CLOTHING MY IDIOT HUSBAND
OR
MAKE DO AND MEND: A TALE OF SARTORIAL REVENGE

BARONESS TASHA MEDVEDEVA

In 1953, a 10th century longship was found at the bottom of the harbor at Hedeby, also known as Haithabu, near Schleswig Holstein in Germany. The ship was not excavated until 1979-80, when a coffer dam was rammed around the ship and the water drained. Among other finds in the ship was a fragment of textile that had been torn from a garment, coated in tar, and used as caulking. This fragment is one of the bases for the conjectural Hedeby pinafore gown, variously called a hangerock, trägerrock, smokkr, or apron-dress. But how did that fragment get there, and what happened afterwards?

GUNNA BJARNARDOTTIR, HEDEBY, 974:

You aren't going to BELIEVE what that husband of mine has done this time. No, Bođny, really! It's beyond stupid.

You know that ship he's working on down the harbor? Well, they're just getting ready to launch it, and he came tearing back here in the middle of the afternoon, rooted through one of the chests, and went tearing back out of here like Garm himself was on his heels. No idea what he was about… then.

Then a couple of days later, I wanted to put on my brown smokkr, and I went looking in the chest where I keep the spare clothes, you know, the little one by the foot of the bed? And *it wasn't there*. I turned the whole thing out, and I couldn't find it. I was starting to think I'd dreamed even owning it, but I remembered wearing it at midwinter! I was sure a house wight had taken it, and I was starting to think of what I had that I could spare to offer the wight in exchange, when Vigolfr came home, and I told him about it.

What do you think he told me? Bođny, he's lucky I didn't send him straight to Hel. He told me… I can scarcely credit it… he told me that he *took* my dress, *ripped it up*, dipped it in *tar*, and used it to *caulk the ship*! He was in a rush, he said and he grabbed the first thing he saw. A rush! I said he must be in a rush to never lay with me again! The nerve, Bođny, the very nerve. That dress was only three or four years old, it was practically new!

So I told him, I said "Vigolfr Agnarrson, I'm not making you another tunic until you can get me new fabric for it." And he says "what about the stuff you're weaving? You said that was for me!" And I told him that it's forfeit, that it's mine now because he stole my best dress and ripped it up for a damned ship! I told him that I hoped the ship would sink in the blessed harbor, it would serve them all right. "Well what am I to wear? This tunic is all full of holes from sparks at the forge!" he moaned at me. I told him that I'd mend the tunic he has, and he can wear that.

So I pulled out the rag bag, which had he just asked I'd have given him for the stinkin' ship, and mended that damned tunic. It's all over patches now, whatever color and whatever thread I could put my hand to. He doesn't put any thought or consideration into taking my dress, I'm not matching patches to his tunic. I even had to pull out the spindle I made out of piece of cow bone to spin more thread. I confess, I do like spinning. It's like magic, taking sheep's wool and making thread out of it.

Oh, and here, look… I'm making a wee bit of trim with some heavier thread I made. I got these cards in trade for some pig meat I smoked. You know Mábil from over past the smithy? She showed me this pretty pattern she learned in Oseberg when she was a girl. I'm going to put it on my new dress, when I get that made. But Vigolfr? He's going to be wearing all the patches for a while to come.

ABOUT THE ARTIFACTS

BARONESS TASHA MEDVEDEVA

GUNNA'S SPINDLE AND THREAD

Bone spindle whorls were often made from the ball joints of horses or cows. It is almost impossible to source ball joints modernly, as butchers and slaughterhouses don't tend to preserve that joint. However, spindles were also found that were made from flat pieces of bone. Since the weight of the spindle matters more than the material used, I was perfectly happy to use a flat piece. One of the things I like about a flat whorl is that the weight is either spread out or better yet, on the outside edge. I've used biconical spindle whorls in the past, and the weight being so close to the shaft reduces the spin time and increases the wobble.

My spindle whorl (fig. 1) was made of a piece of cow bone given to me by Lord Bartholomew Sharpe. It was rough-shaped on a band saw, and then further refined using mostly hand tools: a hacksaw, pliers, sandpaper and a pin vise, as well as a belt sander for expediency's sake. The hole was first bored with a pin vise, then enlarged with a power drill, because I couldn't insert a large enough bit in the pin vise. (Also, it takes forever and I needed to get this done.)

