A murder victim discovered: clothing and other finds from an early 18th-century grave on Arnish Moor, Lewis

by Helen Bennett

INTRODUCTION

On 29 May 1964 the clothed body of a man was discovered in a peat bank during cutting on Arnish Moor, south of Stornoway, approximately 84 yds (76.5 m) south of the Stornoway-Harris road and 98 yds (89 m) east of the Grimshader road near the junction of the two (NGR NB 386305) (fig 1).

The body had been laid on its back, the head towards the NW, about 2 ft (0.6 m) below the surface. The front of the skull, the first part of the body to appear, was damaged by the peat iron, and although there were traces of dark hair, and finger and toe nails, the skeleton was in a poor state of preservation, the bones having been reduced, to quote an observation made at the time, 'to the consistency of rubbery seaweed'.¹ In contrast, the woollen clothes, stained various shades

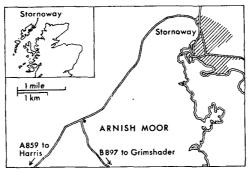


FIG 1 Location of the burial on Arnish Moor, Isle of Lewis

of brown from prolonged contact with the peat, were well preserved. The man had been wearing a much-mended thigh-length jacket over a shirt reaching the knees and a ragged under-shirt of similar length; cloth stockings, patched and wrapped around the feet with rags, were gartered below the knee with strips of cloth, and there was a knitted bonnet on his head. There was no trace of shoes or breeches but in the clothing were found a small striped woollen bag containing a wooden comb and a small block of oak, a horn spoon, two quills, and three clews of wool.

The remains were examined by members of the Ross and Sutherland Constabulary who, when they were satisfied that they were of historical rather than modern criminal interest, packed them in damp moss and forwarded them to the National Museum of Antiquities by air. The Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer claimed the finds, placing them in the Museum (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 98 (1964-6), 328), where they have since been exhibited, and rewarding the finders John Duncan MacLeod and Donald Macleod of 26 Crossbost, Lochs, Lewis.

After consolidation the bones were submitted to Dr R G Inkster of Edinburgh University for examination. Despite the decalcified state of the skeleton he was able to report that the remains were those of a young man, 20 to 25 years of age, no more than 5 ft 4.5 in (1.64 m) in height, who 'threw' a foot forward in walking. The back of the skull proved to have been damaged before burial, and when it was shown to Dr R S Fiddes of the University's Department of Forensic Medicine he was of the opinion 'that the appearances seen in the posterior part of the right parietal bone are consistent with, and indeed suggestive of, a localised depressed fracture such as would result from the impact of an object having a defined striking surface. The position of this fracture would be consistent with a blow with a weapon wielded by a right-handed assailant attacking his victim from the rear.'² In other words, the man had in all probability been murdered.

DESCRIPTION

Unless otherwise stated, the cloths are undyed woollen 2/2 twill, woven from Z spun yarn, and sewn with 2 ply yarn; the buttons are made from screws of similar material and have equivalent buttonholes.

Thread counts are given in numbers per cm, marked warp (w) and weft (we) where these can be differentiated. For main garments back length is measured from the base of the collar.

Jacket (fig 2; pl 22). Back length 27 in (69.5 cm)

