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# Shimmering Cloth, Like the River by this Path:

## Bjørkum, Lærdal, and the Role of an Inland Production Site in the Viking Age

This article uses recent methodological advances (Andersson Strand forthcoming) combined with social theory to suggest that those textile tools referred to as 'insignificant lumps of stone' (Hoffmann 1964, 17) can be used to investigate production, not only of things, but at the human level. Using statistical analysis of loom weights and spindle whorls it is possible to suggest the optimal fabric and yarn types that were being produced at the 7th to 10th centuries AD site of Bjørkum, Lærdal, Norway. A variety of pit house finds, from slag to comb making debris, and beads, suggest a transient craft production. Given the context of the site, archaeological references, social approaches to making and ethnohistoric analogies, it has been possible to analyse fabric production, and its social significance, at a production site that sheds light on the social changes that were intertwined with the birth of the Viking Age in Norway.

In 2009, the Archaeology Unit from Bergen University Museum conducted what was thought to be a routine archaeological survey prior to a road building programme in the Lærdal valley, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway. The road was to follow the valley floor, running beside the river (so rich in fishing that the old kings of Norway held the rights). In an impressive upland environment of steep, rock faced and tree studded fjordal mountains, the course of an older route, past a medieval farm, that joined the West Coast to the Eastern, upland interior. Such was the richness of the discovery that the digging team who started out in short sleeves, the sun on their brown arms, were soon defrosting the site beneath plastic sheets nailed to wooden beams in order to create make-shift tents

as the high escarpments cast a day long shadow above the river, forcing the archaeologists into thick jackets and balaclavas (Ramstad 2011; Ramstad pers. comm.). What they unearthed was a late Iron Age and Viking Age site of considerable importance. An inland/upland production site, with between 13 and 15 pit houses containing a variety of textile implements from loom weights and spindle whorls, through to a bone hand-held distaff; and the rough-outs, and whole glass, amber and crystal beads which could have been used as the finished textiles. Using an analytical methodology largely inspired by recent work at the Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Textile Research, Copenhagen (Andersson Strand forthcoming, Andersson Strand and Gebauer Thomson pers. comm. 2011; see also Mårtensson *et al.* 2009) it was possible to investigate the optimal fabric ranges the 27 (stone and soapstone, complete and datable) loom weights could have been used to produce, and to compare the results to the production ranges of the 19 (soapstone, stone and fired clay) contextually secure spindle whorls (see Andersson 2003). These results, of course, are partially dependant on the number of loom weights discovered. While not huge in number, when considering the amount of stone needed in warping a loom, the find of functional caches, and assuming one weight as being representative of an evenly weighted loom set up using many, the analysis can nevertheless be informative.

The picture that emerged was of a shifting pit house economy, in the early phases (late 7th to early 10th centuries AD), that was re-focused on the re-use of a rectangular 3 aisled house, Structure 1 (10th century



AD). Contemporary with these architectural shifts, seems to be a change in production. In the early phases of use the loom weights indicate that very high end textiles could have been produced (see Bender Jørgensen 1992, 138-140, 212-215, 263-264) These would have been readily recognised by the elites of the day, in tabby and twill weave, through to sturdier textiles, what we might call working fabric, which bares comparison with the specifications known for contemporary sailcloth (Cooke *et al.* 2002). This textile tradition, reinforced by finds of functional caches of loom weights in individual pit houses and matched in the spindle whorl assemblage, seems to run through the early phases, which can be divided into three based on the use, creation and digging out of new pit houses.

In the final phase, loom weights, including the so-called phallic stone found between the paired post holes of Structure 1, indicate a potential proliferation of woven thread at the heavier end; highlighting a range of new textile choices with a preference for thicker closed fabrics (of 40-70g woven thread tension-Cartwright forthcoming a), and an opening of the few cloth types that overlap with any of the earlier productions. Interestingly, noting Andersson's (2003, 143) assertion that a specialised production needs a specialised tool set, Structure 1 is the only context where a pair of lathe turned soapstone whorls seemed to have been produced to match each other.

These results cannot be considered in isolation and gain extra resonance within the context of the site. They add to what we can infer about the physical interaction

of weavers, spinners, yarn, loom and landscape, to the extent that we might refer to them as knotting the threads of mountain pathways through their actions and bodily movements at the loom. The workforce, communities of female weavers and spinners (see Cartwright forthcoming b, on this gendering of practice), were highly skilled, especially in the early phases. A difference made explicit with comparison to the surrounding sheiling sites, suggesting a unique functional niche.

Bjørkum itself, shares a market naming component with the famous Viking Age trading site of Birka, and the site lies below a known thing/ting meeting place as well as a Skeid (Ramstad 2011, 52, 53). Both functioned as meeting points, drawing the local populations, whether for the politics of the day or to watch annual events, such as the horse fights of the Skeid, as recorded in Saga accounts and later historic records (Stylgar 2011). This site of east meets west would have been an ideal point for the production of fine items (there is also slag at the site, suggesting metalwork, and possibly evidence for comb manufacture, Ramstad 2011, 49, 51), providing for the need of thing goes to look the part (we are told for example, that Skarp-Hedin was known at first sight at the Icelandic Althing, because he looked like a warrior; Njal's Saga 1960, 248), an argument potentially supported by the find of a trade weight in one of the pit houses. And we should remember the early potential for producing sail-cloth comparable material, in light of the role of cloth as a Viking Age unit of currency (Hoffmann 1964).