The spindle shaft (fig. 2) is made from a long straight shoot that was growing out of the top of my mother's male holly bush. I stripped the bark and smoothed the knife marks by scraping them with the edge of the blade. I whittled one end to a point, which allowed the whorl to fit the shaft nicely. I also carved a small notch at the other end of the shaft, right below a knot in the shaft. This way I can spin both top and bottom whorl on this spindle.

figure 1

figure 2

figure 3

The whorl and shaft together (fig. 3) weigh just 18 grams (.63 oz), in line with finds from Hedeby and Birka. Because the whorl is so light (16g), I paid close attention so that the spindle didn't reverse direction and unspin my work. I am easily able to thigh-roll the spindle, and have achieved an average of around 30 wraps per inch (wpi) on 2-ply yarns intended for sewing. Based on finds of top whorl spindles from Oseberg, Norway, and Urriđakot, Iceland, I felt justified in trying to spin top whorl, just using a half-hitch to hold the finger-spun leader.

I used commercially prepared Blue-Faced Leicester (BFL) (fig. 4) combed top because I have a lot of it, and it spun up very finely and evenly, which was perfect for the sewing thread I wanted to create. I also sourced four ounces of combed top from Manx Loaghtan (fig. 5) sheep, which are a primitive multi-horned sheep from the Isle of Man. This moorit fiber also spun up beautifully and made an extremely fine thread for sewing, as well as a sturdy, thicker yarn for weaving. I was not able to prepare fleece for spinning myself due to space limitations in my home.

figure 4

figure 5

I made two-ply yarns, S-spun and Z-plied. Given that we have no idea the method used in period to ply yarn, I used the Andean plying method (fig 6 & 7) to ply from both ends into the middle. I then measured the skein on a 24” niddy-noddy (fig. 8), weighted the skein with a small bag of quarters ($3, if you care), hung it up, and steamed it to set the twist. The twist can also be set by washing the skein and hanging it to dry under tension, but steaming is faster. Sometimes I needed to use the thread right after it was spun and plied, and steaming to set the twist was quick and effective. If I were to skip that last step, the plying might be uneven and the thread would coil up on itself and be difficult to sew with.

figure 6

figure 7

figure 8

Not only was it a pleasure to spin a fine, strong single, but the plying was easy and smooth. Five grams of fiber seems to be the limit of my patience for the spindle suspended with only a half hitch; if I were to make a spindle

shaft with a carved hook, like the one from Oseberg (fig. 9), I could probably put as large a cop on the shaft as it could hold. I learned that the direction in which I am spinning determines the way I set the half-hitch; I always want the knot to “chase” the single. This helps the half-hitch stay on the spindle.

figure 9

In some cases, when the single hopped off the half-hitch too often, I did switch from top-whorl to bottom whorl spinning. I could achieve results similar to the singles I made on the top-whorl set-up by spinning bottom-whorl, but it was a lot slower and kind of a pain. It also wobbled a lot more, which in the past, when I was a more inexperienced spinster, could cause a softly-spun single to break. The top-whorl orientation does wobble, but it doesn’t put as much stress on the single. Also, with greater experience comes the knowledge of how to spin a tight, worsted single, which is precisely what is needed for sewing thread and weaving yarn.

Sewing with this thread was amazing. I needed to use a slightly larger needle than I was used to, but I never felt like it was wearing in the eye or in the fabric (well, there was a little fraying at the end of the piece, but that happens with a commercial thread as well). I never felt like it was going to break in the seam, and I never felt like it needed to be doubled for strength. I will be spinning to sew more in the future, probably with this spindle.

