

Invisible Handicrafts

The General Picture of Textile and Skin Crafts in Scandinavian Surveys

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Abstract

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Textile production and fur and skin preparation are seldom put into an archaeological context and discussed. An often-heard argument is that finds of textiles are few and that we know nothing about skin preparation. Textile finds are few compared to, say, iron fragments, flints and potsherds but there are many implements such as needles, spindle whorls, and loom weights.

What significance is ascribed to these handicrafts in prehistoric society? To see how these crafts are presented, I have examined eight surveys from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland.

The examination reveals several interesting differences between, on the one hand, textiles and skin crafts and, on the other hand, other kinds of craft. Textile production and skin preparation are seldom discussed under headings about handicraft. Imported textiles are mentioned in passing but with no proper discussion. None of the authors has totally omitted to describe costumes from the Bronze Age and Iron Age, but one often gets the impression that dresses only are a complement to brooches and other ornaments.

Textile and skin crafts should be discussed on the same premises as other crafts and should be put into context. We must see the needs and possibilities of prehistoric people, not transfer our own values to them. We do not have to presume that the status of a crafts in prehistoric time depends on the number of archaeological finds we have today.

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While working with archaeology I have been surprised to find how rarely textile production and fur and skin preparation are put into a context and discussed. An argument that is often heard is that there are few textiles and that little is known about skin preparation, but is this the truth? It is true that the amount of textiles is small compared to, say, the fragments of iron, flint debitage, and potsherds, but we nevertheless find many different implements such as needles, spindle whorls, loom weights, and so on. Several prehistoric textile techniques, such as spinning, weaving on a warp-weighted loom, and tablet weaving, have a tradition lasting until our own days. In addition, intensive research has been carried out, by schol-

ars such as Agnes Geijer, Margrethe Hald, Ann-Marie Franzén, Marta Hoffman, Margareta Nockert, Inga Hägg, and Lise Bender Jørgensen (appendix), who have studied prehistoric textiles in various ways.

Thanks to their studies, we have acquired information about how textile implements were used and the techniques used to produce the small textile fragments discovered by archaeologists. This knowledge is particularly important when discussing a craft and its significance.

It is impossible to reconstruct a flint axe with hundred-per-cent certainty on the basis of a few debitage, and it is difficult to reconstruct complete costumes on the basis of a few fragments of

textile. However, just as a potsherd is an indication of a complete pot, and the debitage is residue from flint working, textile fragments are traces of clothes and textile production. Clothes are and have always been crucial for survival at our latitudes. Variations in climate over the millennia may have influenced costume in different ways. Clothes are also social signals. In addition, textile production does not only include costume but also hangings, quilts, and the like.

Textile production involves a long process from raw material to finished product, from wool or linen to garment. Wool was pulled from sheep, then sorted and cleaned of the coarsest dirt, and combed; only after this could it be spun. Flax was harvested, the seeds were removed, and the flax was retted either in water or on land, a process which loosened the outer shell from the inner fibres. After the retting, which could take several weeks, the flax was thoroughly dried so that the outer shell could easily be broken. Then the shell fragments had to be knocked off with a tool such as a wooden scutching knife, so that the linen could finally be combed to separate the fibres. Only then could the linen be spun. Where did all the raw material end up? How many sheep and how many acres of flax were needed to cover a household's needs for clothes and other textiles? If one calculates the quantity of yarn needed to produce clothes for a farm unit, one quickly realizes that textile crafts, like other crafts and chores, must have taken up a large amount of people's working time, not just in the dark winter evenings. A piece of cloth measuring 1 x 1.5 m with a thread count of 10/10 threads (warp and weft) per cm requires over 3000 m of 1 mm thick yarn, not counting the thrums, the unwoven ends of warp-threads left when the finished web is cut away. How many metres had to be spun so that the yarn would suffice for a whole sail, and who made it? A small longship such as *Skuldelev 5* is estimated to have had a sail homespun wool measuring about 62 m², and presumably a spare sail as well (Andersen *et al.* 1989, p. 12).

As for skin preparation, the very first finds of

human activity in Scandinavia consist of scrapers which most archaeologists believe to have been used to prepare skins. Skins and furs are thought to have been used mainly for clothes and as exchange goods or exports, as well as for tents, boats, and the like. Hides and skins from various animals, such as reindeer, beaver, and cattle vary in both size and shape, which influences the type of skin-preparation and sewing tools that are suitable for use. Some fish skins can also be used, after preparation, to make clothes, such as shoes, and they are relatively durable.

