

Nalbinding in the Faroe Islands?

Nálabinding í Føroyum?

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Úrtak

Á goymsluni á Føroya Fornminnissavni eru varðveittar nálir, sum fornfrøðingar hava funnið í grevstrum í Kvívík og Tjørnuvík. Hesar nálir kunnu bera prógv um at føroyingar nálabundu áðrenn teir lærdu at binda í 16. øld. At bundnar vørur vóru høvuðsútlutningsvøra Føroyinga í 17. og 18. øld er kanska orsøkin til at nálabinding, sum er ein meira tíðarkrevjandi tekstilur teknikkur, doyði út. Ein tulkning av Tarnovius ber kanska prógv um at fólk nálabundu í Føroyum í 17. øld. Eingir nálabundnir gripir eru varðveittir, sum kunna prógva at so er, og próvføri í kelduni er eisini veikt.

Sjálvt um nálirnar til nálabinding eru einfaldar eru tær eyðkendar. Nárlirnar úr Kvívík og Tjørnuvík bera kanska haldgott prógv um at føroyingar nálabundu, áðrenn teir lærdu at binda.

Abstract

Archaeological findings of needles, now in the collection of Føroya Fornminnissavn, from Kvívík and Tjørnuvík, may indicate that nalbinding did exist as a textile technique in pre-modern Faroe Islands before knitting was introduced in the 16th century. Large-scale knitting dominated the export from the Faroes during the 17th and 18th centuries and may be the reason why the more time-consuming nalbinding technique did not survive. An interpretation of a passage in Tarnovius might, however, indicate that nalbinding was still used in the Faroes in the 17th century. No textile artefacts support this conclusion, and the evidence in the source is weak, so the passage in Tarnovius must be treated with much care.

Although the needles for nalbinding are simple in their construction, they do have a specific and recognisable form. The needles in the collection of Føroya Fornminnissavn from Kvívík and Tjørnuvík may confirm the conclusion that nalbinding was known earlier in the Faroes.

Introduction

Sheep have probably existed as domesticated animals in the Faroe Islands for as long as there have been human settlements. Shepherding was one of the main economic activities in the pre-industrial Faroe Islands. Some scholars believe that sheep have actually bestowed their name to the islands – ‘Sheep Islands’. Sheep may be viewed as a key symbol of the traditional local culture (Ortner, 1973). They yield mutton, intestines, blood, horn, bone, lard and manure, but wool and skin have always been significant products. The usage of wool and skin was probably the main reason, why human beings domesticated sheep (Hjärpe and Olsen, 2001). Being able to manufacture leather from sheepskin for clothing, such as shoes and outdoor jackets and trousers, was

important for the inhabitants of the Faroes in the pre-industrial period (Olsen and Svanberg, 1998). Our viewpoint is that the human being has always been able to manage resources for economic purposes, and has constantly been adapting to changes wrought by external conditions (Svanberg 2001a; b). We shall demonstrate the viability of this idea through examining the local textile techniques, which have changed during the centuries.

Thanks to archaeological discoveries of various implements, such as spindle-whorls and warp weights, we know that spinning and weaving on warp-weighted looms were techniques during the Viking age of the Faroe Islands. Findings from the Viking site of Kvívík for instance support this conclusion (Dahl, 1951). Spindle-whorls made of e.g. lead, steatite and a local red tuff have also been unearthed at a medieval site at Leirvík (Arge, 1997: 32). But it is beyond our power to fully ascertain how the textile techniques were used in the Faroes during the Viking and Middle Ages. Few textile fragments have been found which could be analysed (Diklev, 1980: 24; Arge and Østergaard, 2002). Knitting was probably not introduced to the islands until the early 16th century. Sverri Dahl mentions, however, in his report on the findings from the excavation at the Viking settlement in Kvívík, two needles of wood, which attract our interest (Dahl, 1951: 87). There are unfortunately no further descriptions and details available on the needles, but in July 1966, another ten wooden needles were found in the site 'Á Grundini' at Tjørnuvík (Fmnr 4601), see fig. 1.

Although forests have been absent for as long as human beings existed on the islands, the inhabitants have always managed to construct buildings and manufacture tools and domestic utensils by relying on wood brought from abroad or driftwood, cast ashore by the ocean currents (Jóhansen, 1985; Malmros, 1994; Arge, 1997: 35; Svanberg, 1998a: 86).

Regarding the needles from Kvívík, Dahl did not provide any interpretation of their possible use, and other scholars have yet to examine them more closely. Dahl only reports that similar needles are known from Norse settlements in Greenland. No written analyses of the needles from Tjørnuvík have so far been published.

