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PREHISTORIC COSTUME IN DENMARK

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Summary: In an archaeological context costumes are rare finds, but Denmark possesses a unique and very rich collection of prehistoric garments recovered from bogs and burials. In their totality, they provide an outstanding contribution to our understanding of Scandinavian and European prehistoric textile and costume development. This article presents an overview of Scandinavian costume characteristics and the research carried out at the newly established Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Textile Research.

Danish textile history started more than 5000 years ago with the unique Stone Age textiles in needle-binding technique (Bender Jørgensen 1990). From this period we have only a few indications on the use of costume but there is no doubt that the northern people wore clothes and we assume that most garments were made in animal skin and hide. Although our knowledge of Stone Age costume is limited, it continues to grow.

It was not until the beginning of the Early Bronze Age that weaving is documented in the Scandinavian areas, when we see quite a sudden and widespread deposition of woven textiles in the graves, indicating their use in costume as well. The most spectacular and well-known finds come from the oak coffin graves dated from the 14th through 12th centuries BCE (Jensen 1998). Here a unique body of material with entire costume sets has been preserved, as in the graves from Borum Eshøj, Egtved, Skrydstrup, Muldbjerg and Trindhøj (Broholm & Hald 1940, Hald 1939). (*Fig. 1*)

These objects show that Bronze Age people inhabiting modern day Denmark were very skilled with needle and thread and were familiar with cutting and shaping. A fascinating feature about these costumes is that despite being made in a woven material, many of them are produced in patterns that point back towards a costume tradition based on the use of animal skins.

The next very important step in the Scandinavian costume history happened some time during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age, just around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE. Costumes are now created more directly on the loom with minor changes after weaving as in the Greek and Roman costume tradition. A more widespread use of dress accessories like fibulae seems to indicate that a new costume design is under development.

Because of the cremation burial rite we have recovered only a few grave finds with textiles from the Pre-Roman Iron Age but from the peat bogs Denmark possesses an unparalleled collection of more or less complete costumes. They cover a wide range of male and female garments and accessories, as well as utilitarian textiles (Hald 1972, 1980, Bender Jørgensen 1986).

During the next thousand years the Early Iron Age costume tradition based on off-the-loom garment developed, until we see the formation of the Late Iron and Viking Age costumes slowly taking place. This costume tradition is characterised by more close cut and fitted garments with sleeves and gores. From many different sources we can now document that costumes are used as an important marker of ethnicity and social status and the Viking Age costume, and especially the male costume, were very open to



Fig. 1: Drawings of the Bronze Age oak coffin finds from Muldbjerg, Trindhøj and Borum Eshøj. Drawings from Boye 1896.

foreign influences. At the turn of the first millennium CE Scandinavia was ready to enter the costume tradition of the Middle Ages which is so well known from the Greenlandic costumes (Østergård 2004).

Scandinavian Textile Pioneers

In Scandinavia, we not only have unique textile and costume material to work with – there is also a long tradition of textile studies and experimental archaeology. The pioneering work of Margrethe Hald from Denmark (1897-1982), Agnes Geijer from Sweden (1898-1989) and Marta Hoffman from Norway (1913-2001) has had a lasting impact on worldwide textile research.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Danish scholar Margrethe Hald wrote her famous books about Danish Bronze and Iron Age costumes, *Costumes of the Bronze Age in Denmark* (Broholm & Hald 1935, 1940) and *Ancient Danish Textiles from Bogs and Burials* (Hald 1950, 1980). These books are still used worldwide not only as the primary reference for these finds, but also as models of the publication of archaeological textiles. They are, however, out of date and out of print.

Since their publication, our knowledge of prehistoric Scandinavian textile technology has increased dramatically. Now, more than half a century later, it is time to integrate these accumulated insights and knowledge and to look at textiles in their wider social context.

Centre for Textile Research

In August 2005, Centre for Textile Research (CTR) funded by the Danish National Research Foundation opened at the University of Copenhagen. Until July 2010 the research centre will focus on textile development from prehistory to the present. This is being carried out as a substantial research program involving several Danish and European universities, research institutions and museums. More information on CTR can be obtained at www.hum.ku.dk/ctr. (Fig. 2)

CTR works with two primary research programmes. In *Tools and Textiles – Texts and Contexts* the mission is to conduct a systematic study of textile tools, based on their function. The geographical and chronological framework for this program is the Central and Eastern Mediterranean in the 4th through 2nd millennia BCE. This was the period when, for the first time in history, textile manufacture developed from household production to standardised, industrialised, centralised production based on the division of labour.