The archaeologist Kjel Knutsson has written about scrapers and scraping (e.g. 1977). He refers to an ethnoarchaeological study of the use of scrapers in Inuit culture. It was found that the Inuit used several different types of scrapers for different operations, the scrapers having different edges and different functions. Knutsson asked: "How many skins did a family need each year? An extended family (which was the usual type) needed 40–50 skins (Jenness 1923, p. 11; Mathiassen, 1928, p. 189). There are no absolute data about the length of time needed to prepare each of these skins. In a description of an Indian tribe in central Canada, who mostly made their clothes from caribou skin, we do however find exact details. Their skin-preparation process differs from that of the Eskimos in that they use a tanning agent, but the actual scraping process is very similar. The entire procedure takes about four days, but the actual time spent scraping is about 35 hours for *one* skin (Osgood 1940, pp. 163 f.)" (Knutsson 1977, p. 27).

Skin preparation is a circumstantial process involving several stages. Some of these are general and have been carried out in all periods. First the animal is flayed, and if the skin cannot be prepared at once, the rawhide must be conserved, for example, by being dried, frozen, or salted. When the skin is prepared, one begins by scraping the meat side completely clear of membranes, fat, and the like. If the hairs have to be removed from the skin, there are different possible methods. The simplest one is to lay the skin with the fur side up in run-

ning water. After a while, the hairs on the neck loosen, the skin is taken up, and all the hairs can be removed. Hair can also be removed by laying the skin under snow or by using soap or ashes.

Tanning is the next stage, which means that a substance is worked into the skin so that it is preserved, while simultaneously becoming soft and supple. Skins can be used if they are properly scraped but untanned, but they are then much less durable than if they are tanned. The oldest tanning methods in Scandinavia, according to Lotta Rahme, are smoke-tanning and fat-tanning. Tanning with the aid of bark and urine may also have occurred. Smoke-tanning is most simply done by stretching the skin above the hearth. Fattanning is done by rubbing fat, such as the brain or fat from the slaughtered animal, into the meat side of the skin. For bark-tanning one can apply crushed bark directly to the skin, or else the skin can be placed in a strong bark solution. As the final stage in the process, the skin must be softened by mechanical working, for instance with the aid of a scraper or a withe (Rahme 1985, pp. 2 ff.).

Several early chronicles and narratives mention the fur trade and clothing. One of the oldest, the Gothic historian Jordanes' work from the sixth century, *De origine actibusque getarum*, mentions both hunting and the fur trade (Stenberger 1964, pp. 450 f.). From the Viking Age we have several sources: Ibn Khordabeh described how the Rus transported furs of beaver and black fox; Ibn Rustah writes that the Rus were fur traders who sold, above all, sable and squirrel, and he also says that they wore magnificent clothes (Stenberger 1964, p. 655). In Ibn Fadlan's account of the burial of a Viking chieftain, we read that "They placed him in a grave and put a roof over it for ten days while they cut and sewed garments for him" (Brøndsted 1960, p. 232). In Old Norse literary sources, such as the Poetic Edda and the Icelandic sagas, we also find details about textiles (Franzén & Nockert 1992, p. 87):

*There must be a fire for the frozen knees
of all arriving guests,
food and clothing for those who come
over the hills to your hall.*

*Give your friends gifts – they're as glad as you are
to wear new clothes and weapons;
frequent giving makes friendships last
if the purpose is pure.*

(Hávamál, translated by Terry 1969, pp. 13, 19)

There is no doubt that both textiles and furs were of great significance in the prehistoric period. Admittedly, the written sources do not go back very far, but the need for good clothes would not have been influenced by the coming of written sources. If we look at the historical period we know, for example, through estate inventories, that textiles commanded a high price. Clothes or raw materials for textile production were often the wages in kind received by servant folk, and sometimes clothes were the only personal belongings of the deceased (Bringéus 1970, p. 381).

