

Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen

1933–2023

Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen passed away on Thursday July 13, 2023 after a long illness. Karen-Hanne was among the first members of the NESAT society and participated in the meetings regularly during the first 30 years. She was married to the architect, Henning Nielsen, for 65 years with whom she had four children, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Karen-Hanne was originally trained as a professional weaver from a young age, and when, after having given birth to her children, she began studying archaeology at Copenhagen University in 1969, she brought her interest and knowledge of textiles and textile crafts into her studies. She was never affiliated with any particular museum or academic institution, but with a personal dedication she worked freelance all her career.

One of her earliest and most significant achievements was the discovery of how the male costumes preserved from the Danish Bronze Age were cut and made from a single piece of textile. She recognized how the pieces fitted together in the wrap-around garments came from the rounded cut-off corners of the oval cloaks, and that the selvages and thread directions supported this interpretation. This research was published in the Danish outreach journal, SKALK, in 1971, only two years after she began her studies (Stærmose Nielsen 1971), and scholars have quoted this discovery many times since.

In the following years, Karen-Hanne continued her studies of Bronze and Iron Age textiles. Twice she was in charge of reconstruction projects of Bronze Age clothing in collaboration with different textile craftspeople. In the late 1970s they produced a copy of the female Skrydstrup outfit, to be exhibited at the museum in Haderslev in Southern Jutland, close to where the grave had been excavated (Stærmose

Nielsen 1979). The second was a more daring project, as they were asked to produce two Late Bronze Age outfits in connection with an exhibition at the Hollufgård museum in Odense on Funen; a period from when only fragmentary textiles are preserved (Stærmose Nielsen 1989). In both cases, Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen conducted careful research into the design and construction of the different garments as well as the fibres used in the textiles. She set a high standard for future reconstructions of ancient textiles, as well as providing new knowledge about Danish Bronze Age clothing.

Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen also participated in studies of archaeological textiles in collaboration with other scholars, where they benefitted from her expertise in textile crafts (Alexandersen et al. 1983; Bender Jørgensen et al. 1984; Stærmose Nielsen 1988).

Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen's fascination with textiles and textile techniques was widespread. However, much of her work demonstrates a particular fascination not only for the textiles themselves and the techniques of making the textiles, but also in the praxis of performing the techniques. Her ethnographic studies span from interviewing an elderly Kurdish emigrant in Denmark, who demonstrated her traditional weaving skills by transforming her coffee table into a loom (Stærmose Nielsen 1990) to warping techniques

in Tunisia. On a textile study trip to Tunisia in the late 1990s, she asked specifically to have the warping demonstrated by the weavers, as she saw a similarity between depictions of Roman looms and the looms used by the Tunisian weavers (Stærmose Nielsen 1999). In 2010 at the age of 76, she traveled to Armenia to study a warping method performed by students at a weaving school.



Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen (Image: Lee Bostelmann, CTR Copenhagen).

She had recognized the existence of a so-called “tubular loom” known from the Danish Iron Age – first studied by Margrethe Hald (1950) – in a magazine from a charity organisation and wanted to study the movements performed when setting up the loom herself (Stærmose Nielsen 2011). It is one thing is to recognize the technique by studying the textiles; it is another is to study the movements of the hands performing the technique. This is invaluable knowledge for craftspeople who experiment with this type of loom, such as the present author.

I first met Karen-Hanne as a young archaeology student at the textile workshop in Lejre Experimental Centre (today Sagnlandet Lejre) in 1991. She was beginning her research for the book *Kirkes Væv* about the warp-weighted loom. It was published in 1999. It begins with an instruction on how to set up a warp-weighted loom and continues with a presentation of the use of this type of loom across time and space, and a classification of the different shapes of loom weights found in archaeological contexts in Europe (also presented at NESAT VI in 1999). However, as she saw weaving as a method with many variables regarding tools, in the second half of the book she examines other types of looms, which existed alongside the warp-weighted loom in Europe. As a new approach she created a classification system describing different ways of warping (A, J, O) with examples of how they were applied practically on various looms (Stærmose Nielsen 1999). The book was printed in Danish, but an English translation was made available, though sadly no longer in print.

During that summer of 1991 Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen became my mentor and friend. She opened my eyes to the intricacies of textiles: how to understand a textile and read the traces, unravelling how they were produced. Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen is also remembered for her special style of making notes; often a collage of cut out pictures and small handwritten notes. She would often write on reused paper and it was not unusual to receive a letter from her in an envelope with another address crossed out. Karen-Hanne Stærmose Nielsen had a strong personality, she was fun, colorful and a very kind person, who loved to share her knowledge and ideas

with those who cared listen. I am grateful for all the things she has inspired me to do and learn. She, and her always-supportive husband Henning Nielsen, always warmly welcomed guests in their house, first in Rungsted North of Copenhagen and later in Frederiksværk. She will be remembered with love.

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