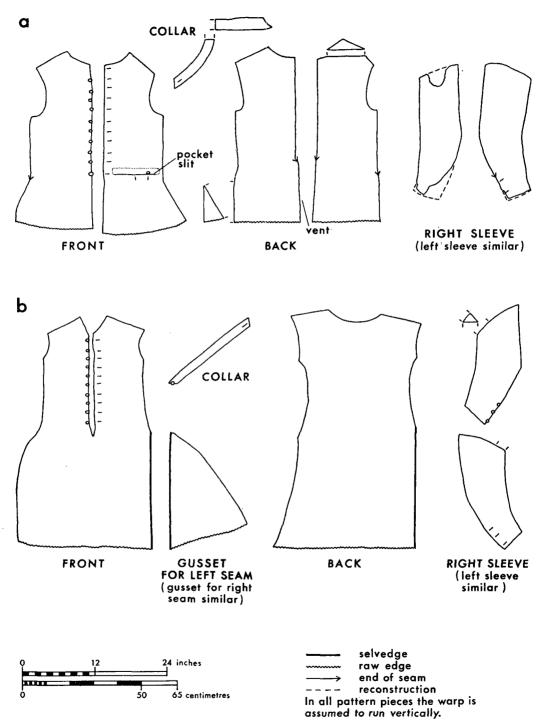
This is thigh-length, cut close to the body down to the waist and then flared, the centre back seam ending in a vent. There is a 2 in $(5 \cdot 1 \text{ cm})$ standing collar, the fabric turned in to neaten, and the garment originally closed from throat to waist with 11 buttons (the top 2 are now missing). The sleeves are cut close to the curve of the arm and each cuff has three buttonholes, although only one of the buttons remains. In the left front, just below the waist, is a horizontal pocket slit with two button fastenings (1 button lost), faced with red and white check cloth from which the pocket has also been constructed. The jacket has plain seams and the original buttonholes are all sewn.

The main pieces all appear to have been cut from the same web but the jacket is considerably worn and there have been several attempts at repair: 10 in $(25 \cdot 3 \text{ cm})$ cuffs in a different cloth have been applied to each sleeve over the ragged originals, and there is a patch roughly sewn over a hole in the left elbow. The body of the jacket has a lining which, from the redundant buttonholes on the right front, appears to be the remains of another garment turned and re-used.

A mixture of wools has been used in the main fabric, giving it a flecked appearance; the cloth is coarse, $12 \text{ w} \times 12$ we, with traces of felting on the reverse. The replacement cuffs are mid brown with darker threads, 12×14 , heavily felted. A loosely woven piece, 9×12 , sand coloured and again flecked with darker wool, patches the left sleeve, and a similar cloth, $12 \text{ w} \times 10$ we, now very worn but showing traces of felting, forms the lining. The finest and most evenly woven of the cloths is that of the pocket, 14×18 , of a regular light sand colour which may originally have been white, with a red check (12R 14S 12R 14S 12R c.98S, repeat, giving a repeat size of 3.5 in (9 cm) in one direction and 4.75 in (12 cm) in the other – see pl 22b).

Shirt (fig 2 pl 23a). Back length 37.5 in (95.2 cm)

The front and back have each been cut in one and the garment is shaped to the body down to the waist from where the width is substantially increased by a gusset in each side seam. The



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FIG 2 a, cut of the jacket before repairs; b, cut of the shirt

front opening, finished at the neck with a 1.5 in (3.8 cm) standing collar, reaches to the waist and fastens with 11 buttons. The shaped sleeves, closing at each cuff with 3 buttons, are similar to those of the jacket, except that there is a small triangular piece inserted in each underarm seam, presumably to ease the fit.

The shirt is exceptional among the cloth garments both for quality of fabric and manner of execution. The neck and cuff openings have been carefully faced and the buttonholes neatly stitched; the bottom edge of the garment is raw but the seams, except where selvedges abut and are oversewn, are tidy run and fell. The whole construction, particularly that of the sleeves, suggests the work of one used to making clothes and with at least a rudimentary knowledge of cut, pre-sumably a tailor.

The cloth is now worn in parts of the body but was originally of close, even weave, $12 \text{ w} \times 12$ we, and the sand coloured yarn is of regular tension. There is no piece with both selvedges intact and the web must have been at least 24 in (61 cm) wide.

