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## **Threads of Devotion: Possible Medieval Origins of Nordic Christening Bands**

### **I. Introduction**

For generations, peasant women in Nordic regions swaddled newborn babies in white or red cloths wrapped with red bands. The bands were woven with protective symbols, believed to shield infants from evil spirits as they were carried to church for baptism. The prevailing theory, articulated in the writings of Norwegian textile historian Inger Lise Christie, holds that this practice began following the Reformation. I believe it is older, with origins in Middle Ages.

While acknowledging the major challenges in studying the time period, this paper will present evidence for an earlier origin, including archaeological finds, textual references, and references from art. I will also provide additional information drawn from medieval history, including the theology of baptism, the role of folk belief, and anxieties around childbirth.

Next, I will examine the symbolism in the abstract designs of the woven bands, locating it within the overall history of Nordic textile design. Here, the previous work of Norwegian textile artist Annemor Sundbø and historian Kristin Marie Tibbs provide both inspiration and methodology. Finally, I will explore how women's responsibility for both weaving and childbirth most likely played a definitive role in maintaining this practice across the generations.

### **II. Christening Bands Overview**

At a recent visit to the American Swedish Institute, several items in a folk art display caught my eye. They included a birch bark basket, a red coverlet, and a woven band, all dating from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. A knowledgeable friend explained that the items

were intended for use in baptism. All three were decorated with protective symbols, intended to shield the vulnerable infant from evil spirits until the sacrament could be performed.

According to Heather Torgenrud, author of *Norwegian Pick-Up Band Weaving*, woven bands were used in peasant culture for swaddling infants until the early twentieth century. Special bands such as the one I saw at the Swedish Institute were used solely for baptism, also called christening. Torgenrud notes that “Because of the importance of the occasion, only the finest woven bands were used for christening.”<sup>1</sup> These bands often required greater technical skill from the weaver, including advanced methods such as pick-up or tablet weaving, and were highly valued as family heirlooms. Further:

Swaddling bands and christening bands were seen as having magical powers of protection. In rural Norway, ancient folk beliefs about evil forces and how to protect against them did not disappear with the coming of Christianity. Instead, those folk beliefs intermingled with Christian beliefs and continued to influence people’s lives for hundreds of years.

Before baptism the child was thought to be especially susceptible to threats from the supernatural world...Baptism was believed to be the most important protection from such dangers. Consequently, the baptismal journey to the parish church was undertaken as soon as possible, often when the baby was only a few days old and often over rough terrain in inclement weather, even though the baby was vulnerable to the rigors of the journey and the underworld folk along the way.

Swaddling bands were one means of protecting a baby. Thought to ward off evil, red was used as the main colors. Diagonal cross motifs in many variations were woven in since the cross was a powerful protective symbol.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Torgenrud, *Norwegian Pick-Up Bandweaving* (Altgate, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2014), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Torgenrud, p. 30.

In addition, metal objects such as coins, also thought to carry protective power, were frequently sewn into the band. Finally, the woven band might be wrapped around the baby in protective patterns, including crosses made a symbolic number of times, such as three or seven.

The use of swaddling and christening bands was well-documented during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by photographers who traveled to rural areas to record folk customs and folk arts which were rapidly disappearing due to industrialization. For example, the Norwegian Folk Museum's digital archive includes thousands of images by photographer Anna Grostøl, who did invaluable work documenting Norway's native textile traditions.

Several of Grostøl's photos of swaddling and christening bands appear in Torgenrud's book. A close look at the photos reveals that the abstract geometric patterns in the bands are identical to those woven in Scandinavian during the pre-Christian era. In her seminal work *Swedish Handcraft*, Anna-Maja Nylén confirms that many of the woven bands documented or collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth century bear much older designs: "The pattern elements—six-pointed stars, diamonds, hearts, ornate crosses, and dentiled triangles—are a natural outgrowth of the [bandweaving] technique itself, and show considerable similarity to prehistoric bands."<sup>3</sup> Given this similarity, I believe that the custom of using christening bands dates to a time when pre-Christian and Christian beliefs had fully mingled; *i.e.*, the Middle Ages, past the point of initial conversion but before the reforming zeal of the Reformation.