What impression do we get of the significance of these crafts in prehistoric society? How is general knowledge of textile production, skin preparation, and costume reconstruction conveyed today? What picture are would-be archaeologists given of these crafts, and finally, what picture is painted in works of popular archaeology for a broad audience? Undergraduate courses in archaeology rarely have works dealing solely with handicrafts on the compulsory reading lists. The knowledge that is communicated is what is written in archaeological surveys. This is also the knowledge that reaches members of the general public with an interest in archaeology. The surveys are also used as a source of facts for textbooks in comprehensive school and high school.

To obtain a picture of the way these crafts are presented, I decided to carry out a thorough analysis of eight survey works, a total of 19 volumes from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland. To examine whether the treatment of the subject has changed, I selected works pub-

lished at different times. The authors are well-established archaeologists, and their books have a very wide spread, comprising both scholarly works and popular science. The surveys I chose were *Arkeologi i Sverige* 1982, revised in 1991, volumes 1–3, *Danmarkshistorien* 1979–82, 8 volumes in all, *Danmarks Oldtid* 1938–40, revised in 1957–60, volumes 1–3, *Det forntida Sverige* 1964 (1979), *Finlands förhistoria* 1964, *Finlands historia* 1993, *Norges historie* 1986, vol. 1, and *Norges Oldtid* 1967.

It was difficult to make exact comparisons, but the result at least indicates what the different authors describe in their works, and above all it shows how differently the same topic can be treated in the same type of literature. I present the results in tables, showing the findings for each survey work, but not for the individual volumes. Each survey deals with the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, and even if there are several volumes the periods are treated in a similar way. The number of pages differs from survey to survey. The Danish works have most pages, about 1150 (*Danmarks Oldtid*) and 1095 (*Danmarkshistorien*), while the Swedish works comprise about 870 pages (*Det forntida Sverige*) and 650 (*Arkeologi i Sverige*). The Finnish and Norwegian surveys have much fewer pages. Despite such differences, these works provide a knowledge of the countries' prehistory and may therefore be considered equivalent. I should also point out that there are few sub-headings in *Danmarks Oldtid*, but there are many summary headings in the margin; the latter make it easier to find one's way in the text, so I count them as headings.

Skin scrapers and fur trade: reality or myth?

In terms of the quantity of information, or more strictly the lack of it, it appears as if skin preparation did not exist on any great scale except in Denmark. My analysis shows that scrapers are mentioned, sometimes as tools for preparing skins, and mostly in passing (Brøndsted 1957 vol.

1, p. 28; Hagen 1967, pp. 14, 17, 24, 36, 70; Kivikoski 1964, pp. 25, 32, 53, Magnus & Myhre 1986, pp. 15, 38; Stenberger 1964, pp. 23, 27, 40, 290) and/or in lists of artefacts, for example, "The material also contains rhomboid arrowheads with retouched, that is, finely shaped edges. In addition there are scrapers used for skin preparation, both flake scrapers of rounded shape, made from a flake from a block of flint, and blade scrapers made from a long, narrow blade split from a block of flint by a powerful, well-aimed blow" (Stenberger 1964, p. 27).

Skin preparation is not included in any general discussion of craft or everyday life. The exception is *Danmarkshistorien Stenalderen* 1 (Andersen 1982), which gives very good insight into skin crafts, with the author describing where the skins may have been prepared, who may have done the work, the skin-preparation process, and sewing skins. He also mentions fish skins as a possible resource. The absence of reconstructions of leather costumes is ascribed by the authors chiefly to the lack of finds, but the need for clothes is nevertheless pointed out. Several authors think that the ornamentation on some idols can be interpreted as details of costume (Burenhult 1991 vol. 1, p. 163; Brøndsted 1957 vol. 1, p. 85; Edgren 1993, p. 79; Stenberger 1964, p. 107).

All these writers agree about the significance of skins and furs for exchange and export (Brøndsted 1957 vol. 1, p. 91, 1960 vol. 3, p. 249; Burenhult 1991 vol. 1, p. 158, vol. 3, p. 34, 153; Hagen 1967, p. 201; Kivikoski 1961, pp. 104, 282; Nielsen 1981, p. 111; Stenberger 1964, pp. 165, 572, 684, 774). Only Edgren writes in *Finlands historia* that since both furs and skins leave no traces, it is difficult to say anything about their significance as exports, above all in the Stone Age, but he nevertheless thinks that they were probably important, especially in later periods (Edgren 1993, pp. 69, 126, 169, 177, 193, 216, 261). No one denies the importance of having access to well-prepared skins.

