

The 17th-century doublet from Keiss, near Wick, Caithness

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ABSTRACT

A woollen doublet found on a virtually complete skeleton was unearthed in peat cutting at Clayton Hill, Keiss, Caithness, in 1975, and proved to belong to a young man of about 17. The doublet is a rare example of clothing for a person belonging to a less wealthy stratum of society. The Treasure Trove panel subsequently awarded the doublet to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

When items for exhibition in the Museum of Scotland were selected in 1994–6 it was decided to use the little doublet from Keiss to illustrate tailoring techniques in Scotland.¹ It was realized that although the doublet had been conserved and a pattern drawn, it had not been published as originally intended. This note sets out to rectify this omission. It is compiled from the various reports written at the time.

At about 1.30 pm on Saturday 24 May 1975, whilst two men were cutting peats on the peat bank at Clayton Hill, Keiss, Caithness (now Highland Council: NGR: ND 332 634; illus 1), they uncovered a human skeleton in the moss (illus 2 & 3). They reported the find to the police, who removed the body for analysis. The police report stated that the skeleton was lying about 3 ft (c 0.9 m) deep in the moss with the head towards the east and the feet towards the west. Particles of flesh on the face and body appeared to be in a semi-preserved state as a result of the action of the moss. The skeleton had been wrapped, as pieces of cloth were still visible.² A subsequent visit and interview with the two finders elicited the fact that the body had been resting on the base soil, lying on its back at an angle to the front face of the peat bank.³ The head was in a southerly direction and the feet lodged against the back wall of the peat bank. The top half of the body had been covered by the doublet. Along the length of the body lay a ‘simmons’ (twisted rush rope). Two large slabs and three smaller stones had originally been laid on top of the body. More bones and more cloth, which appears from the photographs to be the sleeves of the doublet, were found on this occasion. It was also stated that the body was in one corner of a slight mound.

The remains consisted of a virtually complete skeleton; the first five cervical, last three lumbar vertebrae and most of the small bones of the wrist and hand being missing.⁴ The bones were stained very dark brown and were very light in weight, due presumably to decalcification in the acid peat. The bones of the left forearm, the second and third left ribs and the left side of the skull as well as the mandible showed signs of considerable pressure deformation, probably caused

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ILLUS 1 Scottish find-spots mentioned in the text

by the heavy stone slabs placed over the body. Most interesting was the preservation of considerable amounts of soft tissue on the lower limbs.

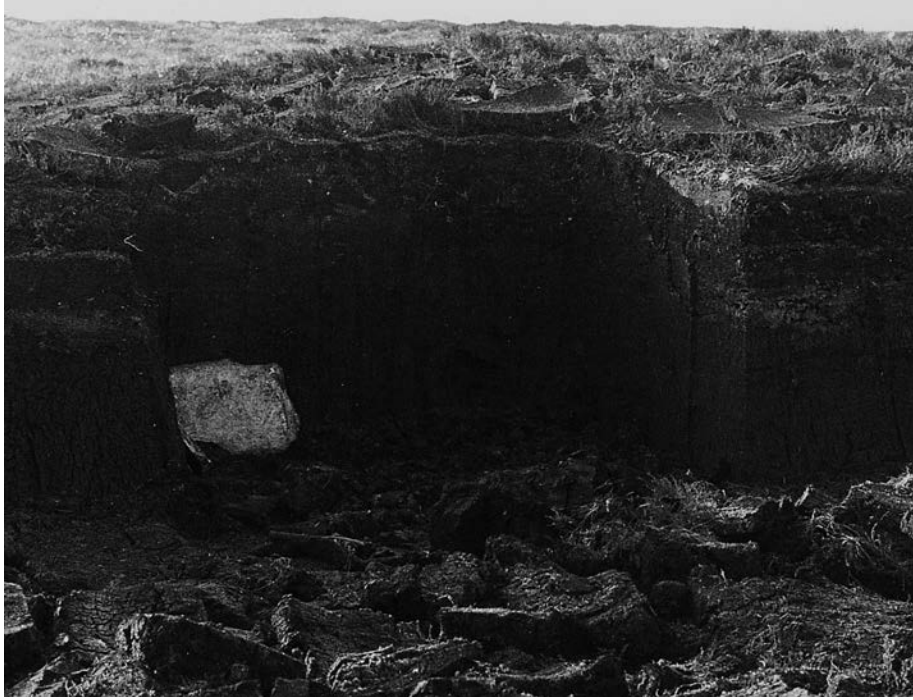
The sex proved difficult to determine, because the hip bones and sacrum were separated and accurate reconstruction was problematic, but a very tentative opinion was that the individual was a slender male. There was no evidence of disease in the teeth. Nor could the cause of death be ascertained, as there was no evidence from the bones of any injury. The conclusion reached was that the remains were those of a slender male, right-handed, aged about 17 and about 1.57 m in height.

