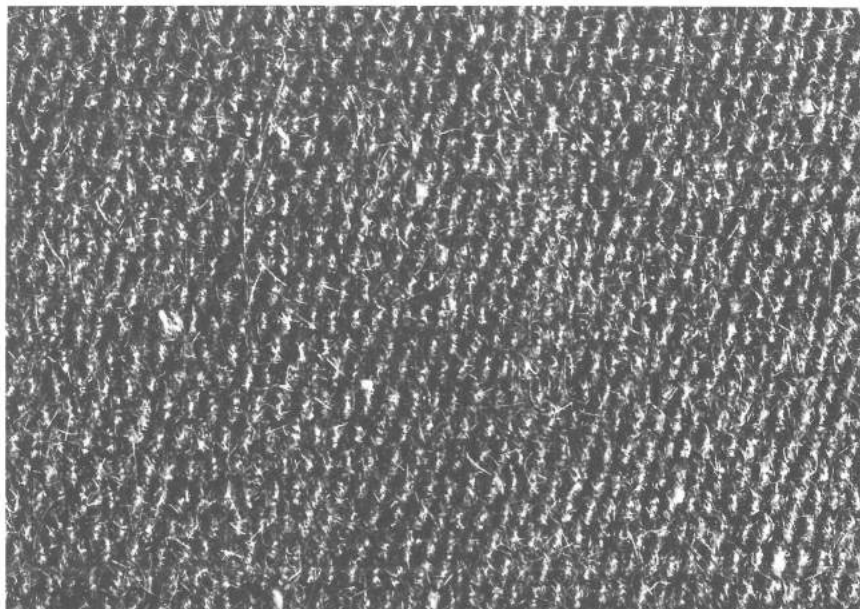


Documenta Textilia

Festschrift für Sigrid Müller-Christensen
Herausgegeben von Mechthild Flury-Lemberg
und Karen Stolleis

Sonderdruck

Deutscher Kunstverlag 1981



1. Tent cloth of goat's hair for bedouin tent, Svria 1961

Margrethe Hald

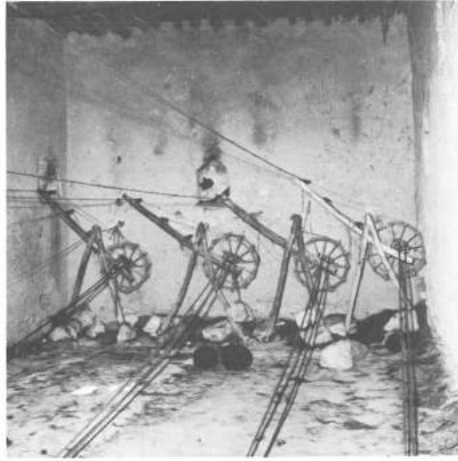
Spinning Goat's Hair

Thanks to a grant from the Rask-Ørsted Foundation I was able to visit the Near East twice in the period 1960–1961 to carry out some textile studies. I was especially interested in a certain type of loom, the so-called tubular loom. I hoped to find the loom in its natural setting because this type of loom had been used in Denmark in the early Iron Age, possibly even in the late Bronze Age. This we know from the clothes and fabrics among Danish bog finds.

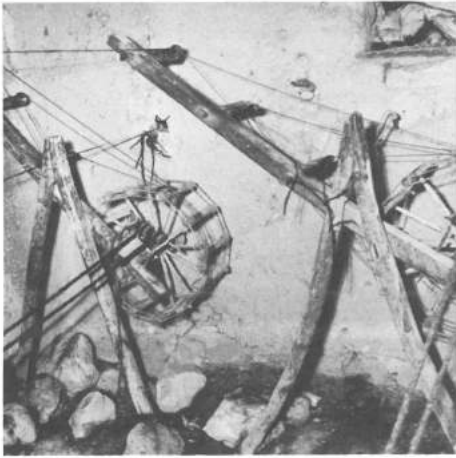
I travelled to Syria and succeeded in finding not only the loom but also in collecting information about how the material was treated which, with the help of the tubular loom, became woven into cloth viz. the hair of black goats. The product is used as tent cloth (Fig. 1) by the Syrian bedouins for their »black tents« – a type of shelter of enormous importance to these sons of the desert from time immemorial.