Under shirt (fig 3; pl 23b). Back length 36.5 in (93.7 cm)

A crude, makeshift garment which was apparently constructed of such scraps of material as came to hand, and very ragged on burial. The body is a single length of cloth, doubled, with a

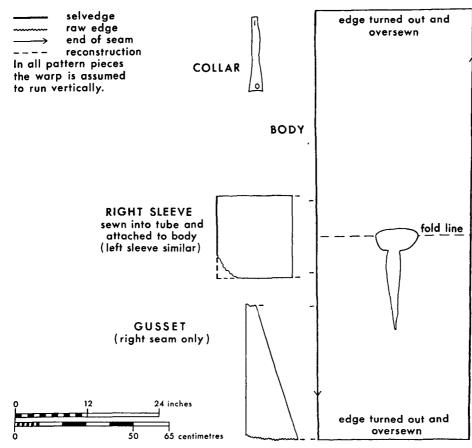


FIG 3 Cut of the under shirt

176 | PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY, 1974–5

hole cut for the head and slit for the front opening, finished with a 1.5 in (3.8 cm) standing collar, cut double, in a darker, heavier cloth. The short tubular sleeves were probably, although not certainly as the left sleeve is in poor condition, made from a 14.5 in (36.8 cm) deep strip cut from the same end of the web as the front hem of the shirt. The shirts are widened over the hips with a gusset, cut from a third cloth, in the right side seam. The seams have been formed by lapping one piece over the other, turning in the outer raw edge and oversewing.

The fabric of the body and sleeves is a rough and careless piece of work. The dark sand coloured yarn shows considerable variations in tension and is frequently overspun. The width, from selvedge to selvedge, varies from 25.5 in (65.7 cm) at the front hem to 26.7 in (68.7 cm) at the back hem; the thread count is consequently variable but averages $11 \text{ w} \times 8.5$ we at the front hem. The collar is of a dark brown heavier cloth, $9.5 \text{ w} \times 9.5$ we; there are traces of felting on the outer face and the inner surface is still heavily felted. The gusset is of mixed wools, having a mottled appearance, 8×10.5 .

Stockings (fig 4; pl 24a). Length of back seam to base of heel: right stocking 21 in (53.3 cm), left stocking 20 in (50.8 cm) estimated

These are cut from cloth and reached to just above the knee, supported by garters – strips of cloth knotted just below the knee. Each leg has one main piece, completed at the top with a triangular insert of the same fabric, cut on the cross and seamed up the back of the leg with a yarn of similar colour. At the base the front divides over the top of the foot and there is a shaped heel with a double layer of cloth under the foot. The feet are formed by rough bags of different cloths; the left foot has a patch on top and another over the heel, and the right foot when found was wrapped around the sole with rags, held in place over a hole in the heel with a tie of rag round the instep. The feet and patches represent four different cloths, sewn in place with dark brown and red yarns, in a coarser manner than the legs. There are traces of sewing, matching the leg seams, in the upper parts of the feet and examination suggests that originally the feet were of the same fabric as the legs but became worn and were replaced.

The main fabric of the left stocking is a sand coloured wool, average 12.5×10.5 , considerably stained on the outside by the peat, with a toe piece of heavily felted dark brown wool, 8×14 , and a patch of similar colour to the main fabric, 12×12 we, but felted. A rag of lighter colour, 10×13 , is tacked over the heel and, as it includes a non-functional seam, is presumably re-used from another garment. The garter is a piece of twill, 13×15 , knotted with a strip of plain weave, 9×9 we.

The right stocking leg is of the same cloth as the left with a toe piece of rough dark brown cloth, 8 w × 8 we. The rags tied round the foot are mid brown, $10w \times 10$ we, with a red and green check (RGGR c. 38 B repeat × RGGR c. 26 B repeat) and are held in place by a strip of tan wool, $12 w \times 12$ we, with a dark brown and red check (RBBRT 32 repeat, in one direction, incomplete in the other). The garter is two pieces of tan wool, 12×16 , with a red and green check (RRGGRR c. 32 T repeat, similar but incomplete in the other direction).

Bonnet (pl 24b). Width of crown 11.8 in (30 cm)-11.2 in (28.5 cm); width of headband 6.5 in (16.5 cm)-6 in (15.25 cm)

The woollen bonnet has been knitted in stocking stitch, worked in the round using several needles.³ Beginning with the inside of the headband, 85 stitches were cast on and gradually increased to 200 at the maximum width of the crown; as the work proceeded towards the centre of the crown the stitches were decreased until 12 were left, these being pulled together at the centre.