### **III. Theories of Origin**

Curious, I contacted Heather Torgenrud for more information. She directed me to the work of Norwegian textile historian Inger Lise Christie, who has studied christening bands since

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<sup>3</sup> Nylén, Anna-Maja, *Swedish Handcraft* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1977), pp. 196-197.

the late 1970s. Since Christie's book *Dåpsdrakter* is only available in Norwegian, Torgenrud kindly summarized Christie's theory for me:

Inger Lise Christie talked about how in the Middle Ages, in Catholic times, the swaddled baby would be completely undressed so it could be dipped or have water poured over it in the baptismal font. And then, as part of the ceremony, the baby would be clothed in a symbolic and ceremonial all-white cloth or garment belonging to the church.

After the Reformation, when this symbolic white cloth was no longer part of the ceremony, the swaddled baby would be held up to the baptismal font in its own clothing and then it wasn't long before people began to use finery for this important occasion. Wealthier people began to use the same colors and types of cloth for the baby as they themselves used for their best churchwear.<sup>4</sup>

This practice is documented in church paintings dating from the 1500s onward. Many such paintings depict wealthy patrons of the parish surrounded by their children, with infants swaddled using red bands and wearing lacy caps that could be removed for the sprinkling rite.

Perhaps my initial assessment of christening bands is incorrect. Still, questions remain. Surely infants who were carried to church for christening would have been carefully swaddled against the elements before being undressed for the ceremony, especially in a harsh Northern climate. Could this pre-baptism swaddling have included the red bands? Further, if the folk beliefs about supernatural dangers pre-dated Christianity, might not protective practices also date to the earlier period following conversion, rather than later? After all, more than five hundred years passed from the initial conversion of the Nordic region to the Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Finally, given the stern aesthetic of the reformed church, which banned the use of ecclesiastical textiles

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<sup>4</sup> Email to author, September 20, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> For this paper, I have adopted the dating of Peter and Birgit Sawyer, who roughly divide the Middle Ages in the North into three periods: The Early Middle Ages/Viking Age (800-1200s), the Central Middle Ages (1200-1300s), and the Late Middle Ages (1300s-1500). Peter and Birgit Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. ix.

including white christening blankets, would this have been a time when the use of christening bands would have been tolerated, let alone initiated?

#### **IV. Challenges**

In investigating the theory of an earlier origin for christening bands, I immediately encountered several challenges. Textiles tend to disintegrate due to time and use, and only a few fragments remain of textiles woven during the medieval period.

In addition, as Peter and Birgit Sawyer write in *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation*, “Compared with western Europe, Scandinavia is poorly provided with written evidence for its early medieval history.”<sup>6</sup> Literacy only came to the North with the conversion to Christianity, and both happened relatively late compared to continental Europe. In addition, such records as exist concern only a small segment of society:

With the exception of late medieval urban records, most of the people who figure in the [written] sources belonged to the higher ranks of society—members of the royal and aristocratic families and higher clergy. Almost everything was written by men, and their attitudes are normally reflected, a circumstance that calls for caution when considering the role of women.<sup>7</sup>

Given these challenges, I cast a wide net when investigating the practice of christening bands. In doing research, I looked at a large geographic region including what is now present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, during a broad time period from 800 to 1500 CE. (I did not include Denmark in my survey.) My search for clues led me to information from a variety of fields, including archaeology, law, trade, art, theology, folk belief, and medicine. Finally, the work of textile historians Annemor Sundbø and Kristin Marie Tibbs provided me with a lens with which to understand the bands in terms of their symbolism and social context.

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<sup>6</sup> Sawyer, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Sawyer, p. xiv.

## V. Evidence

### A. Archaeology

Fortunately, the field of archaeology in Nordic regions is particularly rich in information on textiles. In “Production, Quality, and Social Status in Viking Age Dress: Three Cases from Western Norway,” historian Ingvild Øye investigates grave goods relating to textile production. Her article details archaeological digs done from 2012 to 2015 by the University of Bergen.

