

# Finds of Norse Textiles in Greenland

The first known textile find is from 1839, when the trading clerk Ove Kielsen, in a letter to the Royal Nordic Society for Ancient Manuscripts in Copenhagen, writes that a boat and some pieces of clothing had appeared after the sea had washed away a large part of the coast below the Herjolfsnæs church ruin. Kielsen thought that the garment was a jacket and that it had belonged to a drowned sailor.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next few decades the National Museum in Copenhagen occasionally received reports that human bones, coffin remains and small crosses and pieces of clothing had been found on the coast at Herjolfsnæs.

In 1920 what had now become many reports from Greenland prompted the Commission for Geological and Geographical Investigations in Greenland, in collaboration with the National Museum, to resume excavations at the Herjolfsnæs church ruin, before the ruin and churchyard completely disappeared into the sea.

Poul Nørlund, the later director of the National Museum, was appointed as leader of the excavation and in May 1921 he travelled to Greenland. Because of the frost, the digging work could only begin in July. After a few days' work the first coffin and a wooden cross saw the light, and on 11th July the first garment was pulled out of the mud.<sup>2</sup> This began what was to be the biggest event in the study of ancient textiles in Europe in the twentieth century: the find of the Herjolfsnæs costumes. In all, some 70 pieces of textile were dug up, including body garments, hoods, caps and stockings; everyday clothing from the Middle Ages, which had been used for the last time as grave clothes and shrouds for want of coffins.

After Poul Nørlund's great costume find, many archaeologists, not surprisingly, expected to find other textiles in excavations of Norse ruins. So far, there have been only a few fragments, although many textile-working implements have emerged.

At the bishop's seat of Gardar (Ø47), present-day Igaliku, near Sandnæs (V51) and at the farm (V52a) in Austmannadalen, finds include many textile-working implements, but very few textile fragments. At the *Landnáma* Farm (Ø17a) at Narsaq, textile fragments in various colours as well as textile-working implements have been dug up. Remains of Norse clothing have also appeared from excavations of Inuit settlements up along the west coast of Greenland and on Ellesmere Island (see *The Textile Finds from Greenland – Overview*, pp. 32-35).

The latest major investigation in Greenland is the excavation of 'The Farm Beneath the Sand', or 'Gården Under Sandet', also called GUS (64V2-III-555), which began in 1991. For this excavation we can thank two alert Greenlandic caribou hunters who, on a trip up the Ameralla fjord, east of Nuuk and close to the inland ice, saw some large pieces of wood sticking out of the sand bank. Since Greenland is a country with few trees, the sight of large pieces of wood is not an everyday occurrence. Large tree trunks normally come as driftwood from the rivers in Siberia to the east or from the Mackenzie River in northern Canada. The caribou hunters reported their find to the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk, which then, in



Fig. 3.  
*The 'Farm Beneath the Sand' in Vesterbygden (Western settlement) was excavated through six summers from 1992 to 1997, with a digging season of four weeks each year. In the end, the archaeologists had to abandon the task. The river inundated the ruins.*

collaboration with the National Museum in Copenhagen, initiated a dig that was to prove both difficult and costly. The farm lay buried below one and a half metres of sand, and with the ice-cold meltwater from the nearby glacier pouring past, the task was hard going and not without risk.

The digging went on for six summers. Every summer, when the archaeologists returned, the abandoned excavation field had silted up again, and much precious time was spent shovelling the sand away. But the meltwater too created problems, and after the excavation of the sixth summer it had to be abandoned.<sup>3</sup> The river now overflowed the ruins of the large farm complex, where the oldest building was a long-house from the eleventh century.

Fortunately the archaeologists – despite the difficult working conditions – had been able to wrench from the Greenlandic soil a large quantity of everyday utility objects and important archaeological facts about building construction, which add new pieces to the large puzzle of the lives of the Norse settlers in Greenland. The first room that was excavated at GUS was given the name Room I (Room XIII on the excavation plans) with the addition 'the Weaving Room', and it was soon to prove the most interesting room from the point of view of textile history. This was the location of the large pieces of wood that had attracted the attention of the caribou hunters, and which turned out to be parts of a warp-weighted loom.<sup>4</sup> And when the rooms beside this were excavated, one could see that the floor level of the weaving room was about half a metre below that of the other rooms. The fact that the floor of the weaving room was sunken like this probably means that there was a need for greater room height for the sake of the loom. In the weaving room many loom weights, various textile implements and several hundred textile fragments were also found.

## 1. Exhibitions of Norse textiles

After the costumes from Herjolfsnæs had come to Copenhagen in 1921 they were cleaned and described. They were also repaired so that they could be exhibited. Nørlund wrote a few years later: 'Pressed together in a murky corner cabinet of the National Museum there is now a display of the old costumes that form the most valuable part of the find from Herjolfsnæs ...'.<sup>5</sup>

Although the costumes were not given a very prominent place in the museum displays, they were still something that people came from far and near to see. Here one could recognize everyday clothes from the Middle Ages, of the kind seen in the murals of the Danish churches, but unparalleled anywhere else in Europe. Pictures and drawings of the Herjolfsnæs costumes were used as illustrations in innumerable publications about medieval clothing. This has meant that over the years very many people – 'ordinary' people as well as experts – have wanted more (and more specific) information about the Norse clothing.