**Fig. 1. 'Creating a Buzz': A Hand Carved 'Beehive' Shaped Whorl from Bjørkum with a 1 penny for scale. It is an interesting whorl type, reasonably rare, and gives a visual indication of the role whorls could have played as personal possessions (Photo: author).**



What of the weavers themselves, what role did they play in this regionalised economy? I would argue that weaving acted as both a tangible (in thread) and intangible point of binding together. The seasonal nature of the site, - the form of the pit houses, possibly just pits for tented structures, and lack of formalised hearths (until the later phases), suggests a transient workforce. If it is argued that cloth production operated in a pre-planned cycle, yarn being specifically produced for specific cloth, then the pit houses of Bjørkum would have necessarily been linked to the landscape in material demands for flax and wool. The agricultural restrictions on when this would have been available, suggest a possible mid-summer schedule, between the first shearing/flax planting, and taking of the animals to pasture - the time of year when Skeids were traditionally held (Stylgar 2011), and the harvesting of the lush summer coats/flax harvesting and processing at the end of summer. All tasks that would have required inward looking community co-operation and the associated activities of social bonding (e.g. see Larson 2001; Stewart 2005; Lucas 2008).

One should consider the role of the loom in bringing different areas/groups together. The raw material has to be physically (walked out and) gathered from the landscape, pre-prepared, and eventually the product of the loom processed, in all likelihood, by communal groups. This is an area of research I am currently engaged in. There is an area of study that suggests the formation of habit is a creator of a 'way of seeing' (a pun on habit as both spatio/temporal movement and as an item of clothing. Elsewhere, I have taken this further to argue that clothes are an imposing factor in the imposition of bodily movement, habit and meaning) (Berger 1972, Felski 2000). This can in part be put down to the demands that the loom creates, a seasonal way of doing things that is required in the pre-planned nature of production. That the paths one takes through the landscape, literally give a point of view (Ingold 2000, 226), and as such are crucial factors in the creation of a world view in any given spatio-chronological context. I would argue it is the interface of weaver, material and loom that, in part, provides a temporal stimulus for these interactions.

If the weavers were drawn from the surrounding upland populations, Bjørkum may have functioned as an important community weaving site, a site of coming together, drawing practitioners from across the region. Similar arguments have been made for sites in Zealand, Denmark (Gebauer Thomsen pers. comm.; see also Gotfredsen *et al.* 2011, 213; Nørgård Jørgensen *et al.* 2011, 102-104), and within Norway (Brink 2011, 89-91), for example at Stedje farm (Mortensen 1998).

Pit houses sealed in the act of cloth production, would have become "cafés of women" (Naji 2009, 56), sites of competition, communication, education, discussion, resulting in the re-weaving of a sense of a region wide communal identity (which would surely have been a matter of some political importance to the burgeoning chiefdoms - as a form of self-making whose significance is seemingly highlighted in literary sources, and notably those linked to cosmological influence (for example, the relic poem *Darraðarljóð*; see also Gardela 2008, 50).

This influence, or what has been termed in recent anthropological literature *agency* (Gell 1998- used here as a causal affect born from an act of doing, notably the influence weavers generated through their skill), belies traditional assumptions about the domesticity of cloth production, and rather sees the *locus* of the loom as a centre of world weaving. This status is perhaps reflected in the procurement and transporting of soapstone rough-outs, lathe turned and inscribed soapstone, and fired clay whorls, to the site. If specific whorls were needed for specific productions, and given the skilled and time consuming nature of spinning yarn, then this must have occurred under the demands/ guidance of the spinners. Could the trade weight, remembering that women in 'Scandinavian' Russia have been excavated buried with scales, reinforce this picture of autonomy, and finally, given the re-structuring of the last phase of use, how would this have affected these strong women? It is likely, given the anthropological literature on the sense of, and oppositional slow change of practical traditions, that enforced change (perhaps related to a top down re-ordering of space and practice as seen at Bjørkum, not forgetting that there is an important medieval farm situated metres away) would probably be, to some extent, resisted.

This threat is possibly acknowledged in the memorialisation/curation of the importance of past productions at the site (the bodily acts of their predecessors and relations in social practice, and their importance in community binding, and spiritual re-weaving) in the find of a spindle whorl within a foundation deposit, a post hole packing fill in Hus A, as well as a whorl found in a fire-pit with a complicated relationship with Structure 1. These buildings ceased to be used at a time when sweeping changes were about to be made to the spatial organisation of cloth production in Northern Europe. And notably in connection to socio-political events in Norway and the Atlantic sphere. We might ask whether these whorls were placed there to commemorate the role of cloth production and its producers at the site, at a time when that very production was being forced to change?



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