

# The Folk High School of Bäckedal: Education in Ancient Techniques\*

**The Folk High School of Bäckedal offers courses of ancient techniques where the participants can learn the basics of a wide range of traditional techniques and handicrafts.**

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In the middle of Sweden, in the forests close to the southern mountain range that separates Sweden and Norway, in the province of Härjedalen, which is a part of the South Sami area, sits Bäckedal's folk high school. Sveg is the main settlement with a population of 3000 inhabitants, however, the province has less than one person per square kilometre. The school is beautifully situated with the river Ljusnan on one side and forest on the other. Some of the material needed in the courses can be collected from these surroundings.

The courses of ancient techniques were started in 1982 by Tomas Johansson, one of the founders of EXARC. The programmes/activities have expanded and developed over time. At Bäckedal you can attend a shorter course, from a weekend up to a month focusing on a certain technique, or a two-term course. This basic course, "Man – Nature – Technique", contains various techniques and handicrafts and can therefore give an overall picture of ancient everyday life. The specialised courses are dedicated to techniques related to textiles, leather, fur and metalwork. There is also the possibility of taking an advanced course where you enter more deeply into your own project. The courses are taken not only by students

from Sweden, and neighbouring countries, but also as far as U.S.A., New Zealand, Russia, Japan and, as you will see later, from the Czech Republic.

## Our goals

Our goal is to create the possibility for the participants to learn the basics of a wide range of traditional techniques and handicrafts, which are sourced from either the archaeological material or the still-living knowledge of subsistence households. As what we call ancient techniques can also be the contemporary knowledge of traditional, non-industrialized societies.

At the same time we try to give a picture of how the techniques have been developed over thousands of years based on human needs and the availability of material. It is important to us that we have a holistic approach to the courses. We also want to inspire the participants to develop their knowledge. Many questions and discussions arise in the dialogue between teachers and students that lead to experiments and, hopefully, new knowledge and further the development of the courses. The students often continue to develop their own specialisation after having completed the course. Some of them return to our school later as lecturers or teachers.

## Which needs do our courses fulfil?

On our courses there is room for students with different interests and circumstances. This includes people interested in history who seek answers to their questions, archaeologists who want to understand how a flint arrowhead is made, and also those with a passionate

interest for old handicrafts who wish to gain a skill. There is a strong yearning by many people to create with their hands.

Practical work with old techniques allows one to understand earlier societies, but it also gives a new perspective on our modern society. For example, to dye fabrics with plants raises such questions as how, where and by whom are textiles dyed today. Environmental consciousness brings a wish to relinquish or to replace that which we consume with things we make ourselves. Ancient techniques become not only a way of getting to know our history but also a contribution to the preservation of resources and a sustainable future.

## The workshops

Participants in the course "Man – Nature – Technique" investigate the usefulness of birch-bark. They make receptacles and boxes of different designs. Inspiration is drawn from the birch-bark containers of Ötzi, "the Man in the ice", as well as from the beautiful birch-bark boxes from the peasant society of the county of Härjedalen.

The boxes of birch-bark are used when the participants go out in January to live a nomadic life by skiing in the forest on their own homemade skis. The fireside is a crucial place during this time and it is when their theoretical knowledge is put into practice.

The participants in the textile course card wool, which is felted into socks, gloves, hats, etc. The participants already have the basics in distinguishing the quality of the fibre. They



■ Fig. 1-3 Katerians wefttwinning and wooden forms for gloves woven with weft twinning.

start by making a test-piece of felt: How much does the wool shrink? What does the quality feel like? Some of the participants prepare the fermentation of lichen. Petuled rock-tripe (*Umbilicaria hyperborea*) is one of the species of lichen which has been used as an alternative to the roccella lichen. With the ammonia method we can make a purple colour, but how was it done in earlier times? Are there other alternatives to urine and ash lye? Hopefully some of the participants are willing to give it a try.

In the smithy, bloom iron is forged into bars of about 10 centimetres in size which are then used to make wire. As a group they start by pulling the wire on the bench, pulling it through one hole after another,

\* Translation by Maria Brolinson



■ Fig. 4 Fulling of the coat fabric.

the participants' enthusiasm glows as strong as a red-hot melting pot. The moment the thread snaps, the atmosphere in the room instantly changes to one as thick as smoke. Why did the thread snap? Was the iron not pure enough or the carbon content too high? The questions are many; they will try again tomorrow!

Everywhere in the tannery hides hang in different stages of preparation. The hides which have been scraped are tanned with grease, smoke or bark then worked with and softened and sewn into something useful. The skin-tanning techniques of the tundra and taiga are well known. But what techniques are used in other parts of the world, where the burning sun and the lack of water places other demands on the course of action? The needle is an important tool for sewing. How are fine and close seams created with needles and awls of bones using tendons as thread?

