

VikingGold: New possibilities?

By Tone Skårdal Tobiasson

A recent visit to the Heathland Center at Lygre in Norway brought about a discussion that could be fruitful for the VikingGold project.

At the Heathland Center – an hour's drive from Bergen – the local museums have created a living historical center with wild sheep grazing. This is an indigenous breed which almost became extinct, but a breed that was important to the coastal area and to Vikings.

The wild sheep differ from the old spæl breed in that they are shades of gray shades up to black, but not the brown ones. The wild sheep's wool does not differ in length as much as the spæl sheep wool does, between cover wool and bottom down wool. As the wild sheep wool "lifts" at a point when it should ideally be shorn or plucked – if it isn't shorn it felts into one piece.

By chance, when one of the employees at Hillesvåg had handled such a fleece of wild sheep wool, he had discovered it was actually rather easy to separate the bottom down from the cover wool by hand. This is something that should be looked more into. The bottom wool more or less "fell out" by itself if the fleece was handled properly.

The wild sheep bottom wool is around 17 micron, and the staple is longer and therefore easier to use than the spæl sheep bottom wool.



A sheep farming couple joined the discussion, who work closely with the Heathland Center, and brought examples of skins, yarns and a wonderful naturally colored "islander" sweater from wild sheep wool. We were also taken around the trails looking for the herd, but as they were lambing they were clearly in hiding. We were explained how the heathlands depend on the grazing down of the heather by these indigenous breeds and the plan is to build the flock. The biodiversity of the region relies heavily on these breeds, but the wool has no value in the traditional pipe-line. Most of the wool is therefore either burned or buried. The estimated amount that is destroyed is somewhere between 50-100 tons annually. As the Heathland Center has contact with many of these farmers, there is a chance of retrieving the wool.

As Hillesvåg, as one of the very few spinners, has spun wild sheep wool for several sheep farmers – it was agreed that the Heathland Center would propose a project on wild sheep wool and look in to funding.

When we later heard Allan Savory speak at the IWTO Congress in Cape Town, the theme of a need for grazing animals on grasslands as well as heathlands was put forward. Just as sheep need to be sheered so the fleece does not mat, grass needs to be either eaten, shorn or burned in order not to thatch and become a problem. Large areas globally are becoming deserts because animals no longer graze and fertilize the land. (While in Norway the heathlands are becoming forests, changing the ecosystems just as drastically.) The need to increase grazing flocks around the world, is paramount, according to Savory who believes good grazing practices will save the world.



When visiting with Ingebjørg Monsen from the Bergen Crafts' group we saw some amazing woven pleated materials woven. We had learned while we visited Sjølingstad museum-factory that the pleated materials they had woven there with spæl wool had quite a different "bounce" than the materials woven with merino wool, which is most used in the materials for the national costumes.