

## Introduction

She soon fell asleep and she had a dream which she related to Pálnir on awakening. "I dreamed," she said, "that I was staying here on this estate and I thought that I had a grey colored cloth in the loom. It seemed as though the weights were attached to the cloth and I was weaving. When one of the weights fell down behind from the middle of the cloth, I noticed that the weights were the heads of men. I took up that head and recognized it." When Pálnir asked whose head it was, she said that it was King Haraldr Gormsson's.

*Jómsvíkinga Saga* (Blake 1962:10)

*The Valkyries' Loom* is a book about textiles, specifically textiles from the Scandinavian settlements of the North Atlantic. It is not a descriptive or technological book in nature; rather, it addresses the social archaeology of textiles and textiles as a form of material culture that encodes information about the societies who made them. Textiles are like "text" (which is where the term comes from) and tell a story about hardships and successes and, most importantly, about the lives of the women who made them.

*The Valkyries' Loom* is the product of nine years' analysis of textiles from the Viking and Norse colonies of the North Atlantic, incorporating the results of three National Science Foundation grants from Arctic Social Sciences: *Imagining an Engendered Archaeology of the North Atlantic* (NSF 0946247); *Rags to Riches: An Archaeological Study of Textiles and Gender in Iceland, AD 874–1800* (NSF 1023167), 2010–2013; and *Weaving Islands of Cloth: Gender, Textiles,*

and Trade across the North Atlantic from the Viking Age to the Early Modern Period (NSF 1303898), 2013–2016. In 2017 I was awarded a one-year supplement to the third grant, which enabled me to complete research on the Norse Greenlandic assemblage.

Archaeological textiles and their social use as a symbol of women's culture have never been addressed in the North Atlantic specifically. Most studies have focused on highly technical overviews of archaeological textiles, including thread counts, weave types, production techniques, tools, fleece type, or were in-depth ethnographic and descriptive analyses examining the finer textiles produced for ecclesiastic centers and religious use. The great majority of these studies in Iceland were performed by the late Else Guðjónsson, a pioneer of Icelandic textile work, but she left to her successors the huge task of tackling a corpus of unexamined archaeological textiles, stored in the National Museum's warehouses. Guðjónsson's work was valuable and comprehensive but discussed only a handful of these archaeological remains in Icelandic journals (for works by this author, see Guðjónsson 1962, 1964, 1973, 1978, 1980, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1998a, 1998b).

The Faroe Islands had a similar devotee to the study of textiles, Nicolina Jense Bender, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in 2015 and who sadly passed away a year later. Bender published the volume *Seyður ull Tøting* (2010), documenting all manner of textile work and production, from the origins of the Faroese sheep to spinning, weaving, and dyeing and to documenting the extensive knitting traditions that developed in the Faroes. Neither of these women were archaeologists, but both devoted their lives to wool and its various uses in the recent past; both also laid down the path for others, who would pick up where they left off.

In Greenland the most valuable contribution to the study of archaeological textiles came from the Danish National Museum's Else Østergård, who in 2004 published *Woven into the Earth*, the most complete catalog and technical overview of archaeological textiles from Norse Greenland. Her work served as the foundation on which I built my own research. Additional work on archaeological material was performed by Penelope Walton Rogers (1998, 2012), who analyzed Greenlandic textiles from the sites of the Farm beneath the Sand (Gården under Sandet, GUS), Greenland, and the farm at Reykholt, in Iceland. Walton Rogers (and Greaves 2018) also analyzed Inuit material from the Eastern Canadian Arctic and elements from the Faroese collections (Walton Rogers 2001), though these findings from the Faroes have not been published.

Scottish Viking textiles were compiled and analyzed primarily by Lise Bender Jørgensen and published in 1992, followed by Thea Gabra-Sanders (1998), who also passed away leaving unfinished work. I used some of Gabra-Sanders's

analyses when recording and consulting the Viking Scottish material, which is largely stored at the National Museum of Scotland, with some collections scattered in regional museums as well as the British Museum.

All of these studies, while essential to the analysis of textiles, have never engaged the material culture as a way to seek an understanding of the social dynamics operating within each of these societies through cloth. What I hope to have achieved here is a social archaeology of textiles. Østergård (2004) did present valuable social insights concerning the emergence of weft-dominant cloth and possible reasons for its proliferation in the Greenland Norse colony. But the work of delving into the deeper motivating factors behind textile work, its symbolic meaning, and what textile work actually meant to the women performing it has been neglected.

I felt that textiles and textile work were a medium as informative as any in understanding important social issues that characterized these North Atlantic Norse societies: environmental stress, economy and trade, and even resistance to Danish colonial oversight. Therefore, after many trips back and forth across the North Atlantic for almost a decade to various museums where I counted threads and otherwise recorded these textiles in minute detail, I can say that this study of the North Atlantic material is by far the most extensive.

## An Archaeology of Gender in the North Atlantic

In recent decades, archaeological research in the North Atlantic has made remarkable advances, not only in synthetic analyses (e.g., Bolender et al. 2008; Brewington et al. 2015; Buckland et al. 1996; Church et al. 2007; Dugmore et al. 2007; Harrison and Maher 2014; Harrison et al. 2008; Hayeur Smith 2004, 2012; Lucas 2009, 2010, 2012; Lucas and McGovern 2007; McGovern 1980, 1991; Mann et al. 2009; Smith 1995, 2004, 2009; Sveinbjarnardóttir 2009, 2012, 2016; Zori 2014), but also in reporting basic data from excavations, surveys, and technical analyses. Work linking natural historical sequences with human activity (Adderley et al. 2008; Barrett 1997; Barrett et al. 2008; Church et al. 2007; Hambrecht 2009; Lawson et al. 2007; McGovern et al. 2007; Smiarowski and McGovern 2012) and social histories (Byock 1988, 2001; Durrenburger 1992; Einarsson 1995; Miller 1996; Sigurdsson 1999; Steinberg 2006) provides multifaceted perspectives on social and environmental change, especially in Iceland, the largest of the Norse North Atlantic colonies. Archaeological research on Norse expansion into Greenland and the Faroe Islands has also received more attention in recent years (Arge 2008; Arge et al. 2009; Arneborg et al. 2008; Edwards et al. 2004; Koch Madsen 2014; Nelson et al. 2012; Ogil-