Type of fiber used for sewing thread	Amount spun	Length	Inches per gram of fiber	Wraps per inch
BFL	3g	980” (27.25 yd)	326”/g	36 wpi
BFL	5g	1151.5” (32 yd)	230”/g	27 wpi
BFL	5g	955.5” (26.5 yd)	191”/g	30 wpi
Manx Loaghtan	4g	931” (26 yd)	233”/g	27wpi
Manx Loaghtan	2g	672” (18.6 yd)	336”/g	34 wpi
Totals & Averages	*19g total*	*4690” (130.2 yd)*	*avg 263.2”/g*	*avg 30.8 wpi*

VIGOLFR’S MENDED TUNIC

I made this tunic in 2009, before I concerned myself overmuch with period colors, fabric patterns, and method of construction, so it was originally machine sewn and this plaid weave is very much not documentable. However, I discovered a few months ago that it has been subject to a very period type of damage: it got moth-eaten. This event was excellent incentive to mend it sooner rather than later. *The submission is the mending and resewing, rather than the tunic itself.*

My inspiration for this artifact is the Bernusthfeld Tunic (Appendix A), found in Lower Saxony in 1907. This bog body was dated to 680–775 CE, and his tunic was made of over 40 patches, comprising nearly 20 different fabrics in 9 different weaves. The fabric used showed wear from other uses, possibly garments, in a variety of twill patterns and rarely, plain weave. Some pieces are held double, while some are only a single layer.

The pattern I used for this tunic is based on Nockert Type 1 (fig. 10) and Type 5 (fig.11). I used scrap from my scrap bin for patches and spun the thread to sew the patches on. I also decided to finish the seam allowances, which was not done when the tunic was made, and subsequently decided that the whole thing needed to be resewn wherever possible. On one side, there are extensive holes near the seams, but I was able to carefully pull that apart and resew the seam allowances and seam, and then sewed on a massive patch to cover the holes and support the weakened fabric.

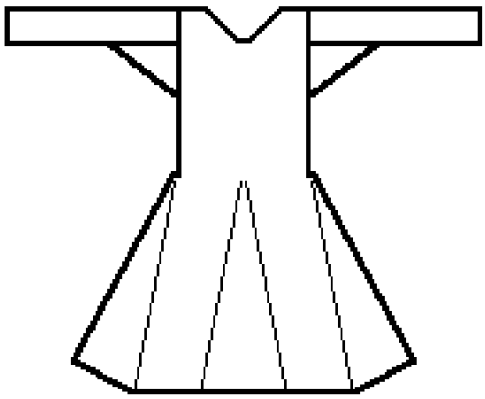

figure 10

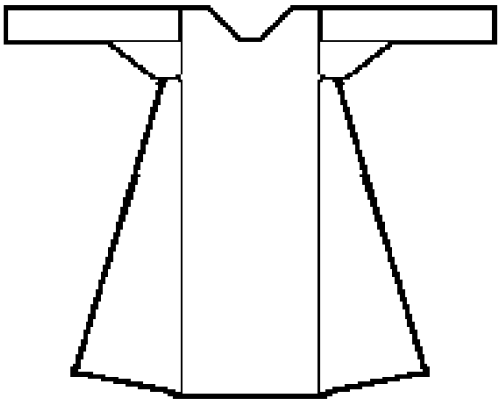

figure 11

I used my handspun wool to sew the patches and seams, using which ever thread I set my hand to: both the white BFL and the brown Manx Loaghtan. I used whichever fabrics suited my fancy, at whatever angle I felt like affixing it. Most of the holes were small, so I put the patch on the outside of the garment, just to prevent them getting bigger. When I patched the largest holes, on the hem (fig.12) and on one side, I put the patch underneath, cut away the remaining threads, and sewed the raw edges to the patch with a whip stitch (fig. 13).

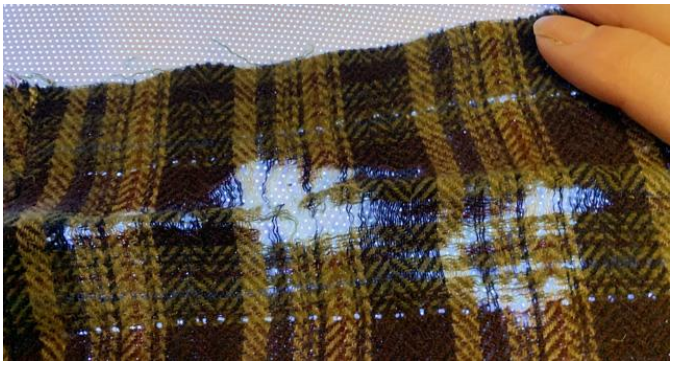

figure 12

figure 13

There are a couple of reasons why I didn't do this with the smaller holes. Firstly, there are just so many of them, and they are very small. The underside method of patching is overkill for such small holes. Secondly, sewing on a patch and then sewing the edges of the holes to the patch takes up thread that is not necessary to use. When you're spinning the thread you're sewing with, you think about every stitch.

