

Recreating clothes from the Iron Age

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One of our aims in reconstructing the tunic is to learn more about how the textile was made, how time-consuming it was to make, and how the wool was used, explains Marianne Vedeler. Credit: Yngve Vogt

A few years ago, the oldest known piece of clothing ever discovered in Norway, a tunic dating from the Iron Age, was found on a glacier in Breheimen. Now about to be reconstructed using Iron Age textile techniques, it is hoped the tunic will inspire Norwegian fashion designers.

There was huge excitement among archaeologists when, three years ago, the oldest piece of clothing ever discovered in Norway – a woollen tunic – was found by an archaeological expedition to the Lendbreen glacier in Breheimen National Park. As a result of climate change, the Lendbreen glacier, just like other glaciers throughout Norway, has in the past few years been retreating. The melting of the glaciers is constantly revealing ancient artefacts.

As well as the tunic, the archaeologists surveying the Lendbreen glacier found shoes, hunting gear, tent pegs and large amounts of horse dung, all dating from the Iron Age. The horse dung shows where the hunters tethered their horses while hunting reindeer on the glacier. In summer, the reindeer were so plagued by reindeer warble fly, a bumblebee-like insect that lays its eggs on reindeer hair which develop into larvae that burrow under the skin, that the animals sought refuge on the glacier. And the hunters took advantage of that.

The glacier protected the artefacts so well that the archaeologists found not only arrowheads, but also whole arrows complete with fletching and shafts. But the biggest surprise of all was when they found the tunic, bundled up and covered by horse dung.

"It's very rarely that we find well-preserved clothing from prehistoric times," explains Marianne Vedeler, Associate Professor at the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo. "Only a handful of clothing like this has been found in Europe."

The tunic, which was made some time between AD 230 and 390, attracted broad coverage in Norwegian and international media when the discovery was made three years ago.

Recreating the tunic

What is not so widely known, however, is that the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Mountain Museum (Norsk Fjellmuseum) in Lom are making two reconstructions of the tunic to show what it looked like when it was new. One tunic will be on display at the museum in Oslo, the other at the museum in Lom, which has a large exhibition of the archaeological finds from the Lendbreen glacier, some ten kilometres west of Lom.

Marianne Vedeler adds: "The remarkable thing is how old and well-preserved the tunic was. It is a very fine example of how prehistoric people used wool. One of our aims in reconstructing the tunic is to learn more about how the textile was made, how time-consuming it was to make, and how the wool was used."

Overhair and underwool

The wool of the old, Norwegian sheep breeds had two layers. The outer-layer hair, known as overhair, is long and stiff and acts as a sort of raincoat for the sheep. The innermost layer, called underwool, is soft and fine and resembles the wool we find in modern sheep breeds. The different properties of the wool were used for different types of textile.

"Textiles made from overhair were more water-resistant and more hard-wearing than if they had been made of underwool. We were therefore surprised to discover that the tunic from Lendbreen was made almost exclusively from underwool, that is to say the wool from the innermost layer. The tunic is a strange mixture of fine wool and simple cut. Most Iron Age clothing was repaired and re-used. More hard-wearing than today's clothing, it might be used for several decades. The tunic may have been used for something else before it was left on the glacier. It was old and worn when found, and had several patches sewn on it. The sleeves had also been sewn on at a later date than the original tunic."

Separating the wool

Present-day [wild sheep](#), like Iron Age sheep, have two layers of wool. For this reason, the Museum of Cultural History will use wool from Norwegian wild sheep to recreate the tunic. The wool is being supplied by a sheep farmer at Hareid in Sunnmøre.

Among other things, the researchers will be seeking to assess how much work was required to separate the overhair from the soft underwool and how long it would have taken to make the tunic.

Before the wool can be spun, all the overhair must be removed. The traditional wool spinnery at Selbu Spinneri will be responsible for separating the wool and spinning it. Some of the wool will be spun on a hand spindle – a long thin spindle with a round whorl – which was the only known method of spinning in olden times. It was not until the 1700s that the spinning wheel first appeared.

"Spinning the wool demanded an enormous amount of work and in those days represented a bottleneck in the production process. Having all the wool spun by hand would have been too costly for our project, so we are also spinning some mechanically," Vedeler explains.

Distinctive diamond pattern

When the archaeologists found the tunic on the glacier, it was possible to discern a diamond pattern in the textile, as long as the tunic was wet. The distinctive weaving technique used to make this pattern is known as diamond twill and is held to be quite advanced.

"Two colours were used in the tunic to create a mottled pattern. The combination of the diamond twill weave and this pattern is unusual, and

it is precisely this combination that we intend to copy."

The underwool from the wild sheep can be sorted in shades from pale grey through to dark grey. For the recreation, Vedeler has chosen to use the palest and darkest shades.

Bronze Age weaving

The spun woollen yarn will be woven on a vertical warp-weighted loom, which is the oldest kind of loom we know of:

"The loom is simple, but time-consuming to use," says Vedeler.

Consisting of a simple upright frame with two horizontal beams, the loom is leant against a wall. The vertical warp threads hang freely from the upper beam. To keep the warp threads taut, stones or other heavy weights are hung from the bottom of bundles of warp threads. The weaving is done from the top of the loom downwards and every line of weft thread is beaten tightly in place with a sword beater.

The textiles will be woven by handweaver Lena Hammarlund from Gothenburg. Lena specializes in reconstructing prehistoric textiles.

Once the textile has been woven, the two tunics will be sewn by tailors at the traditional craft business Heimen Husflid in Oslo.

"The reconstruction project is exciting. We are learning a huge amount in collaboration with the craftspeople. It is only when we reconstruct the tunic that we can understand how it was made."

Wants to inspire fashion designers

Marianne Vedeler hopes the reconstruction will inspire Norwegian designers to create new, modern textiles.

"Clothes were not consumer items in the Iron Age. It was important to be able to re-use clothing, and in those days clothes lasted a long time. Today, we spend enormous resources on clothes. And modern clothes are not durable. If we can use local raw materials and create clothing of high quality, it will be good for us all. We are therefore hoping that designers will be inspired by this example of old, Norwegian design. If we can create modern textiles from a prehistoric design, we hope also to be able to give a boost to the Norwegian wool industry. Sadly, much of the [wool](#) from the old sheep breeds currently goes to waste," adds Vedeler, who, in company with ethnologist Ingun Grimstad Klepp of the National Institute for Consumer Research, and journalist Tone Skårdal Tobiasson – the author of a number of books about fashion and design – has made an all-out effort to rectify this through the "VikingGold" project.

Transport route over the glacier

The director of the Norwegian Mountain Museum, Mai Bakken, is looking forward to exhibiting the reconstructed tunic at the museum in Lom.

"The tunic gives us a picture of how Iron Age people lived in Norway 1,700 years ago. Other objects found on the glacier were shoes, textile remains that might have been used as toilet paper, bandages or menstrual rags, items of horse tack, horse skulls, horseshoes and horse dung. All these finds give us a completely different picture of what the mountains were used for. It was not only hunters who went onto the glaciers to hunt reindeer; the glaciers were also used as transport routes for people travelling between the valleys, such as between Bøverdalen and Ottadalen. It was quicker to go over the mountain pass than to go round.

The glaciers in those days were much bigger, and easy to walk on. The tunic may have been lost on just such a trip," says Mai Bakken, who, along with Marianne Vedeler, first had the idea of recreating the tunic so as to convey this exciting find to the public.

Provided by University of Oslo

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