The overall picture one obtains of skin crafts is very poor. No one denies their importance, it

is true, but the craft is lost in the text. The function of the tools is mentioned in passing when various flint tools are described or when trading contacts are discussed. When the preparation process is ignored, we also miss an understanding of the time the craft must have taken and the significance that skin preparation must have had. This discussion would have been very important. Did the scrapers really have a practical function? From the surveys we gain the impression that their real function is of secondary significance, much less important than the form, the mutual similarities or differences, and the dating. I am not claiming that these factors lack importance, but I think that it is essential to describe the primary func-

tion of the scrapers more clearly, and to put the work of skin preparation in a proper context. The same applies to the trade in skins and furs.

If skins and furs were one of the prime assets and exports, one wonders: were the skins prepared before export? According to some scholars, the composition of grave finds from Öland suggests this, but in this case we must also discuss the preparation process, putting it in its context, especially the time it took. To rectify these deficiencies, the available knowledge about the craft must be presented in the surveys, not just in specialist articles written for people who already know.

The results are summed up in table 1.

Table 1. Skin crafts. A: Scrapers and their function; scrapers are mentioned as tools for preparing skins. B: Skin preparation; there is a discussion of the preparation process. C: The place where the skins may have been prepared. D: Time; how long the work took. E: Exchange and trade of skins/furs. F: Discussion of costume and the need for it. G: Reconstructed costume illustrated. H: Heading; the information comes under a separate heading. Symbols: – no information; x single or occasional details/mentions; X several details/mentions and thorough information.

	<i>Fortida Sverige 1964</i>	<i>Arkeologi i Sverige 1982 (1990)</i>	<i>Danmarks Oltid 1938–40 (1957–60)</i>	<i>Danmarks- historien 1979–82</i>
A Scrapers and their function	x	x	x	x
B Skin preparation	–	–	–	X
C The place	–	–	–	X
D Time	–	–	–	–
E Exchange and trade	X	X	X	X
F Discussion of costume	x	x	x	X
G Reconstructed costume	–	x	–	–
H Heading	–	–	–	x

	<i>Finlands förhistoria 1961</i>	<i>Finlands historia 1993</i>	<i>Norges Oltid 1967</i>	<i>Norges historie 1986</i>
A Scrapers and their function	x	x	x	x
B Skin preparation	—	x	—	—
C The place	—	—	x	—
D Time	—	—	—	—
E Exchange and trade	X	X	X	X
F Discussion of costume	—	x	—	—
G Reconstructed costume	—	—	—	—
H Heading	—	—	—	—

Is work with textiles classified as a craft?

There is a great distance between knowledge of, on the one hand, textile implements and preparation and, on the other hand, the finished product. Textile crafts are rarely included in any overall discussion; they are only mentioned in passing.

Textile crafts and the place where they were carried out are described above all in works dealing with the Iron Age. Examples of headings including textile crafts are “*Settlement and Settlement Practice*”: “Evidence of female handicraft comes from loom weights and spindle whorls found in every house” (Stenberger 1964, p. 107); “*The Furnishing of the House*”: “Up against one wall stands the loom with the work in progress on it. To one side lie a spindle, shears, a comb to disentangle the wool, and perhaps a yarn reel. ... Apart from the loom, the weaving equipment included a band loom, tablet-weaving equipment, and a meshwork frame” (Birkebæk 1982 vol. 1, pp. 53 ff.) “*Villages and Single Farms*”: “The sunken-floor huts at Fosie IV can be clearly associated with textile crafts through finds of loom weights and spindle whorls; perhaps they can be classified as weaving huts” (Burenhult 1991 vol. 3, p. 94); and “*Tools*”:

“Viking Age tools, like those of previous periods, comprise, among others, ard shares, sickles, scythes, knives, axes, hoes, and spindle whorls” (Edgren 1993, p. 243). I must point out here that spindle whorls are not tools. It is impossible to spin on a spindle whorl without a spindle.

It is only Birkebæk, in his volumes of *Danmarkshistorien* (1982), who touches on professional production and textile crafts, for instance in his discussion of Sædding. No one discusses the economic significance that textile crafts may have had. Only occasionally are textile crafts included under the main heading of “Crafts”. Work with textiles is not reckoned as craft in the traditional sense. The economic significance of the work is not discussed, nor whether there was professional production in Scandinavia.

