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Tent Frames and Rope Sliders Found in Archaeological Contexts

Tent frames and rope sliders found in archaeological contexts; wills, sagas and Anglo-Saxon illustrations all indicate tents were used in the tenth century. Is there though, any evidence for tent canvas?

Opinion seems divided on whether finds from Oseberg and Gokstad contained tent fabric fragments. Ingstad and Möller-Wiering write that they were parts of the sail, whilst Gustafson and Nicolaysen say they were from tents. Are there clues by which we may distinguish between a sail and a tent? What should we be looking for today?

From practical experience of stitching together a flax canvas tent by hand, similar techniques would be needed in sail and tent making. However, it may be possible to distinguish between the remains of a sail or tent by looking at specific features.

Anglo-Saxon illustrations and sizes of tent frames found suggest that both a tent and a sail would be made up of large rectangular pieces of wool or linen fabric. These could have more acutely angled triangular corners on a tent, particularly at the ends and doors.

There may be evidence of wear where canvas goes over or inside the frame. Both are possible. If the tent poles had a rectangular cross section, corners would wear more in to fabric than a round spar or mast would affect a sail.

Loops may be stitched to edges of tents with evidence of wear where they have been pegged. However, a tent can be held down by pegging through cringles stitched in to the fabric or by making pockets for stones to use instead of pegs. Cringles are usually present on sails, and loops may have been used at the ends of a spar, but if this were done the wear pattern would be different.

Door fastenings may be ties, pegs, or some form of 'Dutch lacing'. Ties could be confused with sail reefing points unless their location on the fabric was clear.

Seams may show evidence of wear by stitch holes pulled out of shape near loops or ties, but like a sail there may also be wind strain pulling on longer seams. Strain points may be evident at the top of doors, or around pole sleeves. These may have re-enforcing patches sewn on. So may the corners on sails.

Ropes may be present on a tent as both guy ropes or as 'Dutch lacing'. Sails will have halyards and bolt ropes. Rope sizes or attachment points may help distinguish between sails and tents.

Evidence of waterproofing may be present on both sails and tents in the form of grease, wax or oil; possibly containing red lead oxide, ochre or some other preservative.

Archaeological textiles from the 10th century are usually found as small fragments which have been in the ground for a long time; it may be very difficult to tell whether that little piece

comes from a tent or sail. A combination of several of the above features plus the circumstances of the find may make distinction possible after all!

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