Some preliminary notes on the Neolithic textile of the territories of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad oblast

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Abstract

The question of reconstruction of clothing is one of the most important parts of reconstruction of everyday life of Neolithic people of the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast, but we have no evidence of textile manufacturing in these territories. And therefore it is possible to turn to the material of Narva culture that had regular contacts with people who lived in the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast in Neolithic epoch (for instance, in the site of Okhta 1 have been found amber adornments originated from Narva culture). In Narva culture existed textile manufacturing: upon the sites of Šventoji and Sarnate have been tools which can be interpreted as textile tools and a fragment of textile made of linden. Thus, it is possible to state that Neolithic people who lived upon the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast could regularly see textiles and very likely could manufacture it.

Keywords: Neolithic textile; Neolithic period of Northwest of Russia; Narva culture

1. Introduction

There is a problem of visualization of Neolithic everyday life. We have very few wood and bone artifacts of Neolithic people of Northwest of Russia, and the rarest items are those of birch bark and textile.

People of Neolithic period were people of modern anthropology; they had art, they had certain religious ideas and rituals, they could produce pottery and highly elaborated elegant stone tools, they could build permanent dwellings; and also they were involved in commodities exchange. As far as in the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast there is a lack of good flint, so people who lived in these territories in Neolithic period received good flint for knives from relatively remote areas: for instance, from the territories of Karelia and/or Tver oblast. Also they received amber from the territory of Baltic countries: amber adornments found upon the site of Okhta 1 (for the location of sites see fig. 2) look much alike those of the site of Sarnate (Gusentsova, Sorokin 2011: 430 – 431, 446).

In other words: people of Neolithic epoch had a rather elaborated techniques and social relations; and therefore, it is possible to suppose that they also could produce some textile.

In the Neolithic period people already could treat skins/hides of animals and manufacture different wearing from skins/hides; and also they could produce fishing nets. I suppose that Neolithic people could have guessed that in warmer months clothes made from plant fibers are lighter than clothes made from skins/hides. As far as Neolithic people were familiar with the technology of weaving nets so it is rather logical to conclude that they could step by step come to the manufacturing of textile.

In the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast have not yet been found any items made of plant fibers except a fragment of fishing net made of willow bast found by S. Pälsi in 1914 in the site of Antrea (present-day Kamennogorsk) (Miettinen et al. 2008: 71). The net is dated to 9140 ± 135 BP (Miettinen et al. 2008: 71); it means that the net belongs to the Mesolithic period, i.e.: if people of Mesolithic period already could weave nets people of the Neolithic period
should have been more advanced. Actually the border between Mesolithic and Neolithic periods is to a certain extent a convention since terms Mesolithic and Neolithic have actually no more meanings than just numbers on the watch.

It should be noted that the soil of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast are highly acid and humid, so textile items (as well as any other organic items) have little chance to remain. And also the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast have been yet insufficiently explored for discovery artifacts of the Neolithic period at all, and that’s why there is almost no information about textiles from these areas. That’s why in the current paper I am going to pay attention to the artifacts found upon other sites belonging to the same culture (Pit-Comb Ware).

Fig. 1. Fragments of the net found by S. Pälsi (image source: Antrea Net)
2. Evidences of textile manufacturing in the Neolithic period in Europe and the Northeast of East European plain in particular

We know that in the Neolithic period people already knew weaving and could produce not just fishing nets, but textile. For instance, in Swiss lake pile dwellings have been found stone spindle whorls, loom weights and samples made of tree bast and of linen (Médard 2012) see fig. 3; the findings are dated from 4300 and 2400 BCE (Médard 2012: 367)

Fig. 2. Map representing locations of sites mentioned in the text. Violet line show the approximate region of Narva culture. (The map has been made after Bing maps screenshot)
Fig. 3. Samples of Neolithic textile and textile tools from Swiss: corded textile made of tree bast (1), a woven textile made of linen (2), stone spindle whorls (3), terracotta loom weights (4) (image sources – Médard 2012: 369, 372)

According to N. N. Gurina, pottery and bone items of so-called Narva\(^1\) culture look much like those of a site located in the southern coast of Lake Ladoga\(^2\) (Gurina 1996: 137) it means that the people of so-called Narva culture and people of the southern coast of Lake Ladoga had regular contacts and were pretty close.

Also Gurina notes that wands with elk head from the site of Šventoji are much alike the wands with elk head from the Oleneostrovskii grave field (Gurina 1996: 145) see fig. 4, this fact also is an evidence of regular contact between people of Narva culture and people who lived in far more eastern territories.

(An interesting point is that the Olenostrovskii grave field is now considered as a Mesolithic site, it is dated about 8 – 10 millennia BP. However, if cultural parallels are so evident then the presupposition of a strict border between different periods can be easily given up.)

Thus, the materials of Narva culture can be used for reconstructions of the life of Neolithic people of the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast.

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\(^1\) The so-called Narva culture is usually considered as a separated culture, but actually it should be considered as a local variant of Pit-Comb ware culture.

\(^2\) The location of the site is unclear yet.
Fig. 4. Wands with elk heads; left is from Šventoji, right is from Oleneostrovskii grave field (image sources – Gurina 1996: 146; Oleneostrovskii mogil’nik)

In the site of Šventoji have been found a piece of textile made of linden bast (fig. 5) and fragments of pottery with imprints of textile⁵ (Gurina 1996: 145). Also in the sites of Šventoji and Sarnate have been found some items which can be interpreted as textile tools. For instance items 2, 3, 6, 7 of fig. 5 look much alike spindle whorls from Swiss Neolithic sites (see fig 3.)

Thus, it is possible to conclude that people who lived in the Neolithic period in the territories of Petersburg and Leningrad oblast could at least see textile and it is very likely that they could manufacture some textile of bast and of nettles (Urtica). Discovering some fragments of textile and/or undoubtedly identified textile tools would resolve the problem, but even now it is possible to make some preliminary conclusions about the possibility of the existence of textile manufacturing.

³ For some unknown reason images of potsherds with textile imprints are not shown in that chapter written by Gurina.
Fig. 5. A sample of textile made of linden bast (8), and items which supposedly could be loom weights (1, 4, 5) and spindle whorls (2, 3, 6, 7). Weights and whorls seem to be made of stone. Samples 1–3 are from Sarnate; 4–8 – from Šventoji (image source – Gurina 1996: 142)

References


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