According to Øye, “About 130 of the Viking Age graves in the region have yielded textile tools—wool combs, spindle whorls, loom weights, weaving beaters, shears, and others... The finds bear witness to the important role and level of textile production in these rural contexts.”<sup>8</sup> Most of the graves in the University of Bergen project were of high-status females, and Øye writes that textile production “was perceived as the role of females, as producers, users, and administrators. Textiles were moreover transferred to women as bridal gifts and inheritance.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, the high quality of textiles “also implies a high level of organization, access to and supplies of high-quality wool, and not least, skilled labor for the sorting and combing of wool, and for spinning and weaving.”<sup>10</sup>

These finds correspond to other digs such as Oseberg ship burial, dated to August of 834, which contained two female bodies as well as 52 bandweaving tablets still with their original warp strings. Additional items specifically related to bandweaving have also been found. Inger Lise Christie writes that a rigid heddle was found during an excavation in Bergen that has been dated to around 1300, and thus “The implement was known in Norway in the Middle Ages.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ingvild Øye, “Production, Quality, and Social Status in Viking Age Dress: Three Cases from Western Norway,” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles 11* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Øye, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Øye, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Inger Lise Christie, “Tablet Woven Bands in Norway: Living Traditions and Forgotten Techniques,” *Norwegian Textile Newsletter* (Volume XI: Numbers 1-4, 2005), p. 10.

Archaeology also shows that wool was in ready supply, as were linen and hemp. All three fibers were used as warp in bandweaving, with wool predominating as weft. Dyestuffs to produce red textiles were also available, including limited supplies of the more expensive dye, kermes, but also madder and lichen.

The picture that emerges from archaeology is one of female textile production of high quality, with the household being “the key unit for craft production.”<sup>12</sup> This tradition was clearly established before the conversion to Christianity took place, and there is no evidence to suggest that these activities were curbed by the new belief system.

### **B. Law and Trade**

The archaeological picture is corroborated by the few documents that survive. In “Clothing and Textile Materials in Medieval Sweden and Norway,” Eva Andersson investigates written sources such as wills, clothing inventories, and trading records dating from the thirteenth century for clues to clothing consumption during the time period.

Although these documents tend to reflect the experience of the literate classes, especially clergy, a few facts can be gleaned. Wool was the most common material for clothing. While some varieties were imported, the most common was *vadmal*, the fulled woolen fabric produced in abundance in the Nordic regions, particularly in Iceland, and exported to the rest of Europe. The most highly prized woolen cloth was dyed red. In some cases, fabric dyed with imported kermes rivaled the cost of silk.<sup>13</sup>

Clothing inventories show that woven bands were part of both ecclesiastical and secular clothing. This is also confirmed by the preserved clothing found in Skjoldehamm in northern

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<sup>12</sup>Øye, p. 7. (Footnote)

<sup>13</sup> Eva Andersson, “Clothing and Textile Materials in Medieval Sweden and Norway,” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles 9* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2013), p. 101.

Norway, dated from 995-1029, which includes tablet woven bands. Christie notes that tablet woven bands specifically used for swaddling were listed in an estate settlement, albeit from a much later time period (1758):

The valuation is relatively high compared to other values for bands in estate settlements, implying that they have been regarded as fine bands...The high valuation of tablet swaddling bands from the estate settlements mentioned suggest that tablet woven bands were considered to be of such value that they were not used for everyday, but perhaps as baptismal swaddling bands.<sup>14</sup>

Other legal documents include sumptuary laws. Andersson concludes that, unlike continental Europe, such laws in medieval Sweden and Norway initially had less to do with preserving distinctions between social classes and more to do with protecting local export economies from competition by rivals overseas. Laws forbidding the peasantry from wearing expensive fabrics did become more common in post-Reformation era with the rise of the middle class. However, in Finland, “the exceptions to the decrees on indulgences in dress were wedding gowns and christening robes.”<sup>15</sup> Most peasant finery such as wedding and christening clothes were brightly colored, with red predominating. The fact that exceptions were made to such clothing could suggest long-established traditions resistant to change.

