



Fig. 1. Trindhøj.

Men's costumes.



Fig. 2. Borum Eshøj.

BRONZE AGE CLOTHING PRESERVED IN DANISH GRAVES

By Johannes Brøndsted

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THE WOOLLEN GARMENTS AND CLOTHES from the earlier part of the Danish Bronze Age, dating presumably from a time shortly before 1000 B.C. and now belonging to the outstanding treasures of the National Museum, Copenhagen, are priceless direct witnesses of the primitive Scandinavian textile art as it presents itself after its earliest development, not yet quite free from dependence on its models.

What then were these models? Apparently skin costumes. Facing the fact that such skin clothes have never, up to now, been found in Danish Stone Age or Bronze Age graves or settlements, this idea of skin types as models for the Danish woollen costumes is, so we must admit, nothing more than a theory, though, as I think, a very sensible one.

To this we shall return below. First let us give a brief summary of the Danish Bronze Age textile

finds, with some illustrations from the collections of the National Museum.

All the textiles come from the so-called "bole-coffins," i. e., split and hollowed pieces of oak trunks used for the interment of adults or children and placed on stones in the bottom of large earthen (turf) barrows or grave mounds. Under certain circumstances, hard layers of clay in the mound held enough water, more or less, to preserve the coffin from mouldering away and so preserve its contents of organic matter, textiles as well as wooden objects.

In seven cases, all from barrows in the Jutish peninsula (Jylland) which forms the western (greater) part of the Danish kingdom, a complete woollen dress in this way was saved to posterity, so that now the National Museum in Copenhagen possesses four complete men's costumes (from the following barrows: Borum Eshøj—2, Muldbjerg, and Trindhøj) and three complete women's dresses (Borum Eshøj, Egtved, and Skrydstrup). In addition, four other grave finds (Guldhöj, Jels, Dragshøj, Toppehöj) have yielded different parts of men's costumes.

This much about the archaeological material.* Now we proceed to the famous dresses themselves.

In FIGURES 1 and 2 are shown two men's costumes, from Trindhøj and from Borum Eshøj. The dress consists of two main pieces, the cloak and the gown. The loosely hanging shoulder cloak, of oval or bean shape when outstretched, is a rather large piece of fabric, the Trindhøj specimen being a little under two and a half meters in length, 1.25 meters in breadth. The sleeveless gown, used as an undergarment, consists in the Trindhøj costume of several pieces sewn together and has two narrow flaps acting as suspenders and fastened on the back by means of leather straps and some sort of round bronze buttons (*tutuli*). In the Borum Eshøj dress, however (FIGURE 2), the gown is more primitive, in fact nothing more than a kilt leaving the chest uncovered. A woven band (FIGURE 1) or a simple cord (FIGURE 2), used as a belt, held the gown together.

Further, as belonging to the man's costume we have to mention the round woollen cap presenting

itself in two types, a rather tall one (FIGURE 1) made of a round top piece with a cylindrical side piece sewn on, and a more semicircular one (FIGURE 3) carefully and well done with lace stitchings inside and a covering pile of short woollen threads outside, a little masterpiece.

The finds have yielded a few strips of cloth put on the ankles and the feet as some primitive kind of stocking and, in one grave only, a bit of a cloth shoe.

Thus, the dress of a fully equipped Bronze Age man comprised also stockings and shoes (cloth or leather). Finally, one noteworthy though negative fact should be stressed: No trousers whatever were known.

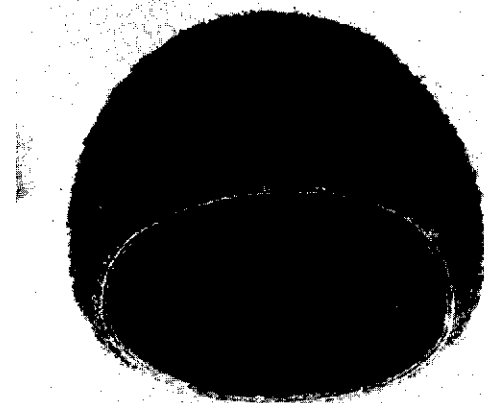


Fig. 3. Man's cap, Muldbjerg.