The fabric is very firm, and inside, heavily felted. The bonnet was apparently made large

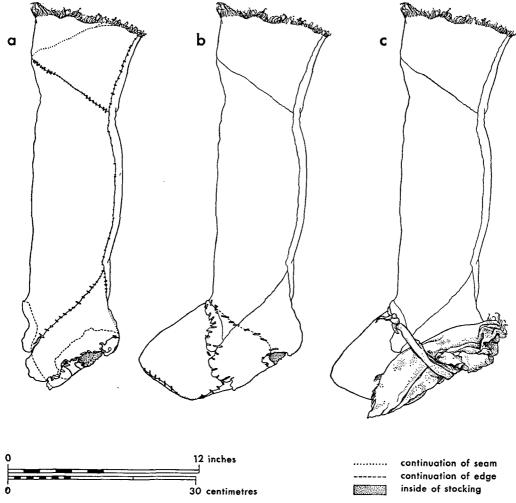


FIG 4 Right stocking. a, remains of the original fabric, including the double layer under the foot; b, with the replacement toe piece sewn in place; c, as found, the foot cloths tied into place over the hole in the heel

and then considerably shrunk by milling, presumably to make it waterproof. This has been carried out so thoroughly that where the fabric has split the stitches have not run; most of the splits appear to be the result of wear but one, 0.9 in (2.3 cm) long, on the edge of the crown with another in the layer beneath, appears to be deliberate and may have been for some type of emblem or cockade.

The present colour of the bonnet is brown-green, but in the folds it is dark blue and, as analysis has shown that it was dyed with indigo,⁴ this is likely to have been its original colour. The bonnet was finished by the turning in of part of the fabric to form a double headband and this was decorated, approximately every two stitches, with knots of red wool.

Small finds (pl 25)

Inside the clothing was discovered a small purse or *bag*, $3\cdot3$ in ($8\cdot5$ cm) wide and $2\cdot7$ in (7 cm) high, made from a length of striped woollen material. Sewn to the top is a strip of sand

178 | PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY, 1974–5

coloured cloth, doubled and roughly stitched, which was wound round the bag to fasten it. The fabric of the bag is hard and close-woven, in plain weave, 14×10 , dark brown with stripes of red and white (WWRRRWW 10 B WWBBBWW 10 B repeat). The fastening strip, 9 w \times 9 we, is felted.

Inside the bag were traces of dark hair and a wooden *comb*, cut from a single block, probably of birch, 2.4 in (6 cm) wide and 2.45 in (6.2 cm) high, with 10 coarse teeth on one side and 14 fine teeth, with many more missing, on the other. A small *block of oak*, $3 \cdot 2 \times 1 \cdot 4 \times 0 \cdot 3$ in $(8 \cdot 1 \times 3 \cdot 6 \times 0 \cdot 8 \text{ cm})$ was also found in the bag: there are no signs of wear or, for example, of metal corrosion and no satisfactory explanation of its purpose has yet been made, unless it was intended to protect the teeth of the comb from further damage.

The horn spoon, $5\cdot 1$ in (13 cm) long, the maximum width of the bowl $2\cdot 15$ in ($5\cdot 5$ cm), is roughly shaped but a crack running from one side of the handle into the bowl has been carefully mended and there are two rivet holes on each side of the crack, although no trace of the rivets remains.

The other finds were two quills, one 3.25 in (8.3 cm) long found in the pocket, and the other 3.6 in (9.15 cm), with one end of each shaped – interpreted as pens, and three *lengths of wool* in varying shades of brown, each wound into a small clew, two found in the bonnet and the third in the pocket.

INTERPRETATION

A question that arises is the date of the burial, there being no coins found with the body. The small finds exhibit no closely datable characteristics and are not helpful in this respect: horn spoons, for instance, have a long history and comparable examples have been discovered in contexts as varied as a late 17th-century grave from Gunnister, Shetland (Henshall and Maxwell 1952, 39), and a 10th-century deposit from County Offaly, Eire (Raftery 1960). The placing of the find therefore depends on the evidence available from the style of the main garments.

