

# Textiles

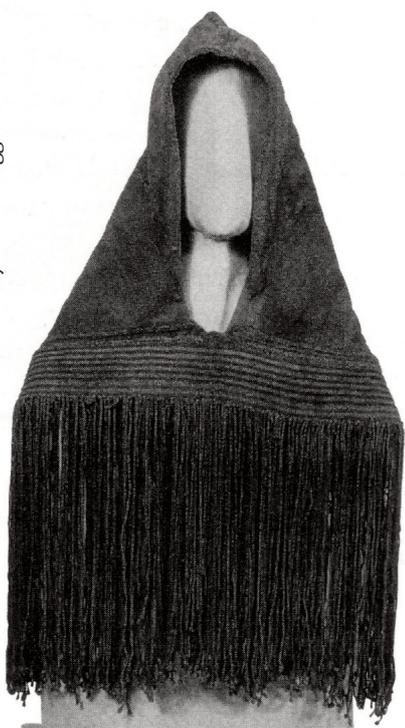
Textiles were an important part of prehistoric life. The term includes all clothes, blankets, cords, threads and even sails for boats. Textiles can be made of animal fibers (such as wool) or plant fibers (such as flax). Fibers need to be processed before being spun into threads, and then woven to produce cloth. Threads can also be braided and woven to produce belts or cords, which have various uses.

It is thought that most textile manufacture took place on a small scale in domestic environments until the Medieval period. From then onwards a growing textile manufacture industry produced most textiles, although domestic production continued in the Highlands right up to the 20th century.

As wool and flax are natural materials they rot away easily and textile finds are rare. We know that farming communities had access to wool from domesticated sheep. Pollen analysis confirms that plant fibers such as flax, nettle and bark-bast would have been available too. We can also learn about the processes used in textile production by the artefacts that are associated with different technology. This includes shears for cutting wool and combs for straitening fibers.

Spinning fibers into thread was generally done using a spindle, as the spinning wheel was not invented until the Medieval period. A spindle is a slim wooden stick with a circular weight (called a whorl). It is attached to the fibers and then spun, so that it twists them into a fine, strong thread. Its portability and convenience meant these simple tools continued to be used in the Highlands into the 18th century. Spindle whorls are common finds on archaeological sites although the spindle sticks tend to rot away.

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*The Orkney Hood, on display at NMS, Edinburgh*

Woven cloth is made up of thread going in different directions – warp threads are aligned up and down along the length of the cloth, and weft threads run back and forth across the width of the cloth. Looms help with the weaving process by allowing warps to be moved forward or back, creating a space for the weft to be threaded through.

Textile manufacture takes many hours and some skill. It could take in excess of 200 hours to spin and weave the materials for a garment. The clothes and items produced rarely survive but must have been widespread and could have had great significance.

## ***What do your clothes say about you?***



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*Reconstruction of a prehistoric loom*

### **See also:**

Box 2 object sheets: Woven Belts and Bands, Cordage

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