The presence of a length of twisted rope, which proved to be made of the roots of *Betula* species, suggested a possible cause of death as hanging, but the fact that the hyoid bone and the top vertebrae were missing made this impossible to prove.⁵

DESCRIPTION OF THE DOUBLET

The fabric is wool, with a check pattern, Z spun in both directions, 10/cm², 2/1 twill, but with reverse for weft stripes, giving even weight to the stripes.⁶ The wool is now stained brown but originally the checks were red with some green. The pattern is not regular in the warp and there are occasional additions in the weft.⁷ There is a lining of wool, stained brown, 2/2 twill, Z spun in both directions (sometimes uneven), about 13/cm², and the exposed surface is felted, except where worn. The doublet is sewn in brown wool thread, 2 ply, Z spun. It can be seen on the collar, left front and basques. Elsewhere there are clear needle holes but no sign of thread. The darts have also lost yarn.

The body of the doublet is cut in one piece, with seams at the shoulders.⁸ There is a slit under the right arm that is post-manufacture.⁹ The left front has 10 buttonholes cut in the cloth, not apparently sewn. The right front has stitch marks apparent at the equivalent level of the buttonholes, for buttons that have presumably now disappeared. Indentations around the lowest three buttonholes suggest the doublet was buttoned when buried. The collar, 50 mm high, is of double thickness and sewn with large running stitches, pieced left front. Round the waist are basques, a strip of fabric folded double and slashed through both thicknesses. A small tab sewn to top of each front. The sleeves are each cut from a width of the cloth. The left sleeve has small pieces sewn on to the selvedge, possibly because it was cut too short. Each cutaway cuff opening has two buttonholes, unsewn, with traces of button threads opposite. The left sleeve has a hole and tear on the outer arm. The raw edge of each cuff is turned in and oversewn. Each front and



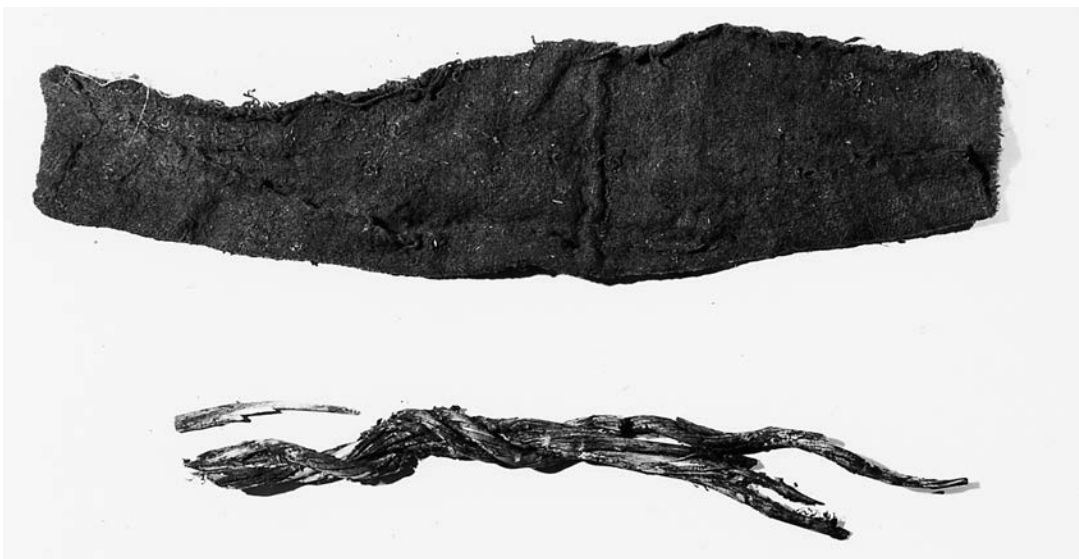
ILLUS 2 The peat bank with one of the slabs raised