Needles in Archaeological Records

Occurrence of needles is known from excavations of Viking and medieval settlements and graves in other Nordic countries. Sewing needles made of iron or bronze are usually between 2 and 6.5 centimetres, but it is difficult to decide the difference between sewing needles and pieces of jewellery. Other materials used for needles are bone, elk antler and wood (Slomann, 1967; Norberg, 1967; Westman, 1986: 55; Anderson, 2003: 83–87, 127–130). A report from an excavation in central Lund in Sweden, with findings from around year 1000, discusses various kinds of needles. Around thirty needles were then discovered in the soil. Most of them were made of bone. The authors state, that it is hardly possible to determine the use of the needles, but they suggest three conceivable fields of applications. A large kind of needle with widening

handles was probably used as shuttle for weaving in warp-weighted looms. Needles lesser in the size – around 10 centimetres – might have been used for making a pattern in the texture. A third way of using the needles has been to make textiles in a special technique known as *nalbinding* (Blomqvist and Mårtensson, 1963: 176). Commenting on needles in archaeological context, a textile historian suggests a fourth use for needles with a sharp point and a round cross section; until recently Shetland fishermen used such needles to repair their woollen sails (Andersson, 1996: 17). As Andersson (2003: 87) in a recent study points out, a needle with an eye need not to have been used as a textile tool at all. They could, for instance, have been used as stylus.

Nalbinding needles seem to be prevalent at Nordic excavations. Lindström (1976) describes 44 needles with eyes, found at another excavation in Lund. These needles were made of bone and antler. The author states, despite the fact they vary in shape and design, that most of them are probably used for nalbinding. Some of them were made of fibula from swine, which is a material used until recently for such needles in both Sweden and Norway. The bone needles are polished slightly and have a flat and in some cases round cross-section: some of them have decorations. Needles have also been found in early medieval sites in Uppsala, Sweden. Franzén (1963: 40) describes two such needles, one of bone and the other of wood. These needles are 8 to 10 centimetres in length. A pointed stick with a hole in the end from the Viking settlement of Elisenhof (southern Jylland) in

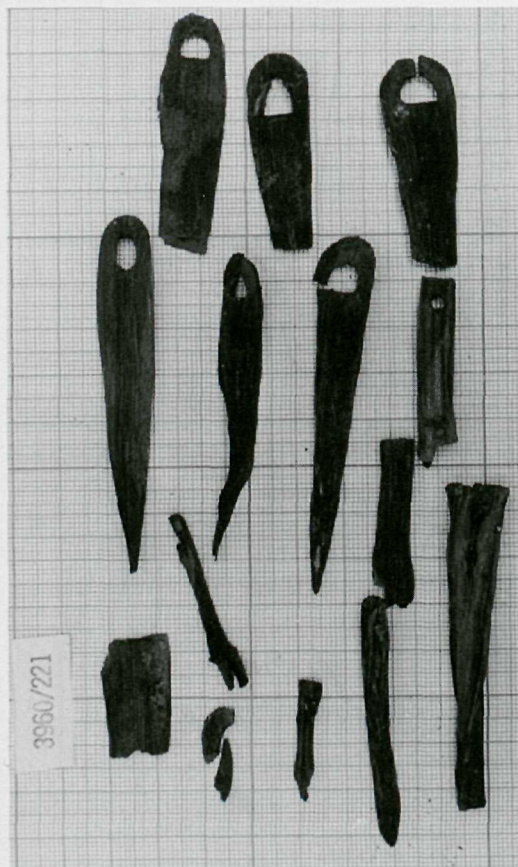


Fig. 1. Needles from Tjørnuvík discovered in July 1966 (Fmnr 4601). The needles are of two different kinds. Seven of them are thin, flat and has a semicircular or a circular hole in one end. Three of the needles are thinner and evenly cut at the upper end with a small circular hole. (Courtesy: Føroya Fornminissavn).

contemporary Germany is construed to be a wooden needle for nalbinding (Grenander Nyberg, 1989: 90). One similar needle in wood was also found during excavations at the Norse settlement of Sandnes in Greenland (Roussell, 1936: 135, 189).