### **C. Art and Illustration**

In art, evidence for the use of bands is readily available. Medieval manuscripts include many illustrations of women weaving bands. There are also images of swaddled infants, such as the one in the Maciejowski Bible. At least one baptismal font (Freckenhorst, Germany, 12<sup>th</sup> century) also shows a swaddled infant. However, whether the swaddling bands were specially made for baptism is impossible to tell without further information.

<sup>14</sup> Christie, *Norwegian Textile Newsletter* (Volume XI: Number 3), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Sirkka Kopisto and Pirkoo Sivho, *Costume in Finland 1750-1900* (Helsinki: National Board of Antiquities, 1996), p. 45.



## D. Baptism

In *A People's History of Christianity: Medieval Christianity*, editor Daniel Bornstein details the problems faced by historians when understanding the faith life of ordinary lay people during the Middle Ages. Such records as exist were written by the few members of society who were literate—and most were written in Latin, rather than the vernacular. The challenge is “recovering a spirituality often written on bodies rather than in books and uncovering the ideas implicit in devotional action.”<sup>16</sup>

Here, Bernard Hamilton in *The New Cambridge Medieval History* lays some helpful groundwork. By the early eleventh century,

Catholic Christianity had spread from its heartland in the British Isles, France, the [Byzantine] empire, Italy and northern Spain to become the official religion of Bohemia, Poland and Hungary and it was continuing to expand into the Viking homelands of Scandinavia and their new settlements in Iceland and Greenland.

A uniform though sparse church organization existed throughout this huge area... The parish system was only gradually coming into being, and since over 90 percent of the population lived in the countryside, this meant that a very high proportion of them had no regular access to a church.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, Hamilton notes, “lay religious practice was often quite limited. Most people knew the Lord’s Prayer and considered regular private prayer desirable,” but mass attendance for most was often limited to the great feast days.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, “Marriage was not accompanied by a religious ceremony in most places.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel E. Bornstein, editor, *A People's History of Christianity: Medieval Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Hamilton, “Religion and the Laity,” *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 499.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, p. 501.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, p. 501.

However, Hamilton writes, this lack of activity in other areas conferred even more importance upon baptism. (At this point in history, infant rather than adult baptism was fully established.) Not only was this sacrament considered essential for eternal salvation, it also conferred membership in both the universal church and the local community. Ideally, baptism took place in a church setting, making it a rare but crucial point of interface between laity and clergy. Although lay people were authorized to baptize in the absence of clergy due to extremely high infant mortality rates, the presence of clergy was preferred in the Nordic region because of social customs. In *Women in Old Norse Society*, Jenny Jochens explains:

The Icelandic and Norwegian laws agree...that lay people could perform the ceremony in an emergency—when the child was ill and might die unbaptized, thereby jeopardizing salvation and forfeiting a Christian burial...According to ancient Church doctrine, however, the person who baptizes a child contracts a spiritual kinship (*compaternitas*) with its family and becomes a godparent, a bond which precludes marriage with the child's relations. For this reason, celibate clergymen were preferred baptizers.<sup>20</sup>

Often the newly born child was carried in great ceremony to the parish church for the occasion, accompanied by family members. At the moment of baptism, ordinary life was infused with the sacred, with significance for both the individual soul and the greater society.

### **E. Folklore**

Of course, the notion of a sacred space and time where the world of the visible and invisible met was older than Christianity. Hamilton notes that although the majority of the population lived their lives within a Christian framework, pagan belief and practice lingered in the form of folklore, particularly in those Northern areas where Christianity was a relatively recent development. Often, new beliefs and practices were layered on top of the old without fully

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<sup>20</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 93.

replacing them, creating a syncretic blend. In the case of baptism, older Nordic practices may have corresponded to the sacrament in ways that increased its social importance.

In *Nordic Folklore*, Juha Pentikäinen writes of the belief in “the dead without status,” also known as “the nameless dead”:

Dead children provide a typical example of the dead without status. The problem with abandoned, murdered, unbaptized, aborted, or stillborn children is that they have died before the proper status-conferring rites could be performed. Their position is problematical in that they have never belonged to a community of the living and therefore cannot belong to the community of the dead.