Textile production

Textile tools are mentioned briefly in all the surveys, but although different techniques such as meshwork (*språng*) and needle-looping are mentioned, there is no explanation of the actual manufacturing procedure.

It is only in *Danmarkshistorien Jernalderen 1* and *Danmarks Oldtid* that we find a detailed account of the different stages in textile produc-

tion and an explanation of the way different implements were used. Finds of loom weights and spindle whorls above all are considered to be evidence of textile manufacture. The absence of spindle whorls and loom weights is therefore taken as an argument that the weaving technique was not known during the Stone Age, but there is no discussion, except in Brøndsted, of the fact that spindle whorls are not found until towards the end of the Late Bronze Age (Hald 1949, p. 133, 1980, p. 134). The spindle is known from the Stone Age in Europe. It is perfectly possible to spin a thread without using a spindle whorl. A spinning hook, a simple stick, may have been used (Hald 1980, p. 135; Geijer 1974, p. 25). Nor is there any information in the surveys that there were different types of loom. The textile researcher Margrethe Hald has shown that both the warp-weighted loom and the round loom were used during the prehistoric period (Hald 1949, p. 222, 1980, p. 218). The round loom, however, is difficult to find in archaeological material since it is a simple wooden structure.

Apart from *Danmarkshistorien Jernalderen 1*, none of the surveys have any headings directly connected with textile production. Textile pottery is mentioned by several writers, particularly Edgren, but no one describes how the "textiles" were used to decorate the pottery.

Since the manufacturing process is consistently omitted, the reader has no chance to form any opinion of the significance of this work or the time that textile production may have taken. Only Birkebæk writes that "the eternal work with the wool and the loom occupied all hands in the evening" (Birkebæk 1982 vol. 1, p. 75). The result is that none of the surveys, apart from the Danish ones, provide a picture of how textiles were made, or even *that* they were made.

But they did wear clothes!

None of the authors, in contrast, has omitted to describe costumes from the Bronze Age and Iron Age, but here too there is a great difference

between the Danish works and the surveys from the rest of Scandinavia. *Danmarks Oldtid* and *Danmarkshistorien* both have a thorough analysis of various textile finds and reproduce costume reconstructions and details. In the Danish surveys we find that costume is always described under its own heading. In the other surveys we gain the impression only that clothes were used only to attach ornaments and other costume accessories to. Exclusive costume fragments are discussed, in connection with grave finds and imports, but I have nowhere found any information about simple costume. Several of the books refer to the Danish textile finds and reconstructions.

It is not surprising that the authors refer to the Danish material, since there are far more surviving textiles from Denmark than from the other countries. At the same time, they ignore other important material. The textiles found at Birka are among the most important textile finds from Viking Age Scandinavia. Brøndsted refers in the first hand to the pictures on the Oseberg tapestry and the Gotlandic picture stones, as well as the textile finds from Birka (Brøndsted 1960, p. 375) when describing Viking Age costume.

Several writers describe lavish graves with fragments of costumes, but these are not put in any specific context; they are merely mentioned along with other finds. "The dead were buried in costly clothes, the men in the normal way with their weapons and often with a rich array of luxury goods in the form of imported vessels of glass, bronze, and fine earthenware" (Stenberger 1964, pp. 704 f.). "Her outfit was truly rich. ... She was dressed in festive garments with the accompanying ornaments" (Myhre 1986, p. 252); "and in Valsgårde 15 a silver-embroidered silk collar, probably from southern Russia, with close counterparts in finds from Kiev" (Stenberger 1964, p. 703). "In exchange they received silver, bronze vessels, beads and textiles, not infrequently silk cloths from China" (Burenhult 1991 vol. 3, pp. 84 f.). Unlike many other grave goods, the textiles are not further

discussed, so they disappear from the reader's consciousness.

The results of the study are summed up in Table 2.

Table 2. Textile crafts. **A:** Textile tools mentioned as finds. **B:** Textile production described in detail. **C:** General discussion of craft and the organization of work includes textile crafts. **D:** Time; how long the work took. **E:** Economic value and status of the craft discussed. **F:** Reconstructed costume in text and pictures with a description. **G:** Production of textiles comes under a separate heading. **H:** Reconstruction of costume comes under a separate heading. Symbols: – no information; x single or occasional details/mentions; X several details/mentions and thorough information.