There are 62 of patches on the tunic, and 421 inches of resewn seams, requiring three passes over each seam: one pass on each seam allowance and one to whip stitch the seam together. At approximately 5 stitches per inch, I sewed 6,315 stitches, give or take.

I did not redo the facing on the neckline (I now bind my necklines rather than installing facings); it's neat and tidy and I didn't see the point in running the risk of screwing it up. I did have stem stitch worked in DMC embroidery floss around the edges to hide machine stitching; I replaced this with wool stitching spun from some Ashland Bay roving I had kicking around my studio.

Gunna's Wooden Weaving Tablets

The inspiration for these tablets was the set of tablets found on the Oseberg ship (fig. 14). They were probably maple, approximately 2" on a side, and really irregular. The holes did not line up, and there seem to have been extra holes for some reason.

figure 14

I made my tablets using 1.5" x 1/8" maple stock, cut with an electric jigsaw. I did not really try to make the tablets square or make sure that all the holes lined up. In fact, I measured the width of the stock against my finger, then used that measurement to determine the length I would cut off. The cuts weren't particularly perpendicular to the edge, and unfortunately, I got a lot of tearout, but I sanded down the rough corners and abated all the other edges and corners to reduce snagging on the warp. I drilled the holes with a 5/32" bit – I would have used a pin vise, but I couldn't fit a large enough bit in mine.

Gunna's Tablet Woven Trim

The inspiration for this item was, again, the Oseberg ship burial. This pattern, from the 9th century, is warp-patterned and very simple to execute. The original was silk and linen, but I chose to use wool (I mean, I was spinning anyway). I am capable of more complex designs, but is Gunna? Given that she now has to make more fabric for her husband, as well as making herself a new dress, it follows that she might not want to spend the time making something really complex, but still wanted to make something to jazz up her dress.

I have woven with a wool/acrylic blend thread before, and it was difficult, as the thread created lint rings around the crosses in the warp, so unweaving, when I made a mistake, was a challenge in breaking this lint locks. It was not an experience I ever wanted to recreate.

Type of fiber used for weaving yarn	Amount spun	Length	Inches per gram of fiber	Wraps per inch
BFL	5g	735” (20.5 yd)	147”/g	
BFL	4g	480” (13.3 yd)	120”/g	
BFL	3g	465” (13 yd)	155”/g	
BFL	5g	552” (15.3 yd)	110”/g	
Manx Loaghtan	4g	408” (11.3 yd)	102”/g	

Luckily, weaving with my handspun is very much unlike weaving with a commercial wool blend thread. I don’t know if it’s because this is a tighter spun thread, the lack of acrylic, the wooden cards, or the fact that I’m weaving using a backstrap rather than an inkle loom, but I have not experienced the same lint rings tying the warp together as I did before. I unwove about 3cm to fix an error, and any problems I had were attributable to my not opening the shed fully and basically misweaving. The thread that I made holds up really well to the cards; I haven’t noticed any particular wear on the warp. The resulting band is firm and not at all fuzzy, and I may well use it when I finish weaving it.

I had always disliked backstrap weaving. Prior experience led me to believe that it was difficult and uncomfortable, but again, that seems to be due to inexperience and improper setup. I didn’t have a securely fixed point to tie the far end to, and I put the belt to hold the near end around my waist instead of my hips, which hurt my back. Now that I know better and tied my warp to the shelves where I store my fabric (weighty indeed), and put the band at my hips, not only is it easy to weave, but I might actually use this method in future.

I was surprised at how easy it was to weave with my irregularly shaped tablets with the holes that don’t line up. I just leaned forward a tiny bit to lighten up the tension on the warp, rotated the cards and made sure that I had a good shed, and then leaned back to reestablish warp tension. And it’s certainly a lot easier to alleviate the twist buildup behind the cards; all you have to do is secure the cards, untie the far end, and push out the twist.