AS REMARKED ABOVE, OUR knowledge about the woman's costume in the Bronze Age is based upon three grave finds: the Egtved and the Skrydstrup graves, each containing the remnants or traces of the corpse of a young girl about twenty years

old, both of which were thoroughly investigated by the staff of the National Museum, Copenhagen; and the Borum Eshøj find, the grave of an elderly woman (in the fifties), found many years ago and not scientifically excavated. We start with the Egtved girl.

In FIGURE 4 we are looking at the costume of this young person. As a fillet around the short-cut hair she used a simple three-ply cord. Then comes the jacket with short sleeves and with some strips of cloth sewn on below to lengthen it all around. Such a jacket was found in each of the three women's graves and so we must believe that it was a regular part of the Bronze Age woman's dress.

Round the waist the Egtved girl had a woven girdle ending in a tassel, the purpose being to hold the jacket together and to carry the circular bronze disc, this characteristic ornament of the Danish Bronze Age woman.

The most startling part, however, of the Egtved dress is the corded skirt, shown in FIGURE 4 and in greater detail in FIGURE 5, a refined piece indeed of textile art and quite new to the archaeologists when the find was made in 1920. Since then we have been able to find several traces of such a skirt type in other



Fig. 4 (left). Girl's dress, Egtved.

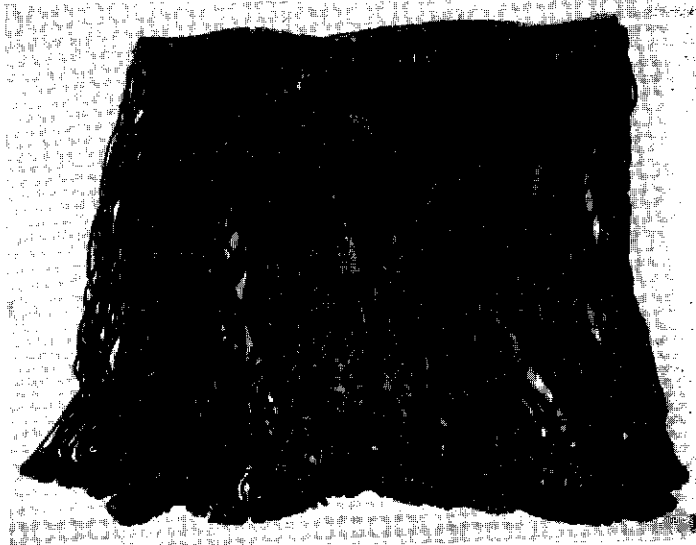


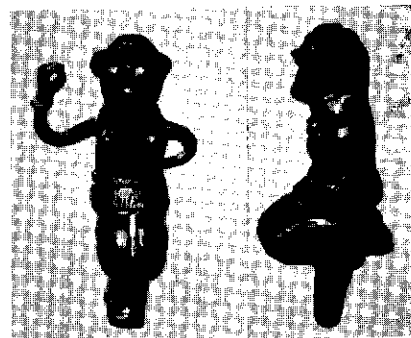
Fig. 5 (above). Girl's corded skirt, Egtved.

Bronze Age graves; and the little figurine of bronze from Faardal (FIGURE 6), dating from the middle of the later Danish Bronze Age, shows how this corded skirt was still in use several centuries after the time of the Egtved girl.

This skirt is made of cords hanging down from a woven girdle more than two meters long, both ends of which are free to be tied together, as the illustrations show. The cords are held together at the bottom by a horizontal twisted string just over the loops. This skirt was wrapped twice around the waist, resting on the hips, and is about 0.40 meters long, thus reaching almost over the knees. That this is a most charming piece of clothing for young girls was shown by one exhibited in Copenhagen on a living model (FIGURE 11).

