

## **Weaving the threads of history: a report on medieval textile artefacts in Scandinavian museums by Georgia Gould**

Textiles surround us; from clothing, to decoration, furnishing and practical storage solutions, textiles shape the cultural identity of a society. They make up much of our sensory world and we experience them every day, making them a constant presence in both past and present cultures.

In museums, textiles are often overlooked in exhibitions and displays. The National Museum of Denmark recently changed this with an exhibition in which textiles took centre stage: the 10<sup>th</sup> century Mammen and Hvidehøj reconstructions from the [Fashioning the Viking Age](#) project, which began in 2018 and ended in April 2023. The project was run by Ulla Mannering and Charlotte Rimstad at the National Museum Denmark, Ida Demant from Land of Legends in Lejre and Eva Andersson Strand at Centre for Textile Research at University of Copenhagen. The exhibition of the reconstructions highlighted how recreation can shed light on the production processes involved in crafting textiles and the construction of historic garments. This type of project and its exhibition provide a tool for both the academic and layman museum visitor to understand textile production and the role of textiles within the socioeconomic network of the relevant period. The National Museum of Denmark's exhibition was the catalyst for this academic investigation.

The purpose of this VSNR-funded research trip was twofold. Firstly, for the acquisition of new and high-resolution photography of relevant items within major Scandinavian museums. These will be used within my PhD thesis titled *Tablets and Trade: how trade, migration and social status influenced the development of motif and technique in medieval Scandinavian tablet-weaving*. Secondly, to examine how textiles and tools of textile production are displayed within these museums, as well as how this can impact the visitor experience. I aim to expand this examination into a full article format, featuring some of the images captured during this trip. Some of the unedited images can be found [here](#).

Three museums on the route across the coast of south-western Norway were closed. Hringariki Kulturminnepark in Veien was closed for the winter and will open only briefly from 23rd June to the 1st of September. Whilst there are some events hosted at the museum, it is closed to the public for much of the year. In addition, the Museum of Archaeology in Stavanger is closed for maintenance, reopening later this year. The Museum of History department of the University Museum of Bergen is closed indefinitely until the building is modernised. However, two museums attached to each academic institution are still open; Jernaldergården, attached to Museum of Archaeology in Stavanger, and Bryggens Museum, which contains some of the medieval collection from the University Museum of Bergen. In addition to these, I visited NTNU University Museum, Trondheim, Gamla Uppsala Museum, Uppsala and The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. NB: not all museums had available the specific dates of all artefacts in their collections, thus where necessary, I have used the general terms "early medieval" (c. 300 – 700 CE), "Viking Age" (c. 700 – 1066 CE) and "medieval" (c. 450 – 1450 CE) to roughly demarcate the age of the collections in question.

Jernaldergården is a reconstructed farm in Stavanger. The site dates to between 350 and 550 CE and contained four houses, several graves and livestock pasture. Three out of four houses have been reconstructed and the original foundations of the fourth are visible on the site. Out of the reconstructions, the longest house is open to enter for museum visitors. In the longhouse, they have reconstructed living and sleeping spaces as well as a section for livestock. Upon entering the house, the visitor is greeted by a room for weaving. In a small

space, the museum has reconstructed multiple examples of weaving apparatus and woven fabrics of different techniques and colours. There are work-in-progress textiles displayed on a variety of historic looms placed alongside other textile working tools; this provides a tangible overview of the textile tools available for the visitor to engage with. Attention was paid to showing a variety of different fabrics, twills and knits, as well as to some of the garments typical of the period. Reenactors working inside the longhouse are dressed appropriately in similar garments. Overall, this reconstructed house and textile room provides a sensory-stimulating interpretation of both the set-up and outcome of weaving, rendering a tangible insight into how textiles may have been produced.