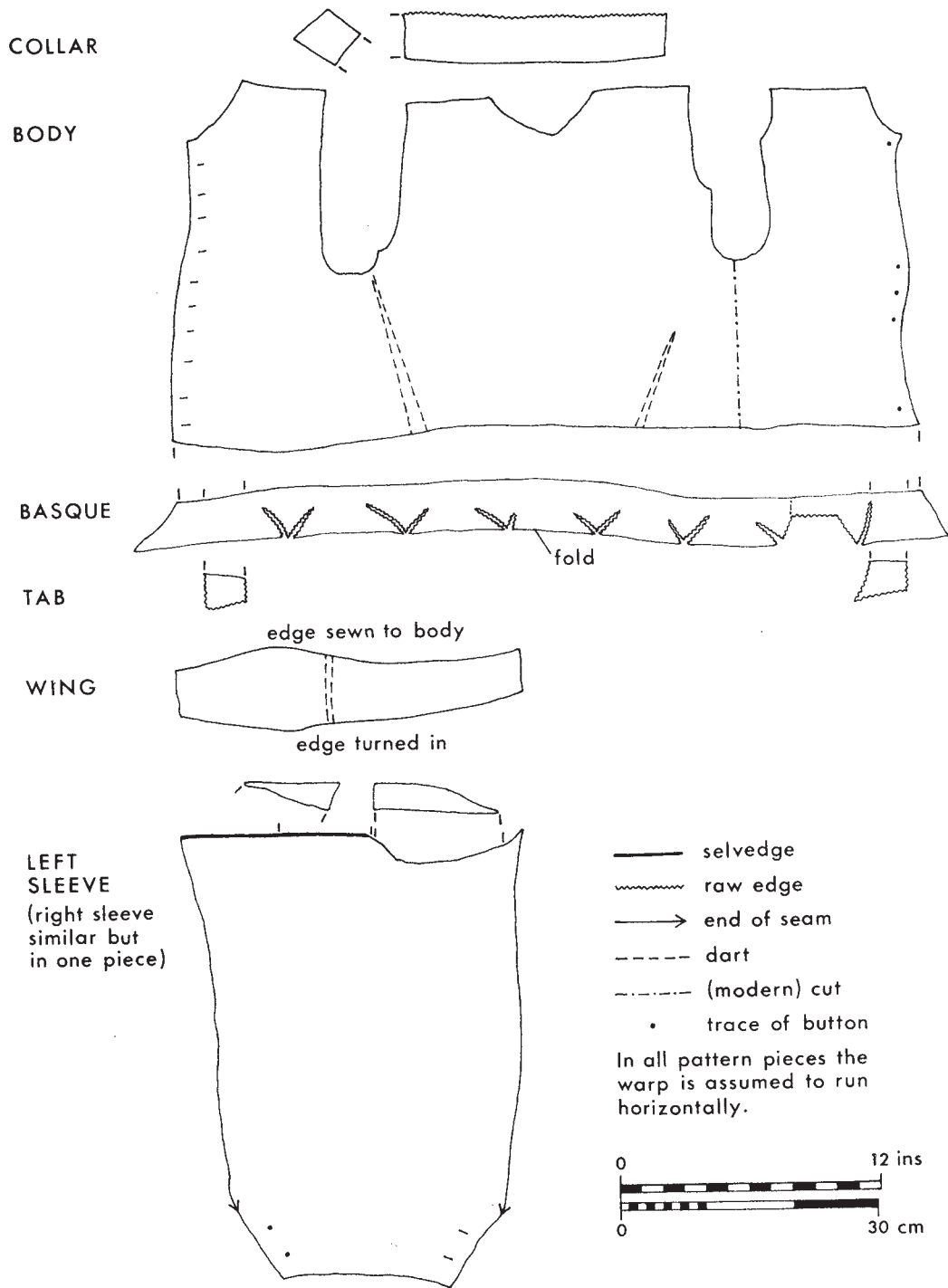
ILLUS 3 The body as found, showing the skull to the left and the doublet in the centre



ILLUS 4 The back and sleeves of the doublet before conservation



ILLUS 5 The extra piece of fabric and the length of twisted rope



ILLUS 6 Pattern of the doublet



ILLUS 8 Back of the doublet after conservation



ILLUS 7 Front of the doublet after conservation

both sleeves are lined. In the left sleeve the lining is several inches short of the top, although there are insertions in the lining.