In terms of religious phenomenology, *naming* was the most important symbol of social acceptance of a child...thus signifying the child’s official membership in the family. The condition for social acceptance was normally that the child be shown to have a father and a mother—in many cultures, an illegitimate child was rejected, abandoned, or killed.<sup>21</sup>

While the mother demonstrated her acceptance of a newly born child by nursing, the father demonstrated his by naming the child, thereby accepting the infant into the family.

Pentikäinen writes that:

In Nordic tradition, naming is an older rite than Christian baptism. In the Icelandic sagas a father demonstrated his approval by receiving the child that was brought to him, pouring water on it, and giving it a name. The question of keeping or abandoning the child was settled at the moment of name-giving.<sup>22</sup>

Only with the advent of Christianity was infanticide considered murder. In any case, the nameless dead were believed to haunt the living in terrifying ways. In “Baptism and the Interaction with Supernatural Creatures in Medieval Europe,” Jenni Kuuliala writes that, according to folklore, families could “lay” or exorcise a dead child’s ghost by baptizing it.

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<sup>21</sup> Juha Pentikäinen, “The Dead Without Status,” *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 132.

<sup>22</sup> Pentikäinen, p. 132.

But even if a child lived and was accepted into the family, further dangers lurked. Tiina Nunnally, in the notes to her acclaimed translation of Sigrid Undset's Nobel-winning novel *Kristin Lavransdatter*, explains the medieval mindset:

In medieval Norway a clear demarcation was made between inside and outside, between the protective circle of human habitation and the dark forces of the wilderness beyond. People believed that the forests and mountains were populated by many types of supernatural beings, which were both unpredictable and menacing.<sup>23</sup>

Kuuliala writes that unbaptized children were believed to be particularly vulnerable to evil forces “as they were in a liminal state and not yet full members of Christian society.”<sup>24</sup> Baptism afforded ritual protection and was therefore done as soon as possible after birth.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, childbirth was a time fraught with anxiety, and not just due to religious and folk beliefs. Both mother and child were in genuine danger of dying in a world where the only care available was that of an experienced family member or midwife with extremely limited medical resources. In such a world, protective rituals such as baptism took on enormous significance.

## **VI: History of Nordic Textile Design**

In examining the woven patterns on christening bands, it is imperative to understand the overall history of Nordic textile design. Thomas Parsons' *Designer's Guide to Scandinavian Patterns* gives a brief overview of these indigenous traditions that lie “resolutely outside of

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<sup>23</sup> Tiina Nunnally, footnotes for *Kristin Lavransdatter* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 1126.

<sup>24</sup> Jenni Kuuliala, “Baptism and the Interaction with Supernatural Creatures in Medieval Europe” in *The Visual Culture of Baptism in the Middle Ages: Essays on Medieval Fonts, Settings and Beliefs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> The belief that baptism must take place as soon as possible was well-documented by at least one nineteenth century Norwegian physician who scolded his peasant patients for exposing vulnerable infants to the elements. Nevertheless, the belief was strong enough that it followed Norwegian immigrants to the new world, where the practice was also documented. See Kathleen Stokker, *Remedies and Rituals: Folk Medicine in Norway and the New Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), pp. 136-137.

mainstream European developments, centered as these are on Classical Rome and Renaissance Italy.”<sup>26</sup> Instead:

Each of the Scandinavian countries came relatively late to Christianity; each one was transformed by industrialism, but also relatively late. For both these reasons, national and local traditions of craftsmanship and design continued to flourish there, from ancient times, in an almost uninterrupted line. They were enhanced rather than redirected by the motifs brought home by far-ranging Vikings.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to sea voyages to the Mediterranean region, the Vikings also sailed down the rivers of Russia to make contact with the eastern empires on the Black Sea. “These eastern connections proved highly influential in the development of Scandinavian patterns,”<sup>28</sup> Parsons writes, persisting long after the Viking era came to a close. Such influences can be seen in the geometric, highly abstract patterns that adorn every kind folk art, from weaving to wood carving.