In the other research program, *Textile and Costume from Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Danish Collections*, CTR focuses on the above-mentioned Danish costume collections from the Early Bronze Age oak coffin graves and the Early Iron Age bogs finds. The aim of this research programme is to create new international reference standards for the material under investigation, to introduce new parameters in the investigation of prehistoric textile and costume by focusing on textile design and to demonstrate the potential of textiles in archaeological research.

Due to the long period of investigation in the *Textile and Costume* programme the first stage of research is the examination of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age bog finds, covering a period from approximately 900 BCE to 400 CE. A second stage of research will include the Early Bronze Age textiles and costumes from the oak coffin graves. The vast majority of the selected finds belong to the collections of the National Museum of Denmark, and the mu-

The Danish National Research Foundation's



Fig. 2: CTR

seum is the primary partner in the programme. However, CTR also collaborates with the local museums which have textiles and costumes in their collections.

Textile and Costume from Danish Bogs

Most Danish bog finds have been found in Jutland due to the special acidic environment, which preserves proteinaceous materials such as textiles in wool and skin and leather almost intact. A great deal of the bog finds have been found before 1900 and all before 1950 when peat cutting was intensively practised. Although no new finds have appeared since then, the already existing material under investigation is so large and complex that it can be looked at from many different perspectives.

The CTR research programme focuses on new technical and cultural-historical analyses, which include new information on costume and textile technology, aspects of resource exploitation, gender and social identity. The program involves a wide range of specialists from all over Europe, including archaeologists, conservators, hand-weavers, geologists, chemists and physical anthropologists.

The planned and ongoing research includes C14 analysis of all textiles, which will permit a precise dating of all finds we are working with. We can already now announce that the Huldremose tubular peplos dress which was excavated in 1895 belongs to an earlier and different deposition than the Huldremose bog body which was found in 1879 dressed in two skin capes, a skirt, a scarf and several smaller accessories (Hald 1980). (*Fig. 3*)

CTR has also performed dye analysis of more than 200 textile samples, which makes this one of the largest collections of ancient textiles for which dye analysis has been performed. The preliminary results show that textiles of this period were much more colourful than previously anticipated and the preferred colour was not brown as the textiles look today or even white but yellow with red or blue accents.

To supplement the dye investigation we are in the process of analysing more than 150 fibre samples, which will allow us to define better the type of wool and fibre preparation methods used during the Iron Age. We can already see that the Iron Age people had access to high quality wool and that the raw material was subject to vigorous selection and preparation processes. Furthermore, we can see that the same raw material was used for textiles of various qualities.

Visual quality and design analysis are new methods of characterising textile structures and textures. We can see that in this period visual appearance plays a great role and often overrules the technical considerations. Likewise, we see a clear preference of fabrics in stripes and checks, so that costume design does not look anything like either the previous or the following periods. (*Fig. 4*)

Despite the fact that it is always assumed that Iron Age garments were ready from the loom, Iron Age people were also skilled with needle and thread as indicated by sewing, seams and mending in the textiles. Refined sewing techniques can also be seen in the fantastic skin and leather garments, giving us unique insights into specialised craftsmanship and primary and secondary garment production. In fact, skin garments constitute a third of all the recovered costume items from the bogs, and since skins and textiles are inseparable elements of ancient costume, they should not be studied in isolation from one another.

The Danish bog finds selected for this study span a period of more than 1000 years. We can already see now that in prehistory, just like today, textile and costume design was sensitive to changes in taste and habits. The changes just happened over a longer period of time. We do not know how aware people were about these changes or which mechanisms governed them. Seen from our perspective these changes are important indicators that can be used to characterize the prehistoric society.

The ongoing research on prehistoric Scandinavian and European costume that takes



Fig. 3: The different items belonging to the Huldremose bog find from 1879. Inner cape (top left), detail of inner cape (top right), outer cape (centre left), accessories (centre right), skirt (bottom left), scarf (bottom right). Photo by Roberto Fortuna, The National Museum of Denmark.