Hald (1950: 283) describes and illus-

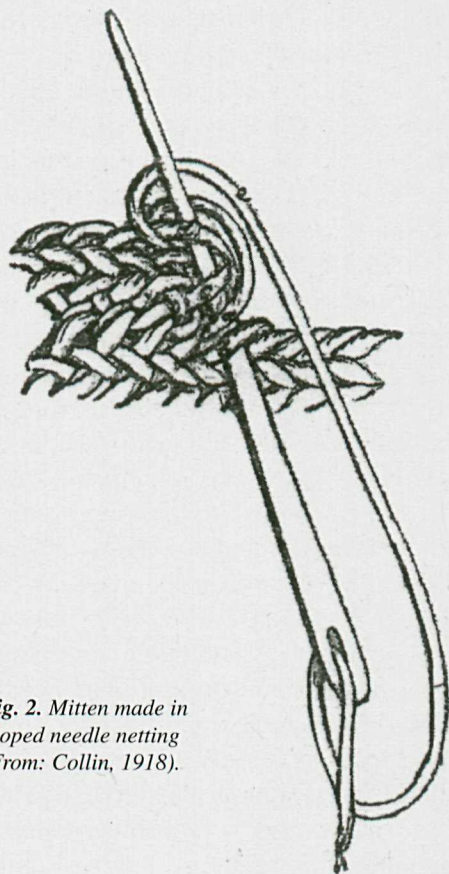


Fig. 2. Mitten made in looped needle netting (From: Collin, 1918).

trates needles of bone, which, according to her, have been used for nalbinding. They are the same size and shape as those in the archaeological finds of Sweden and are even similar to contemporary nalbinding needles. The needles described by Hald are dated to the Viking Age, but similar needles from the Neolithic period have been found in Denmark. Crude bone needles are also described amongst the findings from Ribe. It is suggested that they had been used for nalbinding. However, another possibility, according to Bender Jørgensen, is that they

actually are dress pins (Bender Jørgensen, 1991: 67). Some bone pins from Brattahlid in Greenland, which in shape and size are similar to modern needles for nalbinding, are interpreted as hair-pins rather than needles. However, in the early 1930s, most archaeologists were hardly aware of nalbinding. It has not been possible to date them, but they seem to be from the Middle Ages (Nörlund and Stenberg, 1934: 137).

Nalbinding

Nalbinding is an ancient textile technique, which requires needles of the same size and shape as the needles found in Tjørnuvík. The technique is for producing a looped fabric, and relies on an eyed needle threaded with a relatively short length of yarn. There are several different forms of nalbinding known and used in various parts of the world, see fig. 2. The technique is also known as *looping*, *needle-knitting*, *eyed- or single-needle knitting* and *knotless netting*. Textile historians have characterised the technique as simple interconnected looping or lateral linked looping (Seiler-Baldinger, 1994: 13). Rutt (1987: 8), who has written an indispensable book on knitting, suggests *nalbinding* for a technical term in the English language.

Nalbinding has existed in many different parts of the world and the technique has often been used for producing nets, string bags and baskets (Danielson, 1981: 9; Seiler-Baldinger, 1994: 13–16). Ancient garments produced in the nalbinding technique, mostly socks and mittens, are found in various archaeological sites. A well-known Egyptian sock made in a nalbinding

technique is probably from AD 300 to 500 (Schinnerer, 1895: 22–25). This particular sock has erroneously been described as an example of early knitting in many popular books. Analysis of other Coptic collections from Egypt confirms that the found fabrics were produced in a nalbinding technique (Turnau, 1983: 369). Other examples of textile items made in the nalbinding technique are also found in the Middle East, e.g. textile fragments excavated at Dura-Europos in Syria in 1922, dated to the year AD 256 (Rutt, 1987: 28–29). Fragments made in this technique are also found in Novgorod in Russia. One of them dates from the 10th century, while the others are from the Middle Ages. The so-called Coppergate sock from York was also made in a nalbinding technique (Walton, 1989: 342).

Viking and medieval textiles clearly in the nalbinding technique are found at various archaeological sites of Iceland, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. The oldest examples of nalbinding in the Nordic countries are textile fragments of plant fibres from Bolkilde bog on Als and the settlement Tybrind Vig in Denmark dating from BC 3,400 and BC 4,200 respectively, i.e. the Neolithic period (Bender Jørgensen, 1987: 65). A mitten from Arnheiðarstaðir in Iceland might be from the 10th century (Hald, 1951). Medieval mittens have also been found in Lund, Copenhagen and Oslo (Hald, 1945; 1950: 309; Nordland, 1961: 43). Medieval socks in the nalbinding technique were found in Uppsala and Söderköping in Sweden (Franzén, 1963: 44). An almost intact mitten was discovered 1918 by a farmer in the Åsle bog, in the Swedish province of

Västergötland (Arbman and Strömberg, 1934). It has for a long time been dated to Iron Age, but newer investigation shows that it is much younger (Nockert and Posnert, 2002: 65–66). A mitten found in Tuukkala, Finland is supposed to date from the 14th century (Ahlbäck, 1943: 138; Kaukonen, 1960: 44). A fillet at Mammen, Bjerlinghøj, in Denmark, has been dated to the 10th century; with inlaid golden centres, the fillet was made in a nalbinding technique (Hald, 1950: 109–111; Hansen, 1992).