Marilyn Stokstad, in her classic volume *Medieval Art*, confirms Parsons’ view that Northern artists’ use of geometric forms were similar to the abstract styles of Byzantine and early Christian art, that they continued this abstraction within a new Christian context, and that these traditions remained independent from the rest of Europe during in the Middle Ages.

In part, Nordic textile traditions were protected by geographical isolation and the relative lack of a foreign market. Rather than changing designs to meet the whims of foreign fashion, textiles were produced by and for the family. Parsons writes, “Until the seventeenth century there was very little large-scale productions of such articles; they were always part of much smaller, more intimate social units.”<sup>29</sup> David Black and Clive Loveless, publishers of *Flatweave from*

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Parsons, *Designer’s Guide to Scandinavian Patterns* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Parsons, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Parsons, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons, pp. 8-9.

*Fjord and Forest: Scandinavian Tapestries of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* concur with this analysis, noting:

[T]he production of Scandinavian textiles was never influenced by a commercial marketplace unlike Oriental tribal weaving. The work was undertaken by the women of the family often to contribute to their dowries, with all the love and care such an important purpose implied. The weaving was treasured and handed down in the family, its value being of a sentimental nature rather than commercial.<sup>30</sup>

Parson writes that while attempts were made to establish large-scale export industries following fabrics and patterns popular on the continent, few such businesses succeeded:

At the same time, traditional, smaller crafts continued to be practiced much as they had been for hundreds of years. It helped to maintain Scandinavia's traditional designs that native production was heavily protected by high tariffs from foreign imports. Also, into the nineteenth century rich farmers in southern Sweden, for example, commissioned costume ornaments from local craftsmen that followed medieval patterns; they spurned the more modern and fashionable but imported patterns that by then were available.<sup>31</sup>

The result was "a peculiarly rigid conservatism" in all areas of folk art.<sup>32</sup> For example, Stokstad notes, "Norwegian and Swedish country building remained so conservative that seventeenth and eighteenth century farmsteads reflect the practices of the Middle Ages."<sup>33</sup>

The abstract nature of weaving patterns also occurred for technical reasons: "Woven textiles...were made on looms on which it was not possible to create curved or organic shapes," Parsons explains.<sup>34</sup> This was particularly true for band weaving, which uses a limited number of warp and weft strings, further restricting the technical possibilities.

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<sup>30</sup> David Black and Clive Loveless, *Flatweave from Fjord and Forest: Scandinavian Tapestries of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: David Black Oriental Carpets, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Parsons, pp. 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> Parsons, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art: Second Edition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> Parsons, p. 77.

## VII: “Reading the Bands”: Symbolism and Social Context

In *Invisible Threads in Knitting*, textile historian Annemor Sundbø examines ancient motifs that appear in Norwegian knitting but originated in the much older craft of weaving. “Some of the forms were woven into the textiles for practical and technical reasons,” she writes, echoing Parsons. “At the same time, these motifs were not simply composed and stylized by chance.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, the motifs were deliberately woven to express a symbolic language, a common visual vocabulary. “The language of pictures and signs was well developed at a time when it was not a given that everyone could read,” Sundbø states.<sup>36</sup> Thus:

Geometric patterns from pre-history have survived in an unbroken tradition in spiral forms, rhomboids, crosses, zigzag borders, triangles, rosettes, S-forms, and swastikas. Many of the forms could be repeated in the borders [of garments] and gained the magic of repetition. We find this in all folk art and especially in textiles.<sup>37</sup>

Sundbø explains that such repeating patterns would be used to decorate houses, barns, and everyday objects. “There was a common fear of evil spirits who could enter the body through any opening and bring harm,” she writes. “Folk costumes were often richly decorated around all the openings, neckline, chest, lower edge of a shirt, and sleeve cuffs.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, every wall or doorway needed protective patterns painted on it, for unadorned spaces were an open invitation to evil forces.