	<i>Fortida Sverige 1964</i>	<i>Arkeolog i i Sverige 1982 (1990)</i>	<i>Danmark s Oltid 1938–40 (1957–60)</i>	<i>Danmark s- historien 1979–82</i>
A Textile tools	x	x	x	x
B Textile production	–	–	X	X
C General discussion	–	–	–	x
D Time	–	–	–	x
E Economy and status	–	–	–	x
F Reconstructed costume	x	X	X	X
G Production heading costume	–	–	X	X
H Reconstruction heading	–	–	X	X

	<i>Finlands förhistor ia 1961</i>	<i>Finlands historia 1993</i>	<i>Norges Oltid 1967</i>	<i>Norges historie 1986</i>
A Textile tools	x	x	x	x
B Textile production	–	–	–	–
C General discussion	–	–	–	–
D Time	–	–	–	–
E Economy and status	–	–	–	–
F Reconstructed costume	x	x	x	x
G Production heading costume	–	–	–	–
H Reconstruction heading	–	–	–	–

Crafts in general

Is it only skin preparation and textile production that the surveys give poor information about, or does this also apply to flint working, bronze casting, pottery, or ironwork? As we know, pre-history is divided into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, and it is natural that a great deal of space should be devoted to these three materials. Although the various manufacturing processes are not always described, the products resulting from other crafts are included in the general information; it is very difficult to compare isolated mentions and a few lines of text with lengthy discussions and descriptions. A discussion of flint artefacts and pottery does not concern only the individual tool or vessel form: microliths or potsherds indicate dates and reveal technical development; artefacts are given differing status depending on the contexts in which they are found, and so on. At the same time, these crafts and artefacts are included in discussions of the environment and climatic change, livelihoods, agriculture, hunting, and so on. On the other hand, there are not so many headings, except in the Danish surveys and in *Arkeologi i Sverige*, connected with crafts or different production processes.

Arkeologi i Sverige vol. 1 mentions skin crafts during the Stone Age, in connection with flint artefacts, on only two occasions (Burenhult 1991 vol. 1, pp. 56, 70). In the same volume there are several pictures of flint tools, but only arrowheads and axes are shown in their context (ibid., pp. 73, 107). Pottery is similarly included in a general discussion of topics such as status and everyday life, but there is in addition a chapter dealing solely with pottery manufacture, analytical methods, and so on (ibid., pp. 146 ff.).

In *Det forntida Sverige* Stenberger discusses bronze craft and casting, bronzeworking tools, and so on, but the preparation stages are omitted. *Danmarks Oldtid*, on the other hand, has a good description of pottery, bronze casting, and iron handling. In *Danmarkshistorien* there are

also very good descriptions in the illustrations of the different crafts, often with detailed pictures. Flint-working and the potter's craft are described, as is the bronze caster and his work. Finally, there is a description of smithwork and iron handling, besides which the role of the smith in society is considered. In the Norwegian and Finnish surveys other crafts than those connected with textiles predominate. Only Brøndsted and Hvass stand out by devoting slightly more pages to textile production than to crafts such as pottery and ironwork.

Difference and similarity, cause and effect

There is a great difference above all in the way textile crafts and skin preparation are handled in the Danish surveys, *Danmarkshistorien* and *Danmarks Oldtid*, compared with the others. One reason for the difference is, naturally, that there are many more textile finds from Denmark, but Brøndsted, when describing Viking Age costume, refers also to finds from Birka, Gotlandic picture stones, and the Oseberg tapestry (1960 vol. 3, p. 375). There are textile finds from the Bronze Age onwards from both Sweden and Norway.

Although the Danish material predominates, we do have a number of monographs on textiles published from the 1930s onwards. In the appendix I present some of the most important works in chronological order alongside the surveys examined here. It should also be said that several very good books on prehistoric textile crafts have been published in recent years, besides which there are many articles and essays on the subject.

A further possible reason why the Danish surveys give a better picture of textile crafts throughout is that the textile researcher Margrethe Hald and Johannes Brøndsted collaborated for several decades. It is above all to Hald and her publications that he refers. As for *Danmarkshistorien*,

there is more information in all the volumes, but only Lone Hvass has a proper description of the textile production process. Is it a coincidence that she is a woman, or was it perhaps thought that this information only needed to be provided at one place in the series?