The cut of the clothing has affinities with European fashionable dress of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the shirt, in particular, resembling the sleeved waistcoats of that period (see e.g. Halls 1970, pl 7); but there are other features which by these standards are out of place. Men's costume of this time, for example, was generally collarless and the standing collars of the Arnish Moor clothes are a feature of the first half of the 17th century which does not generally reappear until late in the 18th century, and there are obvious difficulties in applying criteria derived from the study of the clothing of the wealthy to ragged garments from an area remote from the fashionable centres of Europe.

A number of other outfits of male woollen clothing, and also single garments, have been recovered from peat in N and W Scotland, and two of these outfits, from Barrock, Caithness (Orr 1921), and Gunnister, Shetland (Henshall and Maxwell 1952), datable by the coins buried with them to the last decade of the 17th century, are closely comparable to the Arnish Moor group.⁵ The jacket, in general shape and appearance, resembles two from the Barrock burial and the shirt is similar to one from Gunnister; several of the Barrock and Gunnister garments are finished with standing collars.

As to which side of 1700 the find belongs, the later date seems more likely. In men's fashionable dress the doublet began to be replaced as the main upper garment by prototype coats and waistcoats in the mid 1660s: the favoured outline was long and slim and remained so until the 1690s when some fullness appeared in the coat skirts, a trend which continued into the next century (Halls 1970, 7). The available evidence suggests that the clothing of the poorer classes in Scotland followed this general development, albeit at a distance (Maxwell and Hutchison 1958, section 3). Both the jacket and shirt from the Arnish Moor find are flared. This may not be significant in the jacket as it is short and the width of material may have been necessary to cover the hips, but the wide circumference of the shirt hem is more surprising, particularly in view of the economical use and re-use of material in the other garments, and perhaps the best explanation is that it was following the accepted line for garments in Lewis at the time which in turn was following the fashionable line. The most likely date for the Arnish Moor burial, therefore, appears to be rather later than that of the Barrock outfit, that is the early part of the 18th century.

Some confirmation of this date is provided by the bonnet. A number of bonnets, knitted and felted in the same manner, have been recovered from peat and vary in date from an example from Dava Moor (Henshall 1952, 21), possibly late 16th or early 17th century, to an 18th-century example from Huntsgarth, Orkney (Henshall 1969). None of these has the knotted decoration on the headband, although a photograph of a bonnet associated with Prince Charles Edward Stuart among the Gask relics shows knotted decoration on the underside of the crown,⁶ but a similar bonnet is to be seen on the head of Alastair Grant, Champion of Grant, in the portrait of 1714 by Richard Waitt:⁷ the crown is blue and the headband red, the blue dotted decoration of the headband showing clearly.⁸

No trace was found in the grave of shoes, although the use of stockings with feet, for which one accustomed to walking barefoot would have no need, implies their original presence. According to Martin Martin (1716, 207), shoes in the Hebrides at the beginning of the 18th century were thin and single soled, generally worn in preference to the older rawhide shoe. Leather was recovered in fragmentary condition from the Barrock and Gunnister burials, suggesting that it has poor resistance to the acid surroundings. It is perhaps even more likely that rawhide shoes, which are known to have been worn in Scotland into the 19th century (Mackay and Carmichael 1894) and beyond,⁹ would have disappeared without trace. The use of footcloths is also consistent with a thin-soled shoe, there being evidence from Scandinavia of this type of padding from the bronze age to the late 19th century, although it is more normally associated with soleless stockings (Hald 1972, 21).

