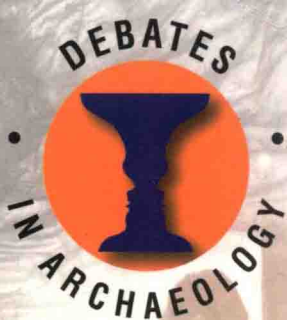


Bronze Age Textiles

Men, Women and Wealth

Klavs Randsborg



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藏书章



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Preface

Among its prized collections, the Danish National Museum holds completely preserved woollen dresses, both female and male, from the Early Bronze Age (the late second millennium BC). These garments are matched in old age and superb preservation only by finds from Ancient Egypt.

This study is based on the highly professional and very thorough textile investigations by Margrethe Hald (1897-1982) at the National Museum, Copenhagen (Broholm & Hald 1929-35; 1939; 1940; cf. Hald 1950; [1980]). Later studies of these Bronze Age textiles have provided more data and much inspiration to the author, as have other textile studies and related investigations. More than two generations after Margrethe Hald, it is time to reconsider these Bronze Age textiles and place them in their wider European setting.

Among recent studies are the important investigations by Professor Lise Bender Jørgensen, University of Trondheim, Norway, discussing the very many fragments of textiles that have come down to us from the Bronze and Iron Ages. Most of these fragments have been preserved by metal oxides emanating from bronze and other metal grave gifts (Bender Jørgensen 1986; 1992). Only rarely do the fragments tell us much about the dresses, but they do inform us about cloth types and weaving. Also, the fragments are well dated and widely distributed in both time and space, while Early Bronze Age dresses are restricted to Jylland (Jutland).

This study may be considered a sequel to a recent publication of the Early Bronze Age oak-coffin graves which contained the complete dresses, among many other items (Randsborg &

Preface

Christensen 2006). That work was written with a view to social dimensions and cosmology, as well as the power of precise dendro-chronological dating.

In most graves from the Nordic Bronze Age we are left merely with the bronze (and gold) items, some pottery, other solid artefacts, and, perhaps, human bones. We tend to downplay, even forget, about the homespun textiles for the better preserved metals like gold and bronze, often in form of exotic artefacts arriving from far away in the case of Denmark. This understandable ignorance even has a gender dimension, with metalwork being a male occupation, and textiles a female one.

The well-preserved textiles of the oak-coffin graves open a door on the beauty and riches of textiles in the historical, social and cultural understanding of the Bronze Age, as well as individuals and their lives. As grave gifts, textiles would often have been more valuable than bronzes commonly buried with the dead. In the Ancient Civilisations of the Eastern Mediterranean, textiles were generally much more costly than foodstuffs, materials, animals, bronzes, and many other items; it is likely that the same was the case throughout prehistoric Europe.

Observations by the present author include renewed inspection of the Bronze Age and other textiles and related data, like images and figurines, throughout Europe, as well as archaeological, ethnographical, and historical information, often sampled beyond Europe.

Acknowledgements for information go to Professor Anthony Harding; Lone Hvass, MagArt; Flemming Kaul, DrPhil; Finn Ole Nielsen, DrHC; Drs Klaus Tidow; Volker Hilberg; Karina Grömer; and for assistance to Dr Inga Merkyte. I am obliged to Bristol Classical Press for accepting the work for its *Debates in Archaeology* series.

The volume is dedicated to Richard Hodges in appreciation of his archaeological and historical vision, sense of field projects, and administrative talent.

Klavs Randsborg

Issues

Danish Early Bronze Age woollen textiles were met with wonder when found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but perhaps less so than one would have expected due to the equally rich material of garments from the Iron Age. Nearly all of the archaeologists were men, none of them with professional knowledge of the technical aspects of textiles. M. Hald's work in the 1930s added this dimension (Broholm & Hald 1929-35; 1939; 1940; cf. Hald 1950; [1980]), but, like the studies of her male colleagues, lacked social understanding of the graves or a broader perspective. One reason is that few finds are known from the bridging Late Bronze Age, but the main one is the rather provincial outlook of the archaeology of the period between the two World Wars and the post-World War II years. The result was that the Bronze Age garments were merely placed in the golden light of a golden age (research history in Jensen 1998).