Bryggens Museum houses a selection of artefacts from the medieval collections of University Museum Bergen, ranging from the end of the Viking Age to the late medieval period. Over two floors, there are display cases full of bone items, metalwork, ceramic and textiles. On the first floor, the visitor can find a small section devoted to textiles from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. One of these is a Late Viking Age tunic from Guddal, a remarkably well-preserved garment. Whilst the lighting made it difficult to take high-quality photographs, the visitor can still get a good view of the tunic's front, including the unique collar and its seams. In addition, there are many wooden weaving swords and beaters, several with runes carved into the "blade", as well as smaller fragments of textiles which still displaying their original colours. The exhibition includes a board with wool swatches dyed with colours like those which were available to medieval dyers. By displaying the replicas next to original artefacts – which have often degraded or their colours have faded drastically – the visitor can form an understanding of how the originals may have looked in use.

The NTNU University Museum in Trondheim has a separate building with a medieval collection of artefacts from the excavations in and around the city. There are a selection of textile exhibits throughout the medieval collection, most dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and later. Multiple well-preserved pieces of silk, wool twills and tablet-woven bands capture the eye on the second floor. In addition, there is a display of a myriad of textile working tools in organic materials, as was also the case in Bryggens Museum. Such a large number of organic materials surviving is rare and speaks to the excellent preservation conditions of the city's sites. One aspect which stands out is the reconstructed street of medieval Trondheim, complete with crafter's shops containing replicas of artefacts on display. This bears a resemblance to the reconstructed Viking Age town in the Jorvik Viking Centre in York. However, in the NTNU museum, the visitor walks through on foot. The visitor can feel a sense of the landscape of the town, albeit on a smaller scale. Whilst textile craftspeople were not represented fully here, the street still offers a sensory stimulation that artefacts cannot adequately provide outside of their original context of use.

The Gamla Uppsala Museum in historic Uppsala does not contain many textile artefacts because very little survived in the area. However, there are some threads and textile working tools on display from the Viking Age. Aside from this, there are some artists' reconstructions of both male and female dress, demonstrating the use of some of the artefacts in the exhibition.

The most interactive exhibitions I encountered on my research trip were at The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. The museum is large and focusses on Swedish history from the Stone Age into the modern period. For my research, the *Viking World* exhibit had much to offer. New approaches to exhibiting archaeology have been applied throughout the museum, with a focus on the sensory. There are artefact copies fixed on tables which the visitor can touch, as well as boxes in which some of the oils and herbs used during the period can be smelled. Some replicas of artefacts on display are specifically designed for

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people who cannot see. These allow the visitor to feel the main structure of specific artefact types (e.g. tortoise brooches) alongside descriptions in braille.

Furthermore, there are multiple types of textiles spread throughout the exhibition, including some of the most famous textile finds from the Viking Age, for example silk from the graves at Birka. There is a section devoted to tablet-weaving as a prominent textile craft in Viking Age Sweden. Whilst small, it contains many educational facets. Alongside a display of relevant textiles, there are reconstructions of bands which the exhibition invites the visitor to touch. Above this, there are large images of close-up sections of the reconstructed bands and pictures of how the bands would be attached to garments, in order for the visitor to see the structure of the band and how they were used. To the left, there is a selection of yarn dyed in different colours available to the Viking Age dyer with descriptions of several plants used during the process. To add a further haptic element, there is a small sample of wool for the visitor to touch. Overall, this display offers a nuanced perspective of the textile production process, from the dyeing and weaving of yarn to the use of the tablet-woven bands in garments. The haptic elements provide the visitor with a sensory experience that not only draws them in, but also allows them to interact with interpretations of history.

In conclusion, providing a multisensory exhibition of textiles in museums allows the visitor to gain a tangible insight into the past. This enriches our collective understanding of history and breathes new life into ancient artefacts. The visitor goes from being a member of a visual audience to participating actively in a new version of archaeological education in living versions of history.

Thank you so much to the Viking Society for Northern Research for giving me this opportunity and I look forward to disseminating these research projects!