According to Martin Martin (1716, 206), men in the Hebrides at this period generally wore coat, waistcoat and breeches, as elsewhere. Breeches were not found and, as the under shirt was observed on excavation to be rucked and creased as if held by the waistband of another garment, it is possible that they were of some material which has been destroyed by the peat, perhaps linen. An alternative is that the man had worn a plaid as Martin Martin mentions that these were sometimes preferred to breeches for travelling, although as the plaid would presumably have been of wool, which would have survived equally as well as the other woollen garments, it would be necessary to assume that this had been lost or stolen before burial. A further possibility is that the marks on the under shirt were produced by linen drawers, and that no main nether garment was worn. McClintock (1943, 161-2) quotes a letter of 1786 from John Pinkerton's Literary Correspondence which gives an account of the gathering of Highlanders to join the Pretender in 1715: this mentions that some were dressed in nothing more than a long coat, having no shirt or breeches. McClintock (1943, 150-1) also quotes a letter from the Edinburgh Magazine, March 1785, which describes Highland dress earlier in the century. It records that those who did not wear a plaid, or who could not afford breeches, 'wore short coats, waistcoats, and shirts of as great a length as they could afford; and such parts as were not covered by these remained naked to the tying of garters on their hose'.

As to the identification of the body, Mr William Matheson of the Department of Celtic, Edinburgh University, suggested a possible clue in a letter to the *Stornoway Gazette*, 4 July 1964.

180 | PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY, 1974–5

He recounted the Lewis tradition: 'Two youths attending the school at Stornoway went to the moors on a birds' nesting expedition. They quarrelled when sharing out the spoil, and one of them felled the other by a blow on the head with a stone. When he realised that his companion was dead he buried him, and fled to Tarbert, Harris, whence he made his way to the south and took up a seafaring life. Many years afterwards his ship put into Stornoway harbour and he went ashore, probably intending to remain incognito. But he was recognised, convicted of murder, and hanged on Gallows Hill.' We are indebted to Mr Matheson for the further information¹⁰ that an elaborate version of the story recounted by the Rev G Hutchison (1873, 227) includes a reference to the corpse being buried by a distinctive rock, and that he has learnt that this rock is known in Lewis as *Creag a'Bhodaich* and that it is close to where the body was found. The tradition is undated but there are so many points of similarity with the find that it is difficult to resist identifying the young man buried on Arnish Moor as the murder victim in the story. Scholars as old as 20 were not unusual in Highland schools and quill pens would have been appropriate possessions for such a person.

SUMMARY

The find represents the clothing and small personal possessions of a young man probably murdered in the early part of the 18th century, the ragged state of the clothing suggesting circumstances of some poverty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the specialists mentioned, thanks are due to Chief Inspector J MacKenzie and other members of the Ross and Sutherland Constabulary for their co-operation and the careful manner in which the remains were removed and conveyed to the Museum; to John Brown who carried out the conservation work, Helen Jackson who prepared the figures, and Gavin Gourley for the photographs.

I am particularly indebted to Audrey Henshall of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and Stuart Maxwell of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland for their advice and for allowing me to make use of their notes and observations made at the time of the discovery.

NOTES

- 1 The discovery was reported briefly in the press early in June 1964, and, in more detail, in January 1965 when the finds had been studied. See particularly *Stornoway Gazette*, XLVIX (sic)-3760, week ending 23 January 1965, 1.
- 2 The Museum is indebted to Dr R G Inkster, then of the Department of Anatomy, and to the late Dr Fiddes for this specialist advice.
- 3 The knitting of caps and bonnets required a number of needles to achieve the appropriate circumference. A letter of 1826 (Hartley and Ingilby 1951, 118) records that some 'Kilmarnock caps', made in the Yorkshire Dales, required as many as 9 pairs.
- 4 Analysis kindly undertaken by Dr D G Duff of the Chemistry Department, Paisley College of Technology. Tests on the red wool decoration proved inconclusive.
- 5 See Henshall (1952) for a summary of the remainder and also Henshall (1969). An outfit discovered at Cambusnethan and now in Glasgow City Museums (Mann *et al* 1937) was believed to date to the late 17th century but in the opinion of the present author a date closer to 1800 would be more appropriate. A further discovery, from Clayton Hill, Keiss, Caithness, a young man wearing a woollen doublet, was communicated to the Society's meeting 1 December 1975, and a report for publication is being prepared.