Everywhere frantic activity prevails. We are having fun. Fun brings curiosity, which is a driving force.



■ Fig. 5 Jan spinning on the great wheel.

The following report shows projects which two of our students, Jan Rodina and Kateřina Brůňová, pursued during the second year of their stay in Bäckedal.

In the first year of the Folk High School of Bäckedal, we participated in the course about textile techniques. During the second year, we were involved in several of our own projects. We had finished studying archaeology, so we were naturally interested in ancient technologies, particularly textile production.

The oldest archaeological evidence for textile production seems to be clay fragments with the impression of textiles from Moravian Upper Palaeolithic sites dated to some 26 000 years ago (*Adovasio, Soffer, Hyland, Klíma and Svoboda 1999; Heckett 1995*). The impressions have been interpreted as the traces of weave made by weft twining, which is above all utilized in basketry. This technology is known from other prehistoric sites, for example, the Swiss Neolithic lake settlements (*Vogt 1937*), Ötzi's equipment (*Spindler 1996*), and from medieval Moravia and Poland (*Kostelníková 1973*). In these countries and also in Slovakia the weft-twining technology (weaving on a form) is maintained to the present. Ethnographical material from the mountain regions of eastern Moravia and western Slovakia shows the use of this technique to produce woollen gloves,



■ Fig. 6 Jan weaving a shaggy pile fabric.

caps and wrist covers, which have become part of Slovakian folk costume (*Vondrušková – Káprasová 1989*).

The weaving of traditional woollen gloves and wrist covers from the eastern part of Moravia was one of Kateřina's projects. The fundamental instrument for weaving gloves is a wooden form in the shape of a hand without a thumb. The form has cuts and pins for the stretching of the warp. In the case of the wrist cover, the wooden form is in the shape of a forearm with pins for stretching the warp on both sides. Hemp thread was used as the material for the warp in the case of the wrist cover, but woollen threads were used for the gloves. Woollen yarn was used as weft in both cases. Products are woven on the form inside out. In weaving the gloves, the ends of the weft yarns (3-5 cm long) could be left intentionally non-woven, i.e. they hang free and create a soft and warm insulation layer within the gloves. In this way they are similar to the hairy fabrics discussed below.

The first stage of Jan's project was to weave a shaggy pile fabric (it was ultimately used as a carpet, but in traditional craftsmanship was intended for coats). The second stage involved weaving and sewing a traditional woollen coat of the mountain regions of Moravia and Slovakia. Both the shaggy pile fabric and woollen coat are called 'guba' or 'huňa'. Several articles about

shaggy pile coats, written by E. Marková (1964, 1967) and J. Staňková (1951), were used as the basis for our attempts on coarse woollen fabrics.

The idea of supplementary weft-pile textiles has spread all over the world. It is surely not an accident that these textiles resemble fur – one side is plain and the other is shaggy. Considering the old saying "Cloth is the first house for humans", there is a very interesting similarity between weaving pile textiles and the technology of roof building. A lower layer of roofing has to be partly covered by another one to ensure a watertight roof. One can therefore believe that the idea of supplementary weft-pile fabrics is very old. In that connection it is worth noting the possibility of the existence of plaiting during the time of *Homo erectus* (*Balák and Chronc 2001: 174ff*).

The oldest European evidence of 'hairy' fabrics is from Neolithic lake settlements of Switzerland (*Vogt 1937: 20ff*) or Ötzi's cloak (*Spindler 1996: 184ff*), both in vegetable materials. Similar woollen fabrics are found in Danish Bronze Age graves (*Stærmoose Nielsen 1989*). Woollen pile textiles are found outside Europe, namely in Egypt (1400–1450 B.C.) and Mesopotamia (ca. 2500 B.C.) (*Barber 1995: 183, 265*). Shaggy pile cloaks are known also from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire as well as from the Middle Ages and later times. Iconographic, written and archaeological evidence testifies to their common use, for example, in Ireland and Iceland (*Priest-Dorman 2001, Heckett 1992*). Fishermen in Sweden, Norway and the Shetland Islands usually had large fabrics with pile in spun yarn as sleeping equipment on boats. Shaggy pile coats are still used in some parts of Europe (e.g. the Balkan Peninsula, Rumania or Greece). Woollen shaggy pile fabrics have some advantages



■ Fig. 7 Jan's coat.

in comparison to furs. If they become wet it is easier to dry them, and, above all, one does not need to kill an animal, so it is possible to gain wool for several fabrics (though not in one year). In contrast, fur can only be gathered once and normally too little for making clothing (at least three sheep are needed for one fur coat).