But the young Bronze Age girl in Denmark did not always wear the short corded skirt. This was learned from the last of three finds of women's costumes, namely Skrydstrup. As the coffin of this grave was very much decomposed it became necessary to transport the dead body, lying calm and untouched in its plastered-up frame, from the grave mound in Jutland to the Copenhagen Museum. After the removal of two covering woollen blankets the Skrydstrup girl appeared (FIGURE 7). She did not wear

Fig. 6.
Bronze statuette
Woman with
corded skirt
Faardal



the short corded skirt; on the contrary, she had a very large piece of cloth wrapped around the body, reaching from the waist to the feet. This "long skirt" was in fact extremely long: four meters, to about one and one half meters in breadth. The question which we shall touch upon later is this: Was this great piece of cloth, sewn together and laced in by a woven girdle to which was tied a comb of horn, a real long skirt worn by the living woman, or was it a sort of swaddling-cloth only for the dead body?

The jacket of the Skrydstrup girl was nicely decorated with embroideries on the sleeves and a carefully sewn trimming around the neck opening. Around the ears she wore gold rings and her large elaborate coiffure was covered and held together by a net of horsehair intertwined into rhombic checks. Under her head were found the remnants of a hood, skillfully made of two-ply wool in a very nar-

row braiding technique named "Sprang." FIGURE 8 illustrates a modern copy of this Skrydstrup hood.

As to the third woman's grave, the Borum Eshøj find, it is enough to say that the woman from this grave, who was between fifty and sixty years old, seems to have worn both the short and the long skirt; she also had the short-sleeved jacket and a broad girdle, nearly two and a half meters long, ending in magnificent tassels. A hair-net of fine two-ply wool, in an open "Sprang" pattern (see FIGURE 9), admired for many years in the National Museum, also comes from this grave, which unfortunately was not scientifically investigated.

HAVING NOW FINISHED our survey of the Danish Bronze Age costumes, we should add some remarks on the position of these dresses seen against the background of the general development of costume. Here it seems to me as if the Danish and South Scandinavian man's dress were a little more primitive than the woman's. This trouserless costume, consisting in its main parts of cloak and gown only, and so fitting itself in very well with the rather warm climate of the time, appears in fact to have been nothing else



Fig. 7. Girl's grave, Skrydstrup.

than a skin dress roughly transferred into a textile technique. FIGURE 1 thus clearly shows on the outside of the cloak the remnants of a pile sewn on apparently in imitation of an animal's long hairs; and a parallel observation can be made of the cap, FIGURE 3, which is undeniably an imitation of fur. Concerning the gown in FIGURE 1, with its suspender-like flaps, the form is evidently modeled on an animal's pelt, with a foreleg and a hindleg still attached and used to fasten it. Thus this Bronze Age man's dress is from a textile point of view not a very far developed type.

As to the woman's costume, however, the situation is different. The jacket, for instance, having of course the worldwide skin poncho as a rather near ancestor, is nevertheless a proper piece of woollen cloth with real textile cut (yet we must understand the strips sewn on below as reminiscences from a remote time when the jacket-poncho made of a single pelt was not long enough). And the corded skirt, this masterly little performance of textile ability, has nothing whatsoever to do with the skin dress; its type should rightly be derived from vegetable plaiting and twining work. So the Bronze Age woman's costume

appears to us more developed and more independent than the man's, and no wonder. Let us not forget that the textile art is the woman's business, and let us note the skillfulness and independence of such performances as the hair-nets and the hood from the graves of Borum Eshøj and Skrydstrup.

Now, how shall we understand the two skirts? Did the short corded one belong only to young girls, while the long skirt was worn by elderly women? We cannot admit this, remembering that the long skirt was used by the young Skrydstrup girl while the mature woman from Borum Eshøj had, as it seemed, both sorts of skirt. Shall we believe, then, that the short corded skirt was for summer, while the long one was used mostly during the cold winter weather? This, I think, is the better theory, all the more as in

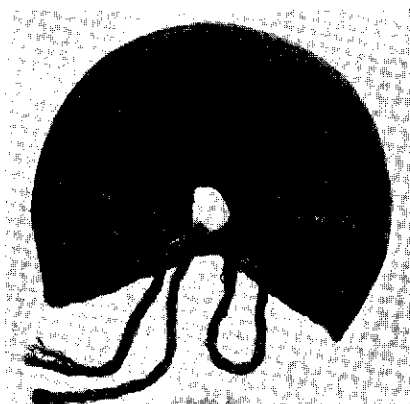


Fig. 8.
Braided hood
from girl's grave
at Skrydstrup
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the coffin of the short-skirted Egtved girl was found a milfoil flower, showing that the burial took place in the summer. Whether the Borum Eshøj lady, wearing the short skirt *and* the long skirt, was perhaps a bit susceptible to cold, we cannot know.