- 6 The Gask Relics are now at Ardblain House Perthshire. The photograph is in the Museum's files.
- 7 Now in Castle Grant.
- 8 The knotted decoration may also be of interest as an indication of the possible origins of the diced band, familiar on bonnets of the last thirty years of the 18th century onwards. W Thorburn of the Scottish United Services Museum has kindly given the information that the diced band did not appear on military bonnets until the mid 1760s.
- 9 A pair of rivlins in the Museum's collection was being worn on Foula in 1953.
- 10 Letter to the Keeper of the Museum, 12 November 1964.

APPENDIX

Wool from the Arnish Moor, Lewis, peat burial

by M L Ryder, Animal Breeding Research Organisation, Edinburgh.

The different garments from the body yielded twelve yarns. One of these had dense natural pigment, four had moderate and four slight pigment, and three had no pigment. Nine of the yarns were of similar hairy medium type, and three were generalised medium wools (Ryder 1964). The shirts had less hairy wool than the jacket, and the stocking had the finest wool. Detailed measurements of the fibres are given in the following table.

Since this wool was reported in 1966, an account of fleece evolution in Scottish sheep has appeared (Ryder 1968) and the present paper should be read in conjunction with that (ibid, 144). More recently (Ryder 1974) some wool from St Kilda has been described, and the present wool compares with that.

The sheep were probably of the Old Hebridean breed, which identified most closely with the modern Orkney and Shetland, i.e. both white and coloured, and hairy and woolly, individuals.

WOOL FIBRE DIAMETERS (microns)

 $(1 \text{ micron } (\mu) = 0.001 \text{ mm})$

	Pigment	Range	Mean	Mode	Distribution	Fleece type
jacket						
warp	++	12–60, 70 & 76	26	22	skew fine	hairy medium
weft	++	12–60, 70 & 76	27	16	skew fine	hairy medium
patch						
warp	+ + +	10-50, 2@60	29	20	skew fine	hairy medium
weft	++	12-56, 1@60	26	20	skew fine	hairy medium
outer shirt						
warp		12-48, 1@56	28	20	skew fine	generalised medium
weft	+	1060, 1@70	27	22	skew fine	hairy medium
inner shirt						
warp		14-50, 1@60	24	20	skew fine	hairy medium
weft		10–50, 1@60	24	21	skew fine	hairy medium
inner shirt gusset						
warp	+	12-48, 2@66	25	22	skew fine	hairy medium
weft	++	10-54, 60 & 66	30	26	skew fine	hairy medium
stocking						
warp	+	14-44, 50, 56 & 58	22	16	skew fine	generalised medium
weft	+	12-40	22	22	skew fine	generalised medium

+ slight pigmentation; ++ moderate pigmentation; +++ dense pigmentation.

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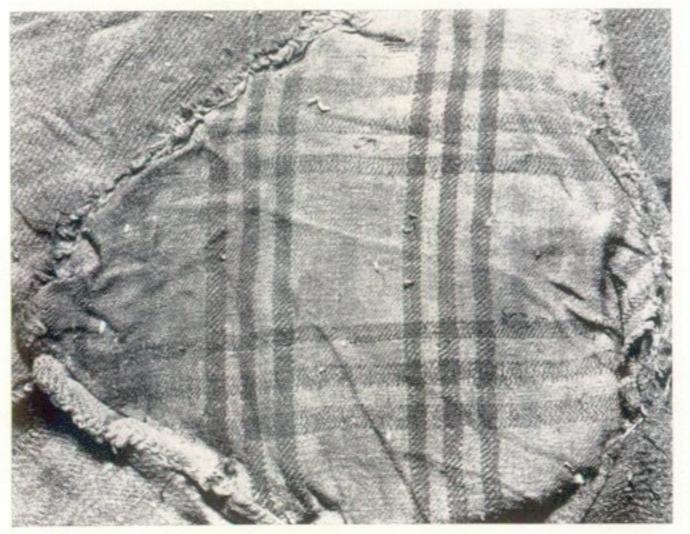
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PLATE 22 | PSAS 106