There is a separate piece of fabric, which had no obvious attachment to the doublet. There was a dart, no longer sewn, down the centre.¹⁰ One long edge is irregularly turned in, but both long edges, however, have needle holes, and one short edge is folded in, the other not.

The doublet was very soiled with much foreign matter adhering to the surface and penetrating the cloth. It was odorous and somewhat brittle to handle. Both sleeves were separate from the jacket; the cloth was frayed and slashed at the lower edges, with very matted fibres especially on the outside over the breast area. The wool yarns were in excellent condition, the dyes still very good and fast, which allowed the doublet to be washed. The fabric had originally been pre-shrunk and felted which also enabled the washing to take place.¹¹

DISCUSSION

It is not clear from the evidence whether the body was dressed in the doublet or if the garment was merely placed on top of the body. The absence of any other clothing need not imply that the youth only wore a doublet. Fibres of vegetable matter such as linen or cotton, and leather, usually do not survive burial in peat. It is possible that a long linen shirt was worn that had rotted by the time the skeleton was unearthed. If the death was due to a criminal act then it is possible that the other clothes were stolen, leaving only the doublet, which may have been very distinctive and would therefore have been identifiable. Clothing was valuable and it is unlikely that a body would have been buried fully clothed except under peculiar circumstances.

The fabric of the doublet is woollen twill, and after cleaning it can be seen as originally cream checked with red and green. The garment is pieced in such a way as to use every scrap of material. The cut, which attempts to imitate a fashionable style, is that of about 1650–60, although there is insufficient evidence to indicate for how long this style might have lingered in lower strata of society, and as such the garment is exceptional.

Among the few items of 17th-century costume remaining in Scotland there are two doublets of this period, from the Marquis of Lansdowne's collection at Meikleour, but they are elaborate silk and embroidered garments, representing the clothing of the wealthy minority.¹² The most closely complete woollen specimens belong to an outfit of about 1630 in Zurich and another in Ulster.¹³ There are examples of woollen clothing, which have survived in similar circumstances, in the National Museums of Scotland. These include three nearly complete outfits covering the period from about 1640–1730, one of which was excavated from Quintfall Hill, less than one and a half miles from the Keiss findspot.¹⁴ From earlier in the century there is a knitted cap and the remains of a pair of trews from Dava Moor, Morayshire.¹⁵ The Caithness doublet fills a gap in the unique series of 17th-century men's garments and gives a rare insight into everyday dress in northern Scotland in the middle of the century.

NOTES

1 Accession number K.1997.36 A & B.

2 Police report in History and Applied Art Department files.

3 By Brian Hughes, Thurso, letter in History and Applied Art Department files.

4 The remains were examined by Margaret F Bruce of the Anatomy Department, Marischall College, Aberdeen.

5 Identified by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh.

- 6 The thread counts of the cloth, identification, dating and pattern of the doublet were the work of Dr Helen Bennett, then in charge of costume and textiles at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.
- 7 Warp stripes: 2R[ed], 2B[rown], 2 R, 16–24B. Weft stripes: 2R, 2B, 2R, (but occasionally 3R), 14–18B. Some green threads appear on the tabs, collar and basque. The ground of the fabric has darker warp threads, these may originally have been green alternating with brown, but there are not sufficient green threads surviving to establish the pattern.
- 8 Overall measurements: top of collar to hem, 495 mm; width across chest, 456 mm; sleeve length, c 560 mm; sleeve width at elbow, c 190 mm.
- 9 Possibly done to help the removal of the bones.
- 10 Separate length of fabric: 375 mm long by 102 mm deep.
- 11 Conservation was carried out by Marjorie Findlay, report in History and Applied Art Department file.
- 12 These are now at Bowood, the family home in Wiltshire.
- 13 Henshall & Seaby 1962.
- 14 Orr 1921.
- 15 Henshall 1952.

REFERENCES

- Henshall, A S 1952 'Early Textiles found in Scotland: Part I, Locally made', *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, 86 (1951–2), 21–4.
- Henshall, A S & Seaby, W A 1962 'The Dungiven Costume', *Ulster J Archaeol*, 24/25 (1961–2), 119–42.
- Orr, S 1921 'Clothing found on a skeleton discovered at Quintfall Hill, Barrock Estate, near Wick', *Proc Soc Ant Scot*, 55 (1920–1), 213–21.