An interesting difference between textile/skin crafts and other crafts is that the former are usually not discussed under headings connected with crafts. The manufacture of the finer textiles is not discussed in any of the surveys I have read. Who, for example, made the exclusive tablet-woven bands and the thin twills with the high thread count? Imported textiles are mentioned in passing, but there is no real discussion about which they are and why they were imported. Nor is any information given about which textiles were probably of indigenous manufacture. With the aid of recent decades' textile research, we should perhaps begin to discuss, as in the case of other crafts, indigenous professional textile production.

The authors often make comparisons with finds from other parts of Europe, but not in the case of skin and textile crafts. No one, for example, discusses the linen found in the Swiss pile dwellings, which are dated to the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age.

Is it relevant that there is such a great difference in the amount of information? Of course, one could again declare that we have no knowledge about skin preparation, textile techniques, and the like, and naturally one cannot ignore the fact that the artefacts that are well-represented in the archaeological material are of great significance from the point of view of typology and chronology. However, in the discussion of things such as status objects, gift exchanges, and export, social organization and everyday life, it is impossible to ignore the fact that, even though we do not have exact factual knowledge, the work was done and was important in various ways.

When trying to compare the quantity of information from different crafts, I have often been struck by the fact that skin and textile crafts

do not fit our traditional division of time into Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages. The picture suggested by the surveys is that the switch from flint to bronze was accompanied by a change from skin clothes to clothes woven of wool, and that linen was introduced in the Iron Age. Should we then speak about the Skin Age, the Wool Age, and the Linen Age? I do not think so, since the traces of these crafts give a different picture of the time perspective.

None of the authors speaks condescendingly of textile or skin crafts. The simplest explanation for the omission of these crafts is the shortage of finds and other evidence, but I think that there are other reasons. One is a poor knowledge of what has actually been found, while another is lack of interest.

Men's work, women's chores!

In the past there was an automatic terminological division into men's work and women's chores, which gave a lower status to the work carried out by women. "Shears, spindle whorls, and linen brushes denote women's chores" (Kivikoski 1961, p. 212). Chores are routine tasks which can be performed on the side, whereas work is concrete, important, and essential for survival. I think that people today are aware of the unfairness of this distinction, but we nevertheless see how women's work is associated with the domestic sphere, the farm and its immediate surroundings, in a way that is different from the traditionally male pursuits. For people who lived in prehistoric times, the things that were produced, above all the knowledge of production methods, were highly significant. If we disregard production for sale and instead look at the needs that existed, then we see that there is a natural place for skin preparation, pottery, ironwork, and textile production in descriptions of everyday life.

Visible and invisible

Although textile production was intended chie-

fly to satisfy domestic needs, this does not rule out the possibility that the female weaver had the same status as the male smith. Since textile and skin crafts are not personified in the same way by the authors as, say, ironwork, one gets the impression that all the women on the farm knew how to produce textiles and took part in this production in the same way as they did in the other “chores” on the farm. Is this a true picture? No doubt many people took part in the process from raw material to finished product, but this does not apply solely to textile crafts but also to iron production and ironworking, bronze-working, and so on.

Associating textile production solely with the home makes the work invisible, whereas great attention is paid to ironworking, which is often personified in the smith. As an example we can take Birkebæk's discussion of settlement at Sædding, where he writes: “The sunken-floor buildings at Sædding must be regarded as workshop huts. Loom weights were found in about half of them, clearly showing their use as weaving huts. Refuse from ironwork was found in one single hut.” Later in the book we read: “At the same time, the many finds of loom weights testify to great activity in weaving and the production of clothes. Although it cannot be proved with certainty, it must be reasonable to assume that sheep rearing and forms of production derived from this were an important basis for livelihood in the village”, but at the same time, “Perhaps the smith was the only outright craftsman in the place” (Birkebæk 1982 vol. 3, p. 33). In the picture showing the placing of the houses at Sædding, the smithy is the only sunken-floor hut to be marked.

Today there is nothing that tells against the theory that textile crafts were predominantly women's work, but it is difficult to say whether there were any professional manufacturers. One problem is the treatment of the archaeological material. For a grave with artefacts indicating ironworking or trade, there is usually a discussion of the occupation and status of the deceased.

