attached to the filet



Plate 6 Roman de la Rose, c. 1380



Plate 7 This is another example of a filet with jewels. This may have been metal or tablet woven.

From Les Grandes Heures de Jean de France
Duc de Berry, c. 1380



Plate 8 A filet with veil
Les Grandes Heures



Plate 9 Brussels Hours, Early 15th c.
Filet, which could be woven or fabric, as it isn't a perfectly straight circle



Plate 10 Salome's Dance from *Les Petites Heures*, c. 1380



Plate 11 Procopius offers St. Agnes a box of jewels. c. 1380.



Plate 12 Baginton Brass, 1407, Baginton, Warwickshire. This is one of the latest examples that I can find of this type of filet being used as an accessory

Bibliography

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Egan, Geoff, and Prichard, Frances. *Dress Accessories: c.1150 – c.1450*, vol. 3 of *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*, 2nd ed., Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002.

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