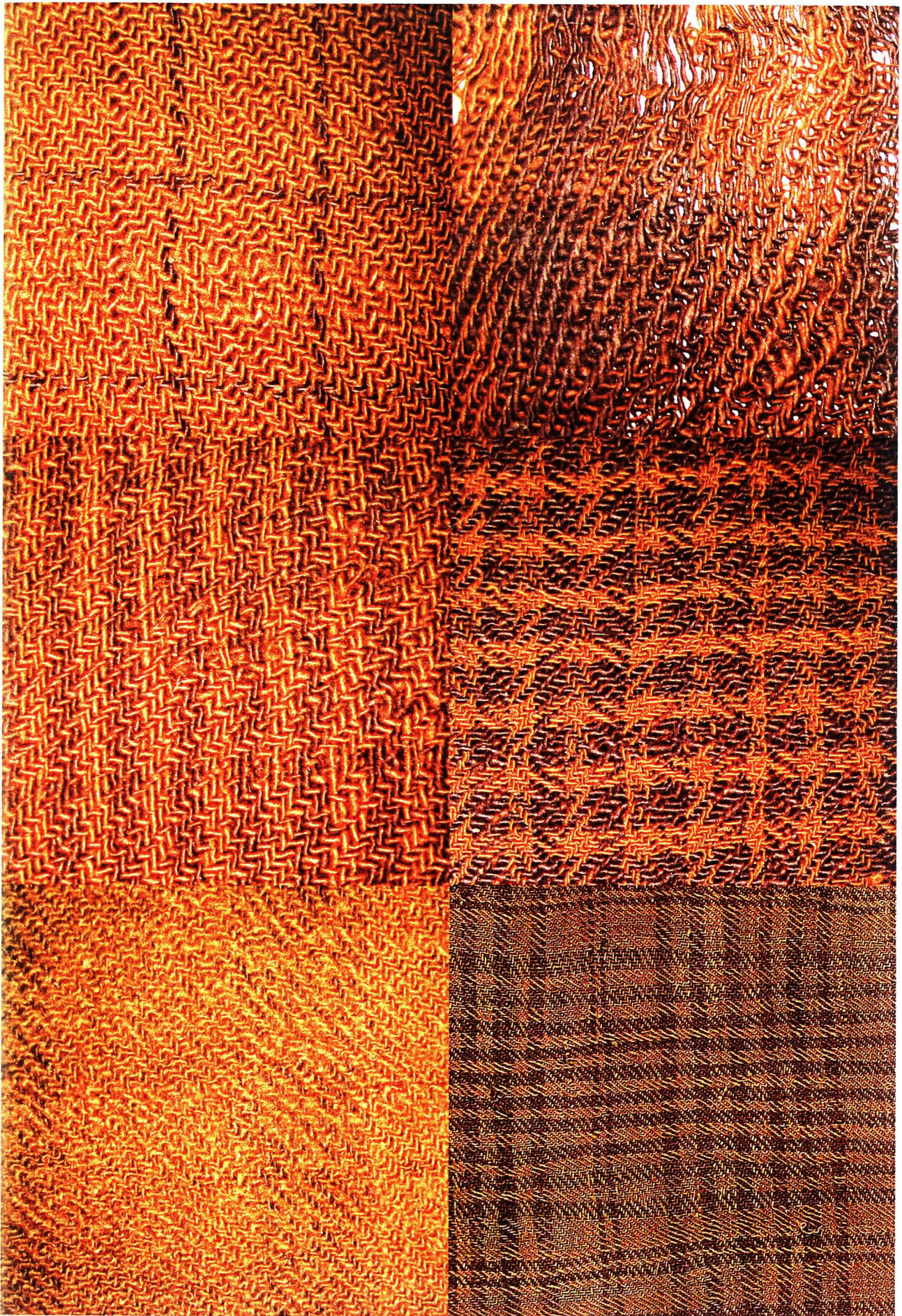


Fig. 4: A selection of Danish Early Iron Age textiles from bogs. Photo by CTR.

place in Copenhagen at the moment provides a unique opportunity to come very close to the prehistoric individual and to demonstrate the potential in interpretations of social, chronological and cultural historical issues in costume research. And, the story continues.

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