

Focus on Fiber Series: Gotland

June 2nd, 2010 by talia



© Göran-Bergström

Introduction:

We all know the tale of Brigadoon, the comely hamlet that inhabits the Highlands of Scotland for 1 day every 100 years to protect the village from progress and evil, never being in one century long enough to be changed in any way, thus preserving their innocence.

The Island of Gotland, off the coast of Sweden, in the Baltic Sea, has a similar mystical legend associated with it. It was placed under a magic spell where the entire island would be submerged in the sea during the day only rising above the waters in the night. The servant of Thor, Þjálfi, was the man who discovered the island by lighting a fire on the land thereby breaking the spell.

Looking at our friend the Gotland sheep, or Pälsfår, we can easily see the magic carried within the breed. The wool's luster and beautiful grey tones call to the handspinner as a siren might call a sailor. In this Focus on Fiber Series, we will endeavor to demystify this bewitching beauty.

History of The Breed:

The Gotland sheep is an ancient breed with similar beginnings to other Northern European short-tailed sheep found in the Hebrides, Finland, Shetland Isles, and other places. The Vikings influenced the native sheep stock by introducing new varieties of sheep that they brought with them on their travels to the resident population.

When the Vikings landed on the Island of Gotland, they arrived with Karakul and Romanov sheep, which they acquired during their journeys into Russia. They crossbred these breeds to the native Gute, or Gutefår, sheep. The cross was to eventually become our cherished Gotland.



Gotland Island from *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* Book 2

Modern Gotland Pelt Sheep, as they are also known, have been selectively bred in Sweden since the 1920's resulting in an animal prized for its silky, highly lustrous fleece. The average flock size in Sweden is about 30 sheep. Interestingly, even though Gotland wool is valued by American handspinners, the wool and pelt sales only account for 10% of the annual income of the producers.

While Sweden still raises the majority of Gotland sheep, the breed has spread throughout the world. The Antartex Sheepskin Co., run by W. MacDonald, was responsible for the breed's introduction to Scotland in 1972. New Zealand received their first Gotland sheep in the 1980's, lifting the quarantine on the breed in 1990. The United States saw their first Gotlands in 2003. Australia, Germany, France, Belgium, and Denmark all have Gotland flocks within their borders.

Breed Characteristics:



Image ©[Malene Thyssen](#) in Denmark, 22 June, 2005

The Gotland is a medium sized sheep with ewes weighing in at 120 – 155 lbs and rams at 165 – 190 lbs. They have black heads and legs that are free of wool. Their necks are willowy and elegant leading to a moderate sized body covered in silky wool ending in a short, woolly tail. Gotland sheep have a tranquil and friendly temperament.

The Wool:



Gotland Top: Sweden

The lambs are born with black wool that starts to lighten within months of their birth. Fleeces, which weigh up to 11 lbs, can be a range of uniform colors from silvery grey to a dark charcoal. Staple length is approximately 3 – 5 inches with a curly crimp to the fiber. Lambswool is approximately 21-25 microns, which changes to a fineness of 28-32 microns as they reach adulthood. The wool has a superior luster and felts easily.

Handspinners will find Gotland wool to have enchanting qualities from the exquisite sheen to its fine, silken hand. It is a multipurpose fleece suitable for knitted garments, woven items, and felting. If you are looking for a new fiber to spin, give our friend the Gotland a try.

Resources:

American Gotland Sheep Society, <http://www.americangotlandsheep.com/index.htm>, Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

Föreningen Sverigeturism, The Vikings, <http://www.sverigeturism.se/smorgasbord/smorgasbord/society/history/vikings.html>, Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

Fournier, Nola and Jane, S, In Sheep's Clothing, A Handspinners Guide to Wool, 1995, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 222p, Hardback (ISBN 1-883010-11-X)

Oaklahoma State University Breeds of Livestock, Gotland, <http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/>, Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

Rare Breeds Conservation Society of New Zealand, Gotland Pelt Sheep: A Rare Breed of Baltic Origin, <http://www.rarebreeds.co.nz/gotland.html>, Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

Vatn, S., "The sheep industry in the Nordic countries", Small Ruminant Research, 86, 2009, pp80-83

Wikipedia, Gotland, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotland>, Retrieved on May 31, 2010