Moving forward, I think that I will spin a bit more finely to weave. I will experiment with different cards and looms to see what works best, but I can definitely see a lot more spinning and band weaving in my future.

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GLOSSARY

BARONESS TASHA MEDVEDEVA

- Andean plying method: A method of plying yarn from one yarn source.
- backstrap: a weaving method that stretches the warp between a fixed point and a strap around the weaver's back.
- biconical: shaped like two cones with their bases together.
- Blue-Faced Leicester: a longwool breed of sheep which evolved from a breeding scheme of Robert Bakewell, in Dishley, Leicestershire in the eighteenth century.
- bottom whorl: a suspended spindle with the weight at the bottom of the shaft. This spindle will spin slower and is generally best suited for spinning thicker yarns and heavier fibers. Also called a low-whorl spindle.
- combed top: commercially combed in one direction. Hand combed fiber prodices the same results on a smaller scale. This preparation is best suited for spinning worsted yarn.
- cop: the cone-shaped accumulation of yarn wound around the shaft of a spindle.
- finger-spun: length of yarn formed by twisting between the fingers, without use of a spindle or wheel.
- half-hitch: a knot formed by passing the end of a rope round its standing part and then through the loop, often used in pairs.
- inkle loom: a loom made up of several pegs arranged horizontally on a frame, around which the warp is wound to hold it under tension for weaving.
- leader: a string tied to the spindle to which the fiber is attached to start spinning.
- Manx Loaghtan: a primitive breed of sheep from the Isle of Man, typically bearing a dark brown fleece
- moorit: naturally occurring brown fleece
- niddy-noddy: tool used to make skeins from yarn. It consists of a central bar, with crossbars at each end, offset from each other by 90°.
- pin vise: a miniature drill or twist drill, similar to a hand drill. It can hold very small drill bits, reamers, small files and other miniature tools. It has a chuck head which can be removed for different-sized collets to be inserted.
- shed: the temporary separation between upper and lower warp yarns through which the weft is passed.
- single: the single ply of yarn that is spun from fiber
- spindle: a tool for spinning fiber consisting of a rod, or shaft, and a whorl, or weight.
- spindle shaft: rod portion of a spindle upon which the spun yarn is wound. Typically made of wood.
- spindle whorl: weight portion of a spindle which increases and maintains the speed of the spin and reduces wobble. Over the centuries, whorls have been made of stone, ceramic, bone, wood, and metal, to name a few materials.
- s-plied: plied counter-clockwise, so that the fibers lay in a diagonal from upper left to lower right, like the central line of a letter S.
- stem stitch: an embroidery stitch forming a continuous line of long, overlapped stitches, typically used to represent narrow stems.
- tearout: broken or torn wood fibers resulting from damage as the blade of a tool exits a cut.
- thigh roll: a method of top-whorl spindle spinning where the spinner pushes the spindle down the side of the thigh to impart a fast spin. This method is recommended for fine worsted spinning.
- threaded-in: generally a repeating geometric design, where the cards are threaded such that turning in a prescribed order (continuously forward, or four forward, four back, for example) results in the pattern automatically appearing.
- top whorl: spindle with the weight at the top of the shaft, suitable for thigh-rolling.

- warp: the set of yarns stretched in place on a loom before the weft is introduced during weaving.
- weft: the threads that run horizontally on the loom and get woven in front of and behind the warp.
- worsted: a spinning technique which produces a smooth yarn in which the fibres lie parallel.
- wraps per inch (wpi): a method of measuring a yarn's thickness by wrapping it around an object with uniform thickness, such a pencil or ruler, and counting the number of wraps over one covered inch. WPI is often used to determine the sett for weaving, or how many threads one needs per inch of weaving width.
- z-spun: spun clockwise, so that the fibers lay in a diagonal from upper right to lower left, like the central line of a letter Z.

SCAN BELOW TO WATCH ME PLY YARN
USING THE ANDEAN PLYING METHOD

BUILT
FJORD
TOUGH

WATCH NOW

THE MANX LOAGHTAN

ABOUT THE BREED

The Manx Loaghtan is one of the oldest and most striking breeds of sheep in the UK. Termed 'a primitive rare breed' it is classed at as 'at risk' by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.