Clearly, these symbols expressed the spiritual beliefs of their creators. “The spiritual was something beyond nature that also had a part in reality,”<sup>39</sup> Sundbø writes. “The visible and the

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<sup>35</sup> Annemor Sundbø, *Invisible Threads in Knitting* (Kristianstad: Torridal Tweed, 2007), p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Sundbø, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Sundbø, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> Sundbø, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> Sundbø, p. 50.

invisible lived side by side and were incorporated into textiles and pattern motifs.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, “Folk beliefs and superstition lived side by side with Christian ceremonies and rituals.”<sup>41</sup>

For example, in examining the christening bands photographed by Anna Grostøl, many display a repeating XOXOXO pattern—so-called St. Andrew’s crosses (X shapes) alternating with diamonds, which Sundbø believes represent an ancient sun disc symbol. (A diamond shape is more prevalent than the circle it represents, given the difficulty of making curves in weaving.)

As far as metal objects being sewn into christening bands, Sundbø explains that this tradition also has deep roots. “From very early on, metal was believed to hinder evil power,”<sup>42</sup> she writes, noting that protective objects placed in cradles included coins, needles, knives, and shears. A volume of Norwegian folk history cites a written text from 1750 describing the practice. “Although such beliefs are on the way out,” recorded the initial source, “these items are still used ceremonially around the country.”<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that, in some rural areas, the practice was still being reported into the 1950s.

In addition to design motifs, the use of color in folk art was also highly symbolic. Most christening bands were woven in red and white. Both colors were believed to protect against evil, and like the X-shaped cross, held meaning in both Christian and folk tradition. Sundbø writes that Norwegian folklorist Johann Storaker traveled the country in the 1800s recording peasant traditions, and he noted that red was commonly used for both baptism and wedding clothing.

This preference for red is universal and ancient. Mary Kelly, an expert in Slavic and Scandinavian textiles, writes: “Worldwide, the color red denotes fertility and sexuality and is one

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<sup>40</sup> Sundbø, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Sundbø, p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> Sundbø, p. 68.

<sup>43</sup> Sundbø, p. 68.



of the most popular colors for wedding clothing, textiles, and embroidered ritual cloths and clothing. The color of blood and thus of life, it is also used on birthing and swaddling cloths.”<sup>44</sup> Kelly notes that early petroglyphs along Scandinavia coastal areas were painted in red, demonstrating the age of this tradition.

In “‘Semiotics of the Cloth’: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions,” Kristen Marie Tibbs analyzes the high value placed on red clothing in the Icelandic sagas, which were written during the Middle Ages. Red textiles feature in key moments of the sagas and were prized in the gift-giving culture these stories recorded. For example, in *Laxdæla Saga*, the king of Norway demonstrates his favor toward loyal retainers by giving them expensive red clothing.

Red was considered so desirable in the Middle Ages, Tibbs writes, that every means was used to create it. A vivid color could be obtained not only by using kermes, an expensive dye material made of insect scales that had to be imported, but also by using native plants such as madder or certain lichens fermented with urine. Danish historian Else Østergard writes in *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland*:

The earliest settlers seem to have begun by over-dyeing coloured wools with dyes, such as woad and lichen purple, which were part of their Viking Age inheritance. As the colonies on Greenland became more established, however, they turned to other local sources for their colours. A tannin-based dye was commonly applied on brown and grey wools, and iron-rich water from local streams was used to colour white wool red.”<sup>45</sup>

Foreigners who visited Norse Greenland were surprised to find the wealthier colonists in the remote outpost dressed in vivid colors such as red, blue, and mauve.

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Kelly, “Red: The Universal Color” (*Piecework Magazine*, Volume XXII, Number 2, 2014), p. 57

<sup>45</sup> Else Østergard, *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), p. 92.

Finally, Kristin Tibbs introduces the idea of “reading the cloth.” In her view, textiles are “nuanced social objects” that communicate key aspects of the culture that creates them through a language based on choice of fiber, method, and pattern.<sup>46</sup> “Readers” of cloth should also take into account who made the textile, for what purpose, and for whom it was intended. Understood in this way, textiles convey “complex social cues” to those who can read the language they speak.<sup>47</sup> This idea echoes Sundbø’s analysis of traditional Norwegian textiles:

Symbols on objects are always a means of communication; that is to say, they can send a message to the “reader.”...In order for the message to be understood, the reader must be able to interpret the symbol. Therefore, there must be common knowledge. One must know a little about the sign, its placement, and the social and cultural background.<sup>48</sup>