In contrast, a grave with sword beaters, spindle whorls, weaving tablets, and the like is labelled a woman's grave. I have never seen the designation “weaver's grave”, neither as a title nor in a discussion. Could the rich woman who was buried at Oseberg spin and weave, or were all the tools intended for the slave?

As the example above shows, sunken-floor huts are mentioned as weaving huts, but the discussion is not developed. What defines a weaving hut – half a loom weight or a number of loom weights *in situ*? Who used the weaving hut, and how? Was the house used only for textile production, or was there room for other tasks? As part of an essay project I studied three settlements of sunken-floor huts from the Viking Age. I compared the sizes of the houses, the artefacts that were found, the layers in which they were found, and so on. My conclusion was that there were no indications at any of these three sites that the so-called weaving huts differed in any way from the other huts, apart from the loom weights. Nor was there any evidence that only one craft was practised in any of the sunken-floor huts (Andersson 1989).

What does the word “craft” really mean? Reference works define it as “professional production, mostly done with the hands”, associating the term with prehistory and the material that was produced then. Exactly when professional production became common is still a matter of debate in some fields. We should define more precisely whether we mean production for domestic needs or production for sale, instead of uncritically using the term craft regardless of whether we are discussing, say, pottery, ironwork, or textile production.

Can invisible be made visible?

The aim of this article has been to analyse the picture one obtains of textile and skin crafts in archaeological surveys. In a similar way one could study other information in surveys, for example, about women, children, pottery, or trade. Any

archaeologist with expert knowledge of one specialist field would probably find that the field was neglected in the surveys.

It might be asked whether there is any justification for calling attention to and discussing something about which we know so little. This question, however, does not just apply to textile and skin crafts but just as much to other topics in archaeology, such as cult, the division of labour, the original meaning of grave finds, and so on. If the goal of archaeology is to create a credible total picture of prehistoric society, however, we must discuss different kinds of material and problems. The textile research that has been and still is being carried out is highly important, with its costume reconstructions, analyses of textile fragments, practical experiments in weaving cloth, and so on. Without this basic research we would not know much, but it is essential that the knowledge is made known. It is also important that the different parts of the research area are tied together. Admittedly, it is difficult to familiarize oneself with different crafts and techniques; no one can be a specialist in every field. On the other hand, it is important to put one's specialist knowledge in a relevant context.

As regards textile and skin crafts, it is my opinion that, if we put together all the knowledge that has been amassed, we obtain a corpus of material which can be discussed from several different angles, and which we can then put in its context in a much more concrete way than ever before. I am convinced that, if we know about the general production processes, we will also have the necessary respect for the work that was done. Through ethnoarchaeological studies and experiments we can obtain more reliable estimates of the time that it must have taken. This knowledge will give us a better idea of the things we should be looking for while excavating.

Textile and skin crafts must be discussed on the same premisses as other crafts and put in different contexts. We must try to see the needs and possibilities of people in the past, rather than ascribing our own values to them. We cannot

assume that the status of a craft in prehistoric times depends on the quantity of finds that archaeologists discover today. We know that the skin preparer, the weaver, the potter, the bronze caster, and the smith existed, whether they were professional or produced for domestic needs, or both.

We must dare to ask questions and discuss, even if we do not always get concrete, easily interpreted answers. If we avoid tricky questions, there is a risk that we obtain a completely erroneous picture of prehistoric times.

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Translated by Alan Crozier

Appendix

Surveys

Author	Year of publication
Brøndsted	1938-40 rev. 1957-60
Kivikoski	1961
Stenberger	1964 (1979)
Hagen	1967
Jensen	1979
Jensen	1979
Hvass	1980
Hvass	1980
Andersen	1981
Nielsen	1981
Birkebaeck	1982
Birkebaeck	1982
Burenhult	1982-83 rev. 1991
Magnus & Myhre	1986
Edgren & Törnblom	1993

Monographs on textiles

Author	Year of publication
Hald & Broholm	1935
Geijer	1938
Hald	1950
Hoffman	1964
Geijer	1972
Hägg	1974
Munksgaard	1974
Hald	1980
Hägg	1984
Lehtosalo-Hilander	1984
Bender	1986
Jørgensen	1986
Nockert	1991