The Manx Loaghtan (pronounced Manx Lockton) is fine boned and late maturing, producing a meat with distinctive taste and flavour. As well as being tastier than commercial lamb it is also healthier. The Scottish Agricultural Colleges found the Manx Loaghton to be 23 per cent lower in fat and almost 10 per cent lower in cholesterol than commercial breeds.

The Manx Loaghtan is a hardy mountain sheep, with impressive horns and a dark brown fleece. Four horned rams are particularly striking. The breed has been around unchanged since the Iron Age. Traditionally the Manx was thought to have been introduced into the UK by the Vikings, but bone records from archaeological sites indicate the Manx was probably already here and probably pre-dates Viking invasions.

The breed takes its name from the colour of its fleece, derived from two Manx words *Lugh* (mouse) and *Dhoan* (brown) or from *Lhost dhoan* (burnt brown). The lambs are born jet black acquiring the distinctive fleece by the time they are weaned.

The Manx Loaghtan used to exist in high numbers on the Isle of Man and across the UK. However by the 1950s there were only a handful left. Today, as with many rare breeds, it is found in a few small flocks around the UK.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RARE BREEDS

The march of industrialised farming has discarded those breeds that don't fit with commercial production. The result is a farming system centred around a handful of animal breeds, crops and vegetables. Many breeds once common in the UK have become isolated and some extinct. Those traditional breeds at risk include the Manx Loaghtan.

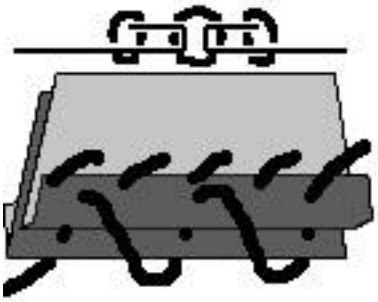
Excerpt from “The Manx Loaghtan Breed”, https://langleychase.co.uk/pages/the-manx-loaghtan-breed

JOINING A WOOL SEAM

For wool, mostly because it tends to felt to itself over time, I like to turn the seam allowances and sew them down *before* joining the seam. Admittedly this works best with straight seams; curves usually require clipping. Since I make early period garb, which has very few curved seams, I'm good to go.

FINISHING THE EDGE

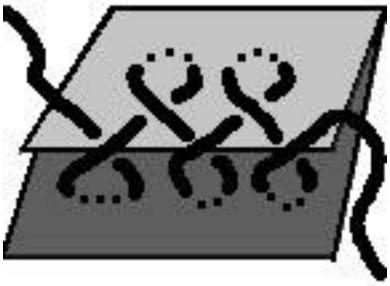
Using a hem gauge, turn the edges of your garment pieces to the appropriate depth. (Don't turn the hems; you want to work those last.) Turn only a single fold; because wool will felt, you don't need to double turn it to enclose the raw edges, as you would with more delicate fabrics. When I sew the edges, I use a hem stitch and make sure that the stitches that catch the main part of the piece are perpendicular to the edge. I think it looks tidier (and I have a wicked hard time making them parallel).



From Archaeological Sewing, Heather Rose Jones

This works best with a closely woven fabric, stitched with a wool or wool-blend thread.

For a more loosely woven fabric, like a herringbone twill, I use a herringbone stitch that covers the edge, to prevent fraying. I make these stitches deeper than I might on a smoother, more tightly woven fabric so that they don't pull out.

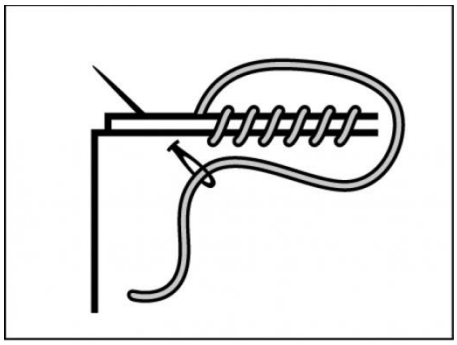


From Archaeological Sewing, Heather Rose Jones

Both of these techniques end up working fairly quickly once you get the hang of them. If you're concerned about keeping your stitches even and regular, you can use a ruler and pen to mark your fabric, or you can get a product like Tiger Tape (available on Amazon), which has regularly spaced markings. With practice, however, you'll find that you will make your stitches neat and even as a matter of course.