Well—someone would rightly object—we still have no decisive answer to our problem: Was this so-called "long skirt" really a skirt, or was it a mere swaddling-cloth for the dead? This is a rather delicate matter and, I think, not to be answered with certainty now. Even if BROHOLM and HALD are

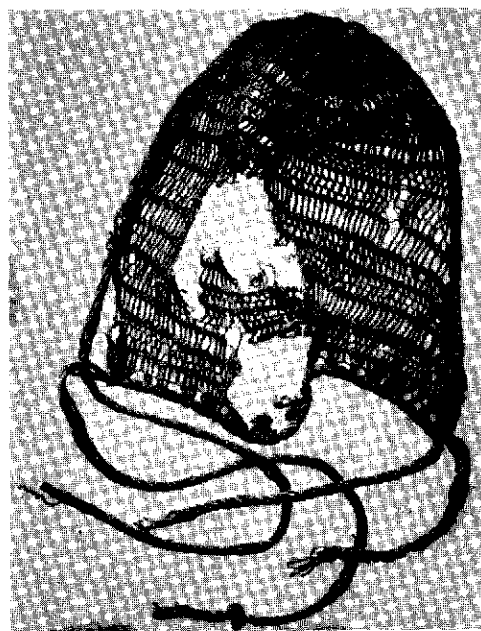


Fig. 9. Braided hair-net from woman's grave at Borum Eshøj.

right—and I am not sure they are—in arguing that the Skrydstrup "long skirt" was impossible to wear as such, and even if this "skirt" through future finds should turn out to be a swaddling-cloth, it would be highly probable, nevertheless, that it reflects a real piece of the woman's dress, used in life but not yet found in the graves. To this, as well as to other problems concerning these unique and exciting Danish Bronze Age costumes, we can only hope that the future will show the way to clear solutions.

* As to literature, it should be sufficient to mention the main result of the lucky collaboration between the archaeologist, Dr. BROHOLM, and the textile expert of the National Museum, Miss MARGRETHE HALD: H. C. BROHOLM and M. HALD, *Costumes of the Bronze Age in Denmark*, Copenhagen and London 1940; a very thorough investigation. For another recent activity of Dr. BROHOLM, see pages 61-62 of this issue.

The illustrations on the facing page were received at the moment of going to press, after the previous pages had been composed, and therefore appear here out of the expected order.

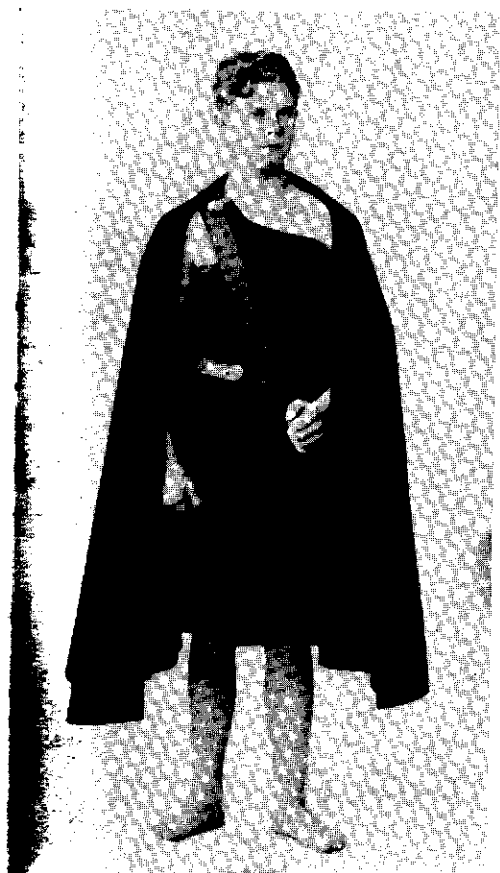


Fig. 10. The man's costume from the Muldbjerg burial, on a living model. (A note from the author attached to this picture says "The model is now Iceland's 'rigsantikvar' in Reykjavik."—Ed.)

