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A Quick and Dirty Look at Viking Women's Garb in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries

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Introduction

This is an intentionally brief, general, and un-footnoted précis of information on making four basic types of Viking women's garb from the ninth and tenth centuries: ninth-century Western Scandinavian (Denmark/Norway), ninth-century Eastern Scandinavian (Sweden), tenth-century Western Scandinavian (Denmark/Norway/ British Isles) and tenth-century Eastern Scandinavian (Sweden). More in-depth information will be available in early 1992 (January or March) in the upcoming [Compleat Anachronist](#), "Women's Garb in Northern Europe, 450-1000 C.E.," co-authored by Mistress Marieke van de Dal and me. Documentation on everything presented herein will be laid out clearly in that work. Of course, you can always ask for [further information](#)!

Figuring out What Kind of Garb You Want to Make

Accessories and Other Commonalities

The following items were more or less common to all the areas and periods considered below. Of course, regional variations in patterning and execution existed, but the presence of these items helps make up the overall Viking look. They are:

- a pair of large dished (tortoise) brooches, either oval or round;
- necklaces and festoons of glass, semi-precious stone, and/or metal beads;
- a fabric belt (if you want to wear one), preferably tablet-woven, without metal findings such as buckles or strap-ends;
- instead of a pouch, straps hanging from the various brooches to hold small implements such as scissors or knives;
- cloaks, mittens, and possibly hoods for warmth outdoors;
- knitted-look stockings and short boots or slippers.

If you will add to these above accessories your choice of one of the four ensembles suggested below, you will have an outfit recognizable as from a relatively specific time and place in the Viking world.

Please keep in mind these few commonalities as well. First, archaeological evidence seems to point toward long sleeves on the smock, gown, and caftan layers, regardless of all that saga talk about "white arms"; however, no real evidence exists concerning the hemmed length of any layer of garments, although common sense seems to dictate something long enough to keep you warm (but short enough not to trail in the muck). Second, the "Viking kerchief" is undocumentable; rather than wear one of those, I encourage you to either try one of the documentable styles of headwear listed below, or just go bareheaded if it's your persona's preference. And third, the Viking apron-dress was held up with straps and those large tortoise brooches; it was a full-fledged overgarment and not a sort of abbreviated tabard.

Time- and Place-Specific Garments

- *Ninth-century Western Scandinavian attire*--A T-tunic style wool smock (undertunic), possibly with an oval neckline; over that a wool apron-dress, either tubular or wrap-around; a caftan; an optional head-covering of a fillet and possibly a veil pinned to the fillet.
- *Ninth-century Eastern Scandinavian attire*--A T-tunic style linen smock with a keyhole neckline (use a 1" brooch to close the keyhole); over that a wool apron-dress in the wrap-around style; a caftan; optional head-covering of a brocaded fillet.
- *Tenth-century Western Scandinavian attire*--A pieced, possibly linen, smock made with shoulder seams, gores, and an oval neckline; over that a wool gown, constructed the same way as the smock; over that a wool [apron-dress, cut and pieced](#) to fit the torso; and your choice of a variety of headwear possibilities--brightly-colored scarves or wool caps have been found in Ireland, silk coifs

with linen ties in the Danelaw.

- *Tenth-century Eastern Scandinavian attire*--A T-tunic style pleated linen smock with keyhole neckline (use a 1" brooch to close the keyhole); over that a T-tunic style wool gown without a keyhole neckline (try an oval one), possibly with gores, definitely with lots of trimming; over that a wool or linen apron-dress, possibly pieced; and an optional head-covering of a brocaded fillet or cap with brocaded trim.

Getting Down to Making Your Garb

Textile Choices

The basic fibers of Viking garb were wool and linen, with occasional trimmings made of imported silk or caps made of tabby weave silk. As a general rule, the later period (the tenth century) saw more use of linen and silk than the earlier one. Also, the British Isles and Swedish cultures made more use of linen than did the Norwegian and Danish, as nearly as we can tell.

Linen was generally undyed and tabby-woven, although some linen twills have been found in the Danelaw. Look for plain tabby weave when you're searching for linen or linen-substitutes. Wool, on the other hand, was generally dyed and either repp-woven (tabby with unequal numbers of threads in warp and weft, for a ribbed effect) or twilled in a variety of ways--plain, herringbone, chevron, or broken lozenge. Look for textured weaves when you're searching for wool or wool-substitutes, preferably weaves that are not overly napped and fuzzy. If you can afford it, worsted wools are a really good choice, and they frequently come in good colors. Imported silk was usually a multicolored patterned twill weave, which is hard to duplicate, but the local silks, woven from imported fibers, were usually tabby-weave and can be duplicated by suit-weight silks or lighter silk noils. (China silk is far too flimsy!)