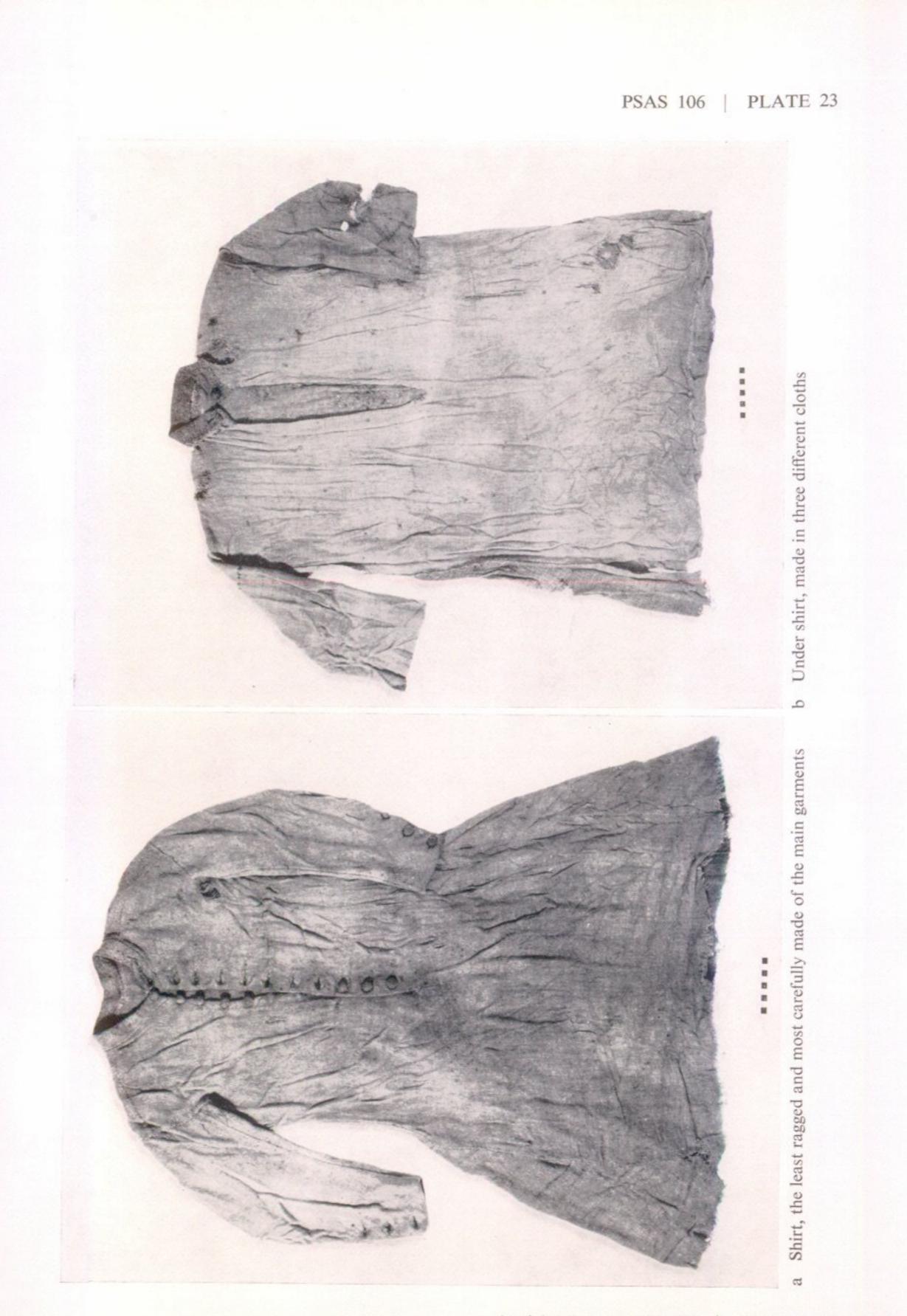


a Jacket, showing replacement cuffs and patch on left sleeve



b Jacket, detail of pocket fabric

BENNETT | Arnish Moor peat burial



Arnish Moor peat burial | BENNETT

PLATE 24 | PSAS 106



a Gartered and muchmended cloth stockings



b Knitted woollen bonnet

BENNETT | Arnish Moor peat burial