I was given the opportunity to study the various preparatory phases in a workshop in the little town of Jabroud, about 80 km north of Damascus. It is not difficult to understand why the bedouins themselves do not weave the cloth for their tents. The tent loom is so large and heavy that it would be an unreasonable load for nomads to travel with. And unthinkable, too, that an even more unwieldy object should be moved from place to place: the spinning apparatus described in this article.

Making tent cloth is specialised work carried out by men; all the different phases are done under the same roof, and women have no access to the premises.



2. A boy whips goat's wool with a four-stringed whip
 3. Four spinning wheels arranged in a weaving-room



4. Detail picture of a spindle-whorl
 5. Two men spinning together in a work-shop in Jabroud

The raw material for the yarn, black goat's hair, is easy to find as goats are ubiquitous in Syria. Sheep's wool is considered to be less suitable because it absorbs moisture. Cloth made from sheep's wool is said to slacken and leak in rainy weather, whereas goat's hair tautens when moist to become more impermeable.

First of all the hair was cleaned and sorted. In order to preserve the material's natural oils it was never washed – an important point – because it not only facilitated the next stages but helped to make the cloth water-repellent. Instead the hair was beaten and the beating took place in a small room behind the actual weaving and spinning workshop (Fig. 2). Four wooden pegs were



6. Pulleys for drawing – strings for two spinning – wheels, on the floor in the background of the workshop
 7. Arrangement of plying yarn at the backroom



8. The spinner joining two single threads
 9. Moslem women spinning goat's wool of second quality on hand – driven spindle – whorls

struck into the ground transversely across the room; to each of these pegs was tied the end of a thin rope, the opposite ends of the ropes were tied to a wooden pole. The result was a four-cord thrasher with which a boy vigorously beat the wool spread out on the floor. The beating continued until all dust and dirt had fallen out and the wool was light and manageable. The wool was then rolled up in a bundle and pushed into a bag made of unhaired but only partially ripped up animal hide which the spinner fastened to his belt.

Spinning was carried out along the length of the workshop, c. 10 m long, in one end of which stood the spinning apparatuses, each consisting of a trestle with an oblique rod which carried

the driving wheel and three spindles (Fig. 3-4). The two lower spindles were meant for spinning, and the uppermost one for plying, i.e. twisting the two single threads together. The wheel was driven by means of a rope spliced together at the ends to make a closed sling which was attached to the spinner's belt with a strap, so that the spinner worked the spinning apparatus while at the same time walking backwards through the shed (Fig. 5). He began with the spindles, and spinning two threads, one with each hand. It all happened with such fantastic dexterity that it was difficult to see from the slight movement of the spinner's fingers how the goat's hair slipped from the bag to turn into thread. The spinner had to suit his steps to the spinning speed to prevent the threads from touching the floor if they sagged, or if they were too taut the spinning would be too tight. In addition, spindle 3 was arranged to ply two threads at the same time. This necessitated a cross in the rope sling between the wheel and the topmost spindle because thread has to be plied in the opposite direction to the spinning.

The thread for plying was passed to a pulley high up on the opposite wall and then weighted down with a stone or the like (Fig. 6, 7). It is an efficient method on the whole, yet it has the limitation that the spinner can only spin lengths of thread corresponding to the length of the room, i.e. the spinning process is not continuous but periodic. When the walk backwards is completed the spinner has to return to the spinning wheel, but before doing so the spun and plied yarn has to be transferred to the ball of completed yarn which the spinner has on a hook in his belt (Fig. 8, 10). This process was also carefully thought out. The wool was not wound evenly onto the ball but collected in small bundles or layers, which were easy to pull off when laying the warp on a loom.

Although goat's hair is a readily available material in Syria, it does not mean that any of it is wasted - to the contrary, every scrap is used. Only the best hair is taken to the weaver's workshop for the men to spin; second quality hair was left to the women who worked in murky unattractive premises elsewhere in the town (Fig. 9). They used a spinning wheel with a handle



10. Two single strings are connected

and the finished yarn was at best only suitable for the weft of the tent cloth. These were not the only uses, because if some tufts remained after the last spinning they were mixed with clay for building bread ovens.

It falls outside the framework of this little article to draw conclusions about where and when the spinning apparatus reached the Syrians. Strictly speaking, it is not primitive and cannot be of the same great age as the tubular loom with which it is found today in Syria. The technique is clearly related to the working method of rope-walks which existed in Europe until recent times.

Photos: 1 The National Museum, Copenhagen. - 2-10: Author