The garments themselves posed various problems. The male ones were but few; men were dressed in coat or loincloth and cloak and wore thick war caps (a pixie cap was added among the grave gifts). Until the Egtved woman was found in the 1920s (Thomsen 1929-35), the women were believed to have worn blouses and long, very heavy skirts, or wraps. The young Egtved woman was dressed in blouse and a short string skirt that stunned the period. Some German archaeologists even identified her as a 'dancer' from the Balkans or equipped her with a long skirt she did not wear in the grave. Clearly a woman of the great Nordic race could not wear such a revealing skirt. It is an irony that a wrap was actually included in the

Egtved grave as a cover. Some archaeologists have argued that the string skirt is either a young girl's skirt or a summer garment; recently it has even been claimed that the string skirt was a cultic dress on the basis of figurines showing very short string skirts on otherwise naked acrobatic dancers.

The find of the young Skrydstrup woman in the 1930s added to the questions, since she was buried in a very large, very heavy wrap strapped with a rather thin belt (Broholm & Hald 1939). Reconstructions show her in this 'large skirt' that would have constantly fallen to the ground (underwear as such was not used, at least to judge from the textiles found in graves); a later idea was that the skirt would have been worn under the armpits, but if so, movement would have been severely hampered. The simple solution follows below: women did not wear the 'large skirts' as skirts but as wraps. If not donning string skirts, they would have worn the smaller long plain skirts that are also present in the graves but traditionally regarded as 'blankets'.

Today, archaeology enables estimates of the season of burial to be made, and thus aids in the discussion of summer versus winter garments. It also allows for a detailed understanding of the social roles and positions of the buried, as measured by the grave goods and – in unique cases – by the textiles. New garments have been identified, like female sanitary napkins and 'shopping bags'. The amounts of labour-consuming textiles in the graves must have been high, especially in the case of women, while the male graves contained more of the metals. At any rate, we assume a particular role for the women in producing the textiles.

Bender Jørgensen, by studying fragments of textiles preserved in quite large numbers of Bronze and Iron Age graves, has added to our recent knowledge (Bender Jørgensen 1986; 1992) as well as giving an overview of the research situation in Denmark, concerning the instruments used, for instance, as well as of parts of Central Europe and even beyond. Only a limited number of textile fragments are known from Europe beyond Denmark: a few, mainly linens, from the British Isles,

a few more from Spain (linens), and scattered finds from Central Europe, both linens and woollen fabrics, including a number of new woollen finds from Austria (Grömer 2007). Woollen textiles do not seem to be that common and may represent luxury articles. European linen clothing is known from the Neolithic, for instance in Switzerland, as are garments in fur and hide.

Bronze Age Greece saw considerable production of woollen textiles, as demonstrated by the Linear B texts, we even get a grasp on the mechanisms of production and control, but virtually no textiles have been preserved from the region. The few that we have are of linen, as in other parts of the Mediterranean, for instance Spain. The Balkans, like the Aegean, supply a number of figurines with dress details, like a female blouse and a long, often voluminous, skirt. Images, including wall paintings from Greek palaces, are another rich source on dress.

Against this sparse background, the woollen textiles and garments of the North are truly outstanding and deserve much more attention than they have received hitherto. Bender Jørgensen, writing partly in English, does not discuss the full garments, and Hald's works were mainly in Danish, even though substantial parts have been translated into English. A new discussion of the Danish finds is thus imperative, particularly in a cultural, social and economic perspective.

It is evident that textiles, both in wool and linen, were very costly in Bronze Age civilisations (and later). We have probably overlooked the sheer value of the homespun Danish textiles and their economic power, and thus ignored the true importance of the work of women. The riches of the Danish Bronze Age and the original beauty of its artefacts have always been a puzzle, since the country and neighbouring areas are devoid of naturally found gold, tin and copper. It is likely that woollen textiles were the gold of the North and a main factor in the rise and workings of the Bronze Age everywhere. Both regionally and internationally, textiles were a motor of Bronze Age economics, providing peripheries with the means of obtaining materials – like metal – from the centres. Nevertheless, virtu-

ally all Bronze Age studies on exchange concentrate on metals and a few other categories (Clark 2009).

These new perspectives will, I hope, give rise to debates within and beyond the science of archaeology.