

Clothing and Textiles

Ancient Europe, 8000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, 2004

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Textile and clothing production was an essential domestic industry in preindustrial times. Entire garments are rarely preserved in the archaeological record, but fragments of textiles, textile production tools, written records, and visual representations allow archaeologists to reconstruct how textiles and clothing were produced and worn between A.D. 800 and 1000, that is, the Early Middle Ages in continental Europe and the Viking Age in Scandinavia.

PRODUCTION

Textile production was primarily a domestic industry in early medieval Europe and Viking Age Scandinavia. Archaeological finds, literary and visual representations, and ethnographic analogies to living cultures all suggest that textiles were produced in the household by women. In Europe a few professional centers of production may have existed and may have exported cloth widely. Cloth was also professionally produced in the Middle East, the Near East, and the eastern Mediterranean during this period and was traded with Europe and Scandinavia. In the latter regions, flax fibers were used to create linen cloth and wool to create woolen cloth. Clothing was also made of silk and cotton, but these fabrics were imported from other regions, not produced locally.

In preparation for spinning, wool fibers were combed with wooden combs possessing long iron teeth. Combing aligned the fibers and separated the short fibers from the long. Soft flax fibers were first removed from their tough stem, then combed. Once the fibers were combed, they were ready to be spun into yarn. A distaff held the length of loose combed fibers, and a spindle weighted with a whorl was used to twist the yarn. The spinner held the distaff in one hand, spinning and dropping the spindle to pull and twist the fibers downward into yarn. She or he then gathered the spun yarn into balls or skeins.

Between A.D. 800 and 1000, warp-weighted looms were used to weave fabric throughout most of Europe and Scandinavia. Warp-weighted looms were made of two uprights about 2 meters tall that leaned against a wall or rafter. A crotch at the top of each upright supported a horizontal beam of variable length. The beam had a series of holes to which the warp, or lengthwise, strands of yarn were attached. Loom weights made of stone or baked clay held the warp strands taut. The fabric was woven top to bottom, with the weaver walking back and forth, inserting the weft (crosswise strands) through the warp and beating it upward toward the beam. The weaver wrapped the woven cloth around the beam as she or he worked, so that it would be out of the way.

CLOTHING

Information on early medieval and Viking Age clothing is available through the archaeological remains of textiles, through written sources, and through visual representations. Scandinavian archaeologists have developed a particularly detailed understanding of Viking Age clothing.

A typical female costume in Viking Age Scandinavia consisted of several layers. The first layer was

[Image not available for copyright reasons]

a linen shift, smooth or pleated, with long sleeves and a long skirt. Over this a Viking woman would have worn a tunic made of imported silk or some other fabric held in place with a pair of tortoiseshell brooches. She might have worn a shirt or caftan over the tunic, fastened with a trefoil brooch, an equal-armed brooch, or a large round fibula. In cold weather she would have added a cape or coat closed in front with a fibula. Finally, her costume would have included leather booties and perhaps a cap or other headgear.

A typical male costume in Viking Age Scandinavia included leggings or wide, knee-length breeches. Along with these, a man would have worn a woolen jacket with overlapping front or a sleeved coat with bronze buttons, similar to a riding caftan. To complete the outfit, he would have had a leather belt, boots, and perhaps a hat or cap.

Both men's and women's clothing was adorned with trimmings and ornamentation made from luxury materials, like silk, precious metals, and furs. Trimmings included woven bands, braid work, and embroidery.

TEXTILES FROM EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND VIKING AGE SCANDINAVIA

Several European and Scandinavian archaeological sites are notable for their finds related to early medieval and Viking Age textiles. Oseberg in Norway and York in England have yielded evidence related to textile production, while finds from Birka in Sweden illustrate the richness of clothing between A.D. 800 and 1000.

The Oseberg burial mound in southeastern Norway contained the grave of a wealthy woman buried with a companion in A.D. 834. Among her grave furnishings were textile production tools, including a set of weaving tablets with an unfinished braid still attached.

York was an early medieval urban center, first for the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria (seventh and eighth centuries A.D.) and later for the Scandinavian-controlled Danelaw (ninth to eleventh

centuries A.D.). Excavations there have produced evidence of textile production, including raw wool and flax, dye plants, spinning and weaving equipment, and textile fragments (fig. 1.)

Many textile fragments, both local and imported, have been preserved at the Viking Age site of Birka (occupied A.D. 750–970), located on an island 30 kilometers west of Stockholm on the eastern coast of Sweden. Numerous types of linen and woolen fabrics have been recovered, varying in their fiber, fiber preparation, weave technique, and threads per inch and in secondary production techniques, such as dyeing. Silk fabrics also have been recovered at Birka, nearly all of them imported from Byzantium.

PRESERVATION

Textiles are fragile, organic artifacts that often suffer from physical and chemical deterioration. Textiles can be preserved archaeologically if agents of decay are absent or if agents of preservation are present to counteract decay.

Agents of decay include water, which acts as a catalyst for many chemical reactions; oxygen, which also acts a catalyst; pH levels, which affect various textile materials differently; bacteria; salts; temperature; overburden; and organisms. Preserving conditions for archaeological textiles include an absence of oxygen (often due to a waterlogged environment); an absence of water (in dry environments); and the presence of salts and other residues, which can preserve nearby fabrics by acting as biocides or by impregnating or replacing adjacent textile fibers.

In wet climates, such as in Europe and Scandinavia, textiles are primarily preserved in two environments: in waterlogged sites, where the lack of oxygen prohibits the decay of the fibers by microorganisms; and in close contact with metal objects, where the decay of the metals preserves the textile fibers. At York early medieval textiles survived under waterlogged conditions, while at Birka metallic salts preserved Viking Age textiles.

See also [Emporia](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Jewelry](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Anglo-Saxon England](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Viking York](#) (vol. 2, part 7).

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