My own fascination with the clothes began when the National Museum in Copenhagen was preparing the exhibition 'Clothes Make the Man', which was held in 1971 at the Museum's department in Brede. The Museum's textile conservation department was also deeply involved and in that connection there were thoughts of moving some of the Herjolfsnæs costumes to Brede, but this idea was abandoned since it was feared that the changeable climate in the then relatively primitive exhibition rooms in Brede might damage the textiles. The conservators were thus asked to create reconstructions, which could be shown instead of the original costumes. The close contact with the costumes – quite literally – meant that I discovered in them a kind of textile processing that I had not seen before. I wondered how people could still have the energy to make such fine products, living as they did in such primitive conditions in a very harsh climate.

Ten years later I was again to work with the costumes, this time in connection with the rebuilding of the Danish Middle Ages Department at the National Museum. The costumes were taken out of the old display cases and sent to Brede. By that time they had been exhibited for more than fifty years, and this had caused visible damage. The effects of both daylight and artificial light had caused an acceleration in the decomposition of the wool fibres.

New display cases with limited light access were made, and after conservation some of the costumes could again be exhibited. However, it had been necessary to shorten the length of the exhibition, as many of the costumes could not withstand the strain of hanging for a longer term on the exhibition dummies. On the other hand, for the purpose of major special exhibitions, they can be shown in a new, less damaging way.

## 2. Exhibitions in Greenland

With the development of the museums in Greenland came a wish to illustrate the various cultures of the country, including the Norse one, by showing some costumes from the Norse period. Over the years a number of costumes have therefore been made for exhibition use. In 1984 collaboration began between the Danish and Greenlandic National Museums. The aim was to return parts of the Danish National Museum's Greenland collection to Greenland with a view to research and making a presentation of Greenland's past. A large Inuit collection has already been moved back, and the Norse objects will soon follow. Since the original costumes can hardly

survive being displayed, either in Denmark or in Greenland, it has been decided that reconstructions are to be made. So that these reconstructions can be as authentic as possible, a number of requirements have been laid down which state that the original material must be investigated as thoroughly as is possible today. This means that colours and fibres are analysed, seams are examined and cuts measured, and against the background of the results of these investigations new costumes will be reconstructed.

### 3. Results of earlier analyses of Norse textiles

In the 1920s Poul Nørlund used the great costume find from Herjolfsnæs for costume studies. He dated the depopulation of the Eastern Settlement to the latter half of the fifteenth century on the basis of the so-called 'Burgundian cap' (D10612). For the first time it was now possible to show real costumes completely corresponding to those known from illustrations of the Middle Ages.

The Herjolfsnæs costumes also became important reference material for textile finds in Europe. The three Danish medieval costumes from Kragelund, Moselund and Rønbjerg, as well as the Swedish costume from Bocksten, and the northern Norwegian costume from Skjoldehamn were all dated in the mid-twentieth century on the basis of the costumes from Herjolfsnæs.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand Nørlund had less to say about the technology – the weaving of the cloth and the making of the clothing.

Finds of textile fragments in recent years, especially from Narsaq (Ø17a) and from the Farm Beneath the Sand (64V2-III-555) can now add to our knowledge of the clothing of the Middle Ages and the textile tradition of the Norse Greenlanders. With better investigative methods, including radiocarbon dating, much new information has emerged, not only about the Herjolfsnæs costumes, but also about the inventiveness of the Norse settlers in the use of Greenlandic raw materials.

With an overview of all Greenlandic textile finds from the Norse period we can draw conclusions about the textile knowledge that the Norse Greenlanders kept alive for centuries despite the difficult external circumstances.

### 4. Man, Culture and Environment in Ancient Greenland

In 1995 a Danish-Greenlandic research programme, Man, Culture and Environment in Ancient Greenland, began as an interdisciplinary project with participants from several countries. An attempt is being made with this project to elucidate the interrelations between Greenland's various cultures, and against this background to explain the cultural and social changes in the Eskimo and European communities in Greenland.

A natural part of this research project is the study of the clothing of the Norse Greenlanders, with which I have the pleasure to work.

With the clothes of the Norse settlers we have the chance to obtain a close, detailed knowledge of the women's craft skills. Clothing is close to the body. It carries an impression and bears many secrets about the life conditions of the user.

It is my hope that the reader will be able to share my enthusiasm for the Norse Greenlanders and at the same time learn many new facts about their sewing and weaving; perhaps also to reflect on the Norsewomen's living conditions or position in society, since these aspects could be expressed in such textile skills.