Speaking of colors, the [documented colors](#) in the Viking textile palette included the following: deep reds from madder, blues from woad, two varieties of yellows, greens from overdyeing with yellow and woad, purple from a variety of sources (madder/woad, lichens, lichens/woad, lichens/madder), and deep brownish/black from walnut hulls. Other colors are likely to have been used, such as the range of golden-browns available from a variety of plant sources, but they have not yet been identified on surviving textiles. Additionally, the uneven distribution of archaeological finds of various colors suggests that certain areas may have used different predominant colors: purple in Ireland, red in the Danelaw, and blue in Scandinavia.

Garb Embellishment

Appliqué work was by far the most common method of adorning a garment. Tablet-woven bands--either plain, multicolored, or [metal-brocaded](#)--were very common. Silk fabric cut into strips was also used as trimming, as was fur in some areas. The merchant community at Birka affected several bizarre types of appliqué metalwork, including looped wire meshwork and knotted strips worked from silver wire. Trimming was frequently used on the sleeves, neck, and chest region of the gown and caftan layers. The apron-dress layer was often trimmed around the top edge; narrow braid or cording sometimes covered

the seams, if any. Generally speaking, trimming was not used on the backs or bottoms of garments.

A few examples of [embroidered](#) Viking garb exist, in the media of wool, silk, and metal thread.

Generally this kind of embellishment is reserved to the gown layer or the caftan layer.

Other Useful Bits of Information

General Construction Notes

- Linings--can be used on all layers except the smock.
- Seam Finishings--In the tenth century flat-felling and French seams were both used, also binding raw edges in the period version of bias tape. It is entirely possible that these finishings were also used in the ninth century, although they are not yet so documented.
- Embroidery Stitches--Stem, chain, herringbone, split, and couching are all documentable; finds of embroidery are minimal, with a couple each from Birka, Oseberg and Gokstad (Norway), Mammen (Denmark), and Jorvík (Danelaw). Mostly they are tenth-century.
- Trimming materials--Narrow (1-2mm) handmade braids, strips of wider diagonal braiding (also called "fingerweaving"), whipcording, bands of fancy cloth, tablet-weaving, or storebought trims with diagonal geometric designs on a single bright color with metallic threads are all appropriate.

Definitions of Garb Layers Discussed Above

- "Smock"-- The undermost layer of garb; a long-sleeved, full-length tunic which can be made either T-tunic style (although separate sleeves are basic to the Viking repertoire) or in several pieces sewn together (e.g., shoulder seams, separate sleeves, and gores for fullness), depending on the time and place.
- "Gown"-- The layer we would most frequently refer to as a "tunic," it goes on top of the smock; long-sleeved and full-length, it was usually brightly-colored and ornamented with trimming or embroidery.
- "Apron-Dress"-- A more descriptive term than simply "apron," this is the traditional overgarment of a Viking woman; it's a complete overdress descended from the peplos garment of antiquity, not a pair of discrete strips of cloth held together by straps [as so many artists would have us think](#). It was also apparently not very heavily ornamented, certainly not with metal-based trimmings.
- "Caftan"-- The outermost layer of garb, it's a long-sleeved long coat which was pinned together at about the solar plexus with a large brooch; it too was heavily ornamented.
- "Fillet"-- A fabric band worn around the head like a diadem or coronet, often of metal-brocaded tablet-woven silk. In nearby cultures, it was often worn either over a veil or as a foundation onto which the veil was pinned.
- "Coif"-- Best generic name for the Jorvík style headwear, which is a sort of square hood with a rounded upper back. It tied under the chin and extended for some way down the neck all the way around the head. Extant examples in undyed, probably locally-woven silk with linen ties.

- "Cap"-- Blanket term for a variety of headwear whose details are frequently obscure. In Dublin the caps were wool, basically rectangular, less-elegant cousins of the Jorvík coif, with points at the back of the head.
- "Scarf"-- Some (fairly small) purple fringed fabrics found at Dublin are thought to have been worn scarf-wise, possibly like the Anglo-Saxon headwrap.

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