Nalbinding is probably also mentioned in two Norse texts. The word *bandvetlingar* in the sentence *Móðir mín, segir hann, fá þu mér út krókstafminn ok bandvetlinga*, reproduced in *Fornmannasögur*, might, according to Hoffman (1967: 427), refer to mittens made in a nalbinding technique. Another text is found from a bone needle excavated in Lund. It is written with runes and says *tofana • skefniG*, i.e. ‘the *skävning* of Anna Tove’ (Blomquist and Mårtensson, 1963: 176). *Skävning* is probably a name of the nalbinding technique.

We may therefore state that there is an ancient textile technique, which requires needles of the size and shape that were found in Tjørnuvík, Faroe Islands.

Recent Use of Nalbinding

The nalbinding technique has survived in some regions of Sweden, Finland and Norway, where it has been used to make small garments, suited for the cold climate in the North (Ahlbäck, 1943; Hald, 1950: 313–314; Kaukonen, 1960; Danielson, 1981; Westman, 1986; Liby *et al.*, 2003). It is also known from Karelia, Ingermanland and



Fig. 3. Needle to make shoe liner, Björkvattnet, Swedish Lapland (From: Campbell, 1942).

Estonia (Ahlbäck, 1943: 139). Labourers, such as lumberjacks, fisherman and hunters, appreciated mittens, socks and other footwear made in the nalbinding technique (Campbell, 1942: 114; Odstedt, 1953: 430). The great regard of the superiority of such mittens was perceived in the Finnish saying: 'He who wore knitted mittens had an unskilled wife' (Kaukonen, 1960: 48). Nalbinding was still practised among Swedish-speaking islanders along the Estonian coast in the 19th century (Söderbeck, 1940: 113).

Until recently a nalbinding technique was used to make milk strainers out of hairs of cow-tail or goat in Sweden, Norway and Iceland (Hald, 1950: 313; Eldjárn, 1960; Nordland, 1961: 108–112; Ankert, 1982; Hjärpe and Olsen, 2001). 'The women sieve the milk through tofos planos [flat mats] made from the hair from cows' tail,' Carl Linnaeus observed at Åbacka in Västerbotten in May 1732 (Linnaeus, 2003: 30). During the early years of the 20th century, fishermen from the Danish West Coast still made shoes and other garments in the nalbinding technique during the winter. Margrethe Hald writes about an old man, who during a stay on the island Føhr had learned and used nalbinding in his youth (Hald, 1950: 310–311).

The needles used for nalbinding in the historical records were often quite large

and they were made of wood, bone, antler or metal. It was common to use fibular bone from swine (*Sus scrofa*) for needles. Some needles were made of the fibular bone of sheep (*Ovis aries*). Also needles of hare (*Lepus timidus*) bone is known (Hyltén-Cavallius, 1868: 123; Collin, 1918: 73; Ankert, 1982: 64; Dahl, 1987: 343; ULMA 8933; ULMA 2424: 3), see fig. 3. The eyes were usually in one end or in the middle and the needles were blunt, in contrast to awls or prickers (Campbell, 1942: 114; Kaukonen, 1960: 52).

A common feature for nalbinding needles is that they vary in material, size and design. The nalbinding needles used nowadays are usually made of wood, antler from elk (*Alces alces*) and reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) or plastic, but any hard material will do. Those who make use of the nalbinding technique seem to agree upon the fact that the form, material and design are subordinate. Many practitioners actually seem to find joy in making their own personal design, see fig. 4.

Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing interest in nalbinding for making mittens, socks and caps; and we may talk of a resurgence of the technique in the Scandinavian countries. Nalbinding-needles and descriptions are readily available in handicraft stores and practical handbooks are available in Danish, Swedish and English

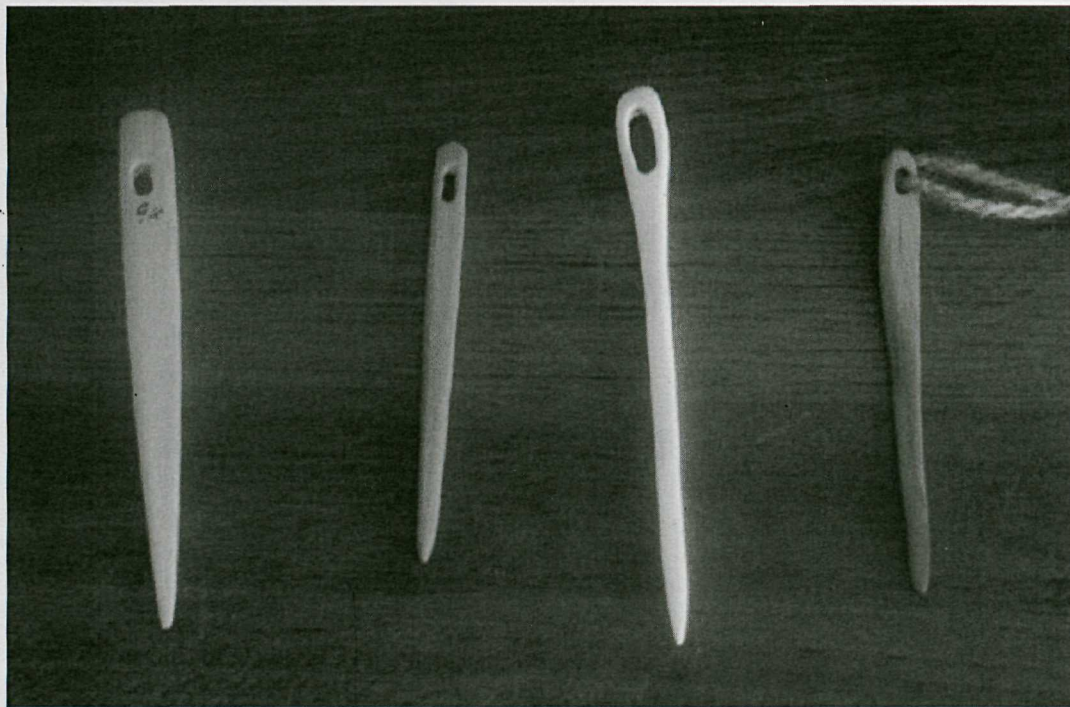


Fig. 4. Contemporary Swedish needles for nalbinding made of elk antler and various kinds of wood (Photo: Ingvar Svanberg).

(e.g. Brodén, 1981). On the Internet there are several WebPages that deal with nalbinding.

Written Records of Nalbinding in the Faroes?

Many textile historians conclude that knitting has replaced the nalbinding technique (Svensson, 1941: 145; Wintzell, 1963: 105; Turnau, 1991: 14). Large-scale knitting dominated the export from the Faroes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and may be the reason why the more time-consuming nalbinding technique did not survive. Norwegian ethnologist Odd Nordland explicitly states, that nalbind-

ing is not known to have been practised in the Faroes in later generations (Nordland, 1961: 99).

An interpretation of a written source might indicate that nalbinding was still used in the Faroes in the 17th century. There is a passage in Tarnovius 1669: 'oc den gemene mand naar de sidde inde i huset og arbeide, da bruge de huer, som de self der *knytte* og *binde*' ['and the common people, when they are sitting indoor working, use caps that they make by *knytte* and knitting'] (Tarnovius, 1950: 69). Danish scholar Tornehave (1964) suggests, in an elucidative study based on linguistic arguments, that the verb *knytte*, in the referred

article actually means nalbinding. She argues that nalbinding co-existed with true knitting in the 17th century in the Faroes. No textile artefacts support her conclusion, and the evidence in the source is weak, so we think the passage in Tarnovius must be treated with much care.

From the viewpoint of a textile historian, the presence of nalbinding during the Middle Ages is of great interest in studying the introduction of knitting in the Faroes. It is much likely that nalbinding existed in the Faroes before knitting was introduced in the 16th century. Archaeological records from other Norse settlements in Scandinavia and the British Isles support our conclusion. When evidences in the written records fail, the use of recorded folkloristic and linguistic evidences is, of course, one way of tracing otherwise forgotten traditional techniques and knowledge (Svanberg, 1997; 1998b; 2001c; 2003). Tornehave has through linguistic arguments suggested the presence of nalbinding in the Faroes, although her argument is not fully convincing.

The form of certain tools fulfils very specific functional requirements. Although the needles for nalbinding are simple in their construction, they do have a specific and recognisable form. The needles in the collection of Føroya Fornminnisavni from Kvívík and Tjørnuvík may confirm such a conclusion.

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