Single locks of wool just as they come from the sheep (i.e. not spun) are inserted into the shed of the tabby weave after each third weft and behind each third warp thread in shaggy pile carpets. Easy knots were made only on selvages. Due to the absence of a suitable stream it was not possible to use waterpower for fulling the fabrics as in traditional craftsmanship (Marková 1964, 1967, Marková – Thainová 1960; Staňková 1951, Ekerwald 1994). We therefore used hands and washboards.

Traditional coats of higher price had a denser pile; locks of wool were inserted more often. On the other hand, the cheapest coats had hardly any pile at all. Making one of the cheapest coats was another project. The cut principle for coarse coats is very simple and ancient. Cloths of similar cut have been found, for example, in Danish Bronze Age graves. The cut maximally uses the fabric and waste is minimal or none.

We used hemp thread for sewing the coat. Growing industrial hemp and using it to make paper, thread and fabric was another project in which we participated during the school year 2005/2006. The whole of the year was full of interesting and exciting experiences. The projects were not strictly experiments as they are understood in archaeological literature, but they gave us a new sense for the raw materials, time consumption of production, etc., which creates new dimensions of perception and understanding of the archaeological material.

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## Summary

### L'université Populaire de Bäckedal: Enseignement en techniques anciennes

Situé au centre de la Suède, l'université pour adultes de Bäckedal propose depuis sa création en 1982 par Thomas Johansson des cours d'initiation aux techniques anciennes sous l'intitulé «Homme – Nature – Technique». Profitant de ses ressources environnementales, l'école propose une approche concrète par la pratique de différents artisanats dans une progression sur deux ans.

Les élèves peuvent s'initier au travail du textile: teinture et confection de vêtements, au travail du fer et au tannage.

Les objectifs de la formation sont l'apprentissage des bases techniques des artisanats à partir des sources archéologiques mais aussi ethnologiques. L'évolution des pratiques est aussi enseignée afin d'inciter les étudiants à développer leur propre culture et leurs propres techniques également. Cela devrait leur permettre non seulement de se figurer les pratiques et la vie quotidienne des artisans des sociétés anciennes, mais aussi de se sensibiliser aux perspectives possibles dans le monde moderne, notamment en termes de prise de conscience écologique et de conservation des ressources.

C'est dans cette approche que les auteurs se sont penchés sur les techniques de production textile. Katerina Brunova a travaillé sur la confection de gants et de cols tricotés traditionnels de l'Est de la Moravie. Jan Rodina s'est tourné vers la confection de tapis épais et d'un manteau de laine des régions montagneuses de Moravie et de Scandinavie. Leur travaux ont permis d'en savoir plus sur les méthodes de confection de tels accessoires vestimentaires, mais aussi de révéler la similitude évidente entre ces pratiques et celles utilisées en architecture pour la couverture des habitations (pour des raisons d'adaptation climatique.)

### Die Volkshochschule von Bäckedal (Schweden) – Ausbildung in alten Handwerkstechniken

Die Kurse zu alten Handwerkstechniken werden seit 1982 an der Volkshochschule von Bäckedal angeboten. Ihr Ziel ist es den Teilnehmenden die Möglichkeit zu bieten, die Grundlagen einer großen Auswahl



■ Fig. 8 Skinworkers.



■ Fig. 9 Bronz casting.

traditioneller Techniken und Handwerke kennen zu lernen, deren Kenntnis sowohl von archäologischen Befunden als auch von heute noch angewendeten Methoden von selbstversorgenden Haushalten stammt.

Gleichzeitig soll in den Kursen versucht werden, ein Bild über die Entwicklung dieser Techniken über die Jahrtausende mit Blick auf die menschlichen Bedürfnisse und die Nutzbarkeit von Rohstoffen zu geben. Die praktische Arbeit mit alten Handwerkstechniken ermöglicht es, frühere Gesellschaften besser zu verstehen, kann aber auch neue Perspektiven auf unsere moderne Gesellschaft bieten.

Die Studierenden des zweiten Ausbildungsjahres erarbeiten ihre eigenen Projekte. Als Beispiele dafür können die Projekte von Katerina Brunova und Jan Rodina dienen, die sich mit Fragen der Textilherstellung befassen. Im ersten Fall wurden wollene Handschuhe auf einer Form gewoben, im zweiten Fall wurden große Mengen eines zottigen Stoffes für das Weben eines Mantels genutzt. In beiden Fällen handelte es sich um Kleidung nach dem Vorbild traditioneller Volkstrachten aus den Bergregionen von Mähren und der Slowakei.

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