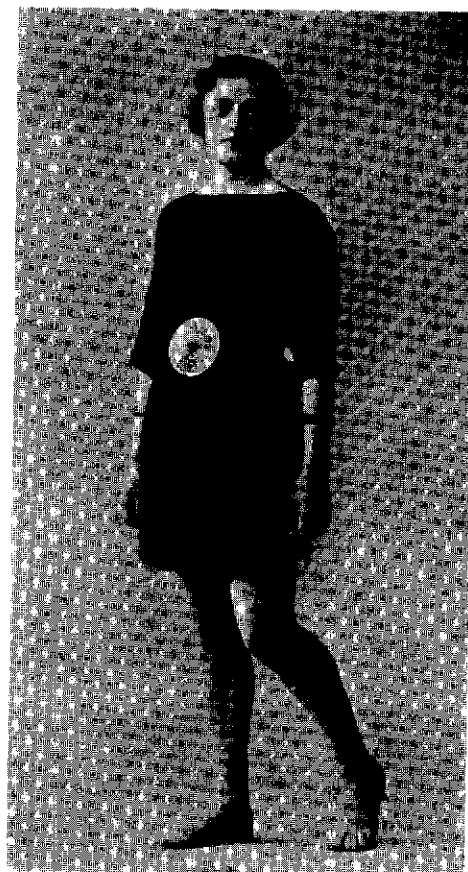


Fig. 11. The woman's costume from the Egtved burial, on a living model.

Fig. 12. The oak coffin of a man's grave, as it appeared in the barrow before opening.

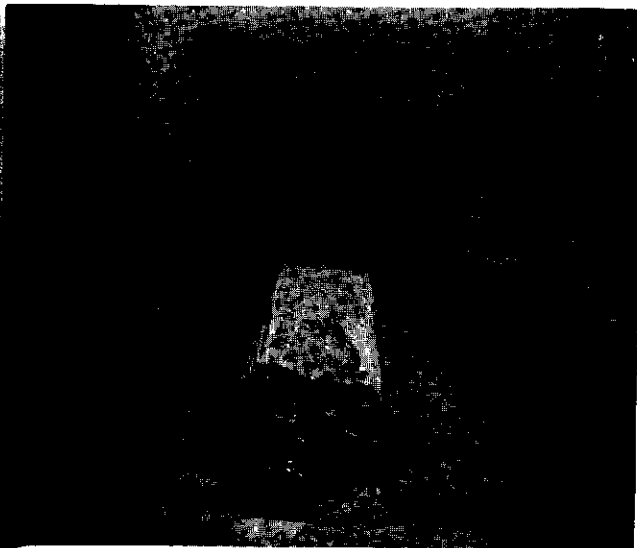


Fig. 13. The oak coffin of the Egtved girl, lying unopened in the barrow.

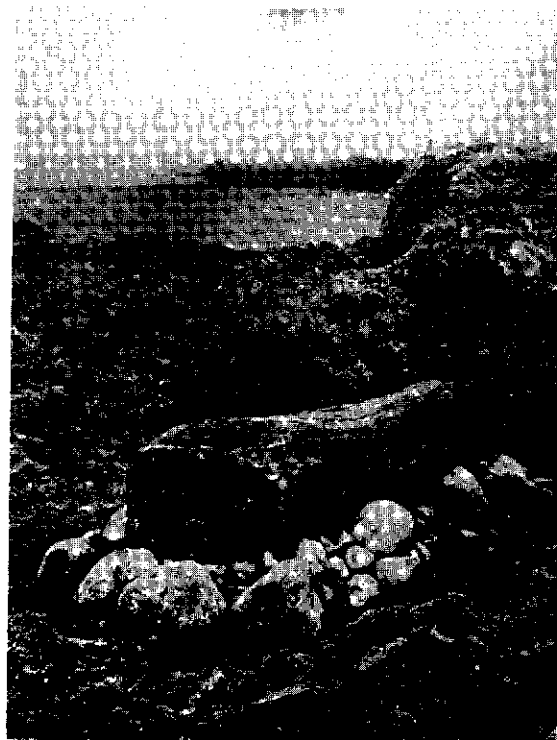


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