

Eva Andersson

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The Reconstruction of Archaeological Textiles, a Source Critical Approach

Since I started working with archaeology, I have been surprised to find how rarely textiles and textile production are discussed in their context. I would like to discuss here why knowledge about textiles and textile handicraft among archaeologists is so bad in Scandinavia. What can we do about it? and are reconstructions one way to make the invisible visible?

Even if it is not necessary, I should like to start with some examples of how invisible textile handicraft can be. In 1995 I studied eight Scandinavian archaeological survey works. I wanted to obtain a picture of the way textile crafts are presented [Andersson 1996].

The study showed that descriptions of these crafts are negligible. There is also a wide gap between the understanding of the finished product and the tools and processes that lie behind it. Textile crafts are rarely discussed in a wider social context and fuller descriptions of different textile techniques are missing. According to the general literature, the production of textiles is not a craft in the conventional sense. The Danish literature is an exception, as it generally includes fuller descriptions [Andersson 1996: 15 f]. Common to all works consulted is a focus on different types of clothing, while other textiles, such as sailcloth, are rarely mentioned. The economic aspect of textile production is never discussed, nor whether a professional production of textiles existed in Scandinavia at this time.

But is it only textile production that survey works give poor information about, or does this also apply to flint working, bronze casting, pottery or ironworking? As we know, prehistory is divided into the stone age, the bronze age and the 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 the occasional mention and a few lines of text with lengthy discussions and descriptions.

Associating textiles solely with home production makes the work invisible whereas great attention is

paid to iron working, which is often personified in the smith. I will give you one example from a discussion of a settlement in Sædding Denmark. The author 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 ironworking was found in one single hut." Later in this 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 can not be proved 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 the author writes: "Perhaps the smith was the only outright craftsman in the place" [Birkebæk 1982 vol.2: 33].

To conclude: textiles and textile handicrafts are invisible in Scandinavian survey publications.

As to textile archaeological literature, do archaeologists know about these publications and do they use them?

Intensive research has been carried out by scholars such as Agnes Geijer, Margrete Hald, Margareta Nockert, Inga Hägg, Lise Bender Jørgensen and Marta Hoffmann just to mention a few. Thanks to their studies we have acquired information about textiles and the techniques used to produce them [see e.g. Geijer 1938; Hald 1980; Hoffmann 1964; Hägg 1974; Bender Jørgensen 1986]. Their work, as you know, has also been published. But how common is it that archaeologists consult these works when discussing an archaeological context? I think that the situation is not bad today, but there is a difference between, for example, Denmark and Sweden. In my opinion Danish archaeologists use knowledge of textile publications, but their Swedish colleagues do not. Do they not know about them, or do they not understand them or do they not realise the importance of knowledge about textiles?

It is seldom that textiles or textile handicrafts are a part of the story that archaeologists create of prehistoric society.

An argument that is often heard is that there are few textiles, but we know that this is not the case and I think that several reasons for this relatively vague picture of textile production may be identified. One is the generally poor knowledge of textile crafts and their significance.

Another reason may be the difficulties in transferring the highly specialised analyses of archaeological textiles into a broader understanding of their significance. Often textile finds are studied in isolation. If the results are published, the analysis is very often presented in an appendix at the end in the publication.

A third reason might be linked to gender. In my literature review it was very clear that at least in the past there was an automatic terminological division into men's work and women's chores that gave (give) a lower status to women's work. "Shears, spindle whorls and linen brushes denote women's chores" [Kivikoski 1961: 212]. Chores are routine tasks that 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 traditionally male pursuits. For the people who lived in prehistoric times, the things that were produced, above all the knowledge of production techniques, 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 work.

A fourth reason is that many people think that it is very difficult to understand textile analysis. Maybe it is true that we are bad in explaining why it is so important to know the differences between a z-spun thread and a s-spun thread or a tabby and a twill. But every craft specialisation is hard to understand to start with, but it is not impossible. Today, for example, we teach students the names of an endless amount of flint artefacts, ceramic chronology, different patterns on bronzes and so on. Why should it be harder to learn about textile techniques?

Textile production is an important aspect of the past, and the potential for improving our knowledge of this field is great. To achieve this, it is vital that we take a broader view of textile production. We need to include archaeological textiles, textile tools and the raw materials used, and we need to relate them to the society whence they come, noting their importance and significance in an economic and social context.

What can and shall we do about this?

One way is of course to make the invisible visible and we must start with the students. I think that it is

very important that students learn about both textiles and textile handicrafts while they are studying archaeology in the first semester. We who have this opportunity to influence the courses must make sure that just as we are teaching them about ceramics, flint knapping and bronze casting, we must also teach them about the roll of textiles and their importance in the prehistoric period. Finally and maybe most importantly, we must discuss textile crafts and put them into an archaeological context.

Can reconstructions make textiles more visible? Yes of course. First I think that it is very important to actually show pictures of, for example, clothing, even if we do not know exactly what the garments looked like. I think that those who are working with textile analyses can create these pictures, even if they are not 100% sure. Archaeology is a science in which we always work with reconstruction. I think that you have all seen pictures of houses from the prehistoric period but what do we actually know about the walls and the roof? Those who are working with archaeological textile material have the relevant knowledge and you can always write under the figure that this is a reconstruction based on what you know. It is important to bear in mind that if textile scholars do not create this picture, others will, maybe without as much knowledge as you have.

From pictures in a book the step to full scale reconstruction is not great. What this type of reconstruction can give archaeology, depends on the quality of the reconstruction. Reconstruction can be done, as you know, in many different ways. The first thing, I think, is that it is very important to explain how it is done. If the correct method is not used, if you have used a machine spun thread (for example) or a fabric woven in a common plain weave, explain why. Probably the explanation is that it would have been too expensive to produce the textile in the correct way BUT that is also a result. If it is so hard to produce textiles today in the same way that they did in prehistoric times, that gives an idea of how valuable textiles were in those days.

Can the work of producing a full-scale reconstruction contribute anything to archaeology? Yes naturally but we must work in a source critical way. We must know which tools were used and I don't just mean, for example, spindle whorls, loom weights and so on, but the specific tool for the particular period. If you are going to produce a cloth from, for example, Birka you must know which types of tool were found there.

It is also very important to work with highly skilled craftsmen who are specialists in their profession. But it is also important to work with the same tools and the same fibre qualities that we know were used in the old days. I also think that we have a lot to learn from

craftsmen who are still working in a traditional way but we must realise that the tools and, maybe most importantly, the fabrics have changed through the years. Marta Hoffmann did fantastic work when she actually recorded surviving knowledge about weaving on the warp-weighted loom. But the weaves that the Norwegian women produced in the 1950s are nothing like the qualities that we know were produced on this type of loom in the Viking period.

To conclude: a good reconstruction based on the archaeological material and the knowledge that you have about textile crafts can contribute to archaeology very important knowledge about not only clothing and dress, but also about work with textiles and its important role in prehistoric society.

I think that together we can succeed in convincing archaeologists about the important role that textiles and textile production have had from the beginning of time. That is our obligation towards all the women and men who have worked so hard to produce their threads, fabrics and garments in prehistory.

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Eva Andersson
Institut för Arkeologi, Lunds Universitet
Sandgatan 1
223 50 Lund
Sweden