In order for such a language to be understood, textile traditions must be maintained. In the case of textiles, Sundbø notes, “Tradition decided how far individual expression could go.”<sup>49</sup>

The language of design placed its imprint on homes, districts, and valleys. Individual local folk costumes developed that became recognizable indications of where people lived. Each region, each mountain valley, or each village had clothing with characteristics that imparted identity and a sense of belonging. A place might have different costumes for work or for special occasions. There could also be different fine costumes for various holidays or to indicate whether one was married or unmarried.<sup>50</sup>

As principal makers of textiles, particularly in the domestic context, women were also the keepers of textile traditions. Older women taught younger women how to spin, weave, sew, and embroider. Textile production played such a crucial role in rural society that every aspect was

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<sup>46</sup> Kristen Marie Tibbs, “‘Semiotics of the Cloth’: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions” (thesis, Marshall University, 2012), p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> Tibbs, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Sundbø, p. 52-53.

<sup>49</sup> Sundbø, p. 122.

<sup>50</sup> Sundbø, p. 122.

guided by folk belief, with nothing left to chance. A sheep needed to be blessed before shearing, for example, while certain days were considered unlucky for spinning.<sup>51</sup>

Significantly, experienced older women were also largely responsible for caring for mother and child during the birthing process and its aftermath. More often than not, babies were delivered by grandmothers, other female relations, neighbor women, or a female midwife.<sup>52</sup>

In “reading” Nordic christening bands, it is safe to say that these highly valued objects were woven by women for use by family members, with patterns and colors specifically chosen to protect vulnerable infants from evil until they entered into the spiritual protection of the church and the protective circle of the family and local community at baptism.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

While there is pictorial evidence for Inger Lise Christie’s theory that the practice of christening bands began following the Reformation, I believe that there is sufficient cause to suggest an earlier origin. Archaeological evidence proves that band-weaving was a well-established art in the medieval North. Weavers at the time had access to the technology, know-how, and raw materials (including wool, linen, and dyestuffs) to create the bands, while the use of symbolic colors and patterns was also well-established, pre-dating the conversion to Christianity.

In terms of textual evidence, estate documents show the high value placed on tablet woven bands, both in monetary terms and as heirloom objects. Trading documents confirm that weaving was done primarily for the domestic sphere rather than a commercial market, reaffirming that the symbolic designs were drawn from local traditions rather than outside influences. In at least one instance, Post-Reformation sumptuary laws did not apply to weddings

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<sup>51</sup> Author’s notes from lecture by Annemor Sundbø, Weaver’s Guild of Minnesota, Minneapolis, February 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Stokker, pp. 123-124.

and baptisms, suggesting long-standing customs resistant to change, while images from both illuminated manuscripts and other art forms prove that swaddling infants with bands was a common practice throughout Europe during the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile, the history and theology of baptism in the Middle Ages demonstrate how the sacrament was viewed as a major rite of passage for religious, community, and domestic life. At the same time, fears and anxieties around childbirth and infant mortality were soothed by folk beliefs and practices which overlapped the sacrament in syncretistic fashion. The methodology of textile artist Annemor Sundbø establishes how the colors and designs on the christening bands expressed the spiritual beliefs of those who created them, with symbols and colors communicating meaning in both pre-Christian and Christian settings. Kristin Marie Tibbs provides a lens to examine the bands as “nuanced social objects” whose materials, methods, designs, and purpose were not random, but deliberately chosen by their creators to communicate cultural concerns.

While it is possible that such deep-seated traditions in pattern, color, method, beliefs, rituals, and social context did not coalesce into the use of christening bands until after the Reformation, long after these factors first emerged on the Northern scene, I believe it is more likely the custom began at least 300 years earlier.

If the practice of christening bands did begin in the late Middle Ages, as I believe it did, the question remains as to how it survived the Reformation, when so many religious customs and textiles did not. I believe the answer lies in the role of older women who presided over the domestic sphere, including both weaving and childbirth. While such women held no official religious authority, their social influence may have been enough to insure its survival within the more conservative folk traditions of the rural North.

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