Joining the Seam

Once the seam allowances are sewn down, joining the seam is done using a very familiar technique: you hold right sides together and whip stitch the seam closed, taking small stitches through the edge of the fabric. This creates a rather elastic seam, so it might not be the best technique for seams under strain. Stitching closely does alleviate this stretchiness, however. This technique was found in Hedeby, a Norse market town in what is now Northern Germany.



Overcast Stitch

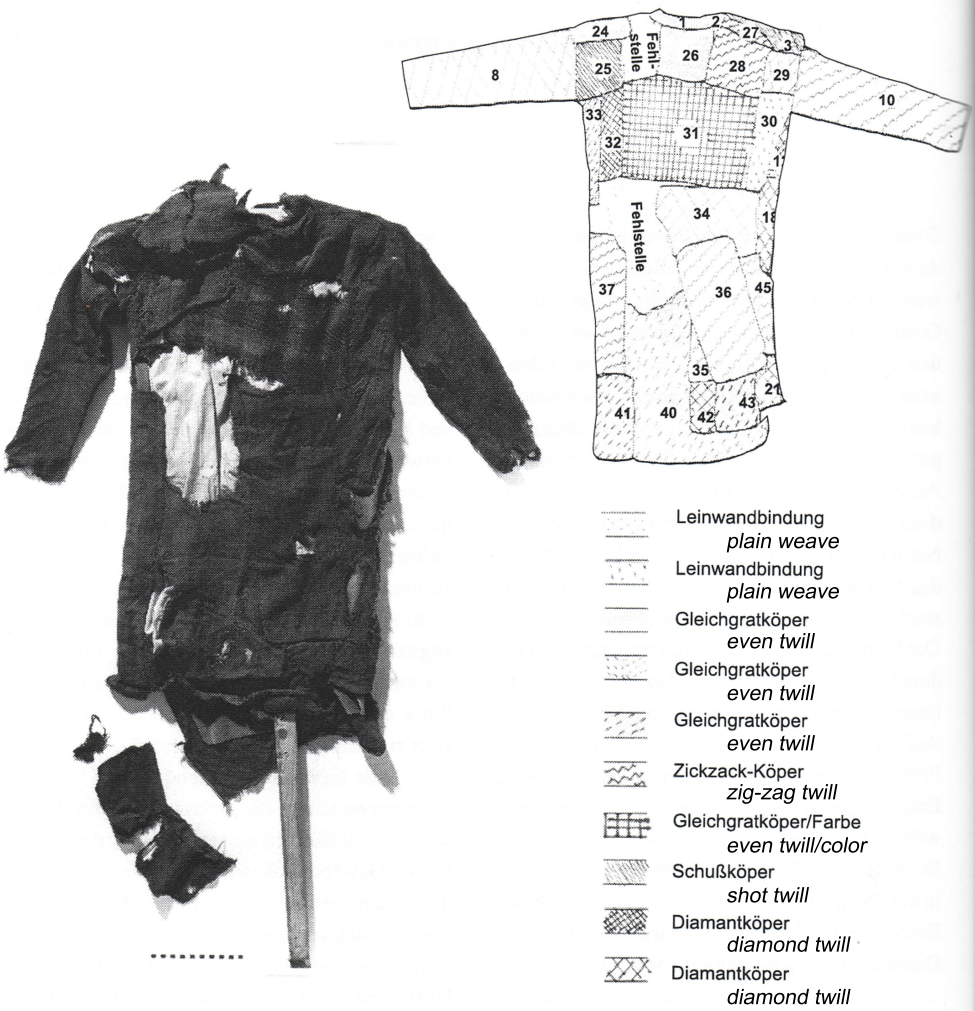


Abb. 1. *Männerkittel aus Bernuthsfeld. Vorderteil vor der Konservierung. Foto: Möller Archäolog. Landesmuseum Schleswig. Zeichnung nach Hahne, neu erstellt Farke.*