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The Gunnister Man Project: researching and reconstructing a late 17th century garment ensemble. Part 1: the wools and knitwear.

Scotland

In 1951, a suit of woollen clothing and other personal belongings were found during peat cutting near Gunnister, in Shetland, Scotland. The garments consisted of a humble man's woven and fulled shirt, breeches, coat, and jacket, as well as a knitted purse, two caps, a pair of gloves and stockings. The purse contained one Swedish and two Dutch coins, dating the garments to the last decade of the 17th century or the first decades of the 18th century. The clothing and other implements became part of the collections of the National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh. There they received conservation treatment and analysis, summarised in a 1952 report. The clothing was occasionally displayed in whole or in part for the following 50 years in Edinburgh but little further analysis was done on the costume.

Following the opening of the new Shetland Museum and Archives in 2007, a partnership agreement was signed between Shetland Amenity Trust and the National Museums Scotland. The agreement allowed for the temporary return of the clothing and implements to Shetland for the first time since their discovery. Shetland Museum used the opportunity to create replicas of all the Gunnister Man finds for permanent display. This paper will introduce the textile finds, discuss the main aims of the garment reconstruction project, the selection of more than 15 different wools for the reconstruction, and the analysis and reconstruction of the knitwear.

The garments could not be analysed microscopically, so it was necessary to study by eye the woollen threads in each of the garments for fibre diameter ratio, pigmentation, and quality or 'behaviour' in the finished and worn fabrics. Warp, weft, knit, and sewing threads were analysed and reconstructed as accurately as possible. Although the breeds or origins of the wools were unknown, it was decided to try to obtain all wools from existing primitive Shetland sheep. Finding wools which would accurately match those in the originals had far-reaching consequences for each of the manufacturing processes of the reconstructions.

The knitwear varied from small fragments used as patches, to over-the-knee stockings. Each garment type was made with different wools and likely came from different culture areas. The knitwear consisted of the use of crossed stitches creating self-coloured texture and pattern, as well as dyed yarns used in stranded, simple coloured designs. Subsequent research into the knitwear revealed that similar types have been found in Shetland, Scotland and other parts of Scandinavia, suggesting the clothing ensemble was collected over time and from different parts of northern Europe.

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