

All the Kentish Ladies (Put a Ring and Dot on It)

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A “Frankish coat” overdress

Introduction

Although grave finds indicate that many women in Kent wore the two-brooch “standard” Anglo-Saxon dress, some high status graves indicate, by the brooches left behind (e.g., Hawkes 2006, Grave 203; Hawkes 2000, Graves 29, 41, 51, 64) that some women wore the “four brooch” style dress popular on the Continent at this time (Walton Rogers 2007) . This consisted of an underdress, closed at the neck and chest by small round or bird-shaped pins, and then an overdress or coat, cut with a V-neck to display the underdress pins, closed with long-small or radiate brooches. (The underdress pins can be quite luxurious and do not show evidence of textiles on their faces, so we assume they were not under the overdress.)

I have made an overdress. I have acquired pins for the overdress and underdress, and the overdress is displayed with an underdress, but I didn’t make that.

Background

No garments are extant, nor do we have any drawings from Anglo-Saxon Kent. We have instead the pins and brooches the women were buried with; in some cases, textile has mineralized and adhered to the backs of the pins. Extrapolating from this, scholars have come up with some different interpretations.

Figure 1 shows Walton Rogers’ reconstruction. Tablet-woven trim borders the openings of the underdress and overdress, as such bands have been found on the backs of both the small round pins and the large brooches. The length of the overdress is not known, although the highly ornamented garter or shoe buckles of Queen Arnegunde (late 6th cen Merovingian) have sometimes been used to suggest that gowns were at least not floor-length.

Figure 1: Kentish underdress clasped with brooches at throat and chest (a), short overdress with brooches at waist (b), and longer overdress with brooches at knee-height (c). (Walton Rogers 2007)

Walton Rogers shows the underdress slit past the waist, with the belt also assisting in holding it closed. That seems a trifle excessive. However, I can easily believe that a long slit to, or to just above, the waist would be used; it would allow for easy breastfeeding. (Although perhaps women of this rank would employ wet nurses?)

Owen-Crocker includes a color plate of Kentish women (Figure 2) in her book. She does not have the gowns bordered, and they are held closed only by belts. Both go to mid-shin length. The woman on the right is more wealthy (she has a crystal ball, golden pendants, and a brocaded fillet) while the woman on the left is less well-to-do (glass beads, only two layers instead of three, less elaborate headdress).

Figure 2: All the Kentish Ladies. (Owen-Crocker 2004)

Methods and Materials

Fabric for gown: herringbone linen with narrow blue stripes.

Linen: Period

Herringbone weave: Period (although diamond twill for this coat, in linen or wool, was most common) (Walton Rogers 2007)

Stripes: Period, but only found on coarser wool fabrics (blankets?) in natural colors. (Walton Rogers 2007)

- This fabric was an impulse buy. It was the first linen I'd seen in a store that wasn't plain tabby repp. The stripes were incidental.

Color: Cream color isn't unbleached linen. Blue looks like it could be woad-y.

Fabric for trim: two-color tabby repp silk in reddish purple

Silk: Silk is problematical for Anglo-Saxon. See below.

Two-color weave: Warp is dark purple, weft is bright red.

- Did not realize this at time of purchase. The silk was about the right color and, I think, the right weight.

Color: Aiming for a Tyrian purple or "imperial purple." "Purple silk" is mentioned in a 7th century letter (see below); red and yellow silks have been found in graves on the Continent.

Thread: 60/2 unbleached linen for linen; 2-ply silk for silk. 2-ply thread was the more common sort.

Brooches: Purchased 2 of brooch TB-3 (Figure 3) from Raymond's Quiet Press.

Figure 3: Raymond's TB-3. Yeah, I really liked it, had a ring and dot on it

TB-3 is based on a find from Cambridgeshire, but similar brooches were found in Kent as well (Figure 4).

Figure 4: From Bifrons Grave 15. (Hawkes 2000).

Wrist-Clasps: You may have heard that the Anglo-Saxon women wore wrist-clasps on their gowns. They did, but that was an East Anglian fashion, not a Kentish one. In fact, a pair of wrist-clasps was found in the Bifrons cemetery in Kent - soldered together to a copper alloy rod and turned into a brooch! (Hawkes 2000).

The Silk Problems

Problem 1: Practically no surviving silk textile from 6th cen Anglo-Saxon England.

There are a few threads found here and there (4 finds out of 3,800)(Walton Rogers 2007). A luxurious gold-brocaded band found in a 7th cen burial at Taplow was executed in fine wool threads, which may suggest that silk was not available.

However, the Merovingians on the Continent had silk. It turned up in the 6th cen high status graves in Saint-Denis and Cologne (Crowfoot and Hawkes 1967). The people of Kent had Frankish bird brooches, Frankish garnet belt buckles (Hawkes 2006, Grave 203), Frankish fashions, Frankish wives (Prince Æthelberht married the Frankish princess Bertha in the late 6th century)... Although there is no physical evidence for it, it doesn't seem impossible that silk might have made the Channel crossing as well.

By the late 7th century, there was enough silk that Aldhelm would chastize nuns for using it to decorate their garments (see below). We still don't have archaeological evidence for it from this period.

Problem 2: Borders were likely tablet-woven, not fabric.

Walton Rogers points out that the textiles preserved on the back of the large brooches are tablet-woven bands. I didn't see that until after the overgown was completed, but it makes sense - I wince every time I try to work the large brooch pin through the silk band. I'm worried it's going to snag or tear.

Walton Rogers also mentions linen "button loops" that were sometimes used on the undergown layer, as purchase for the small round or bird brooch clasping it at the throat (Figure 5). These were made by binding a bundle of fine linen threads with buttonhole stitch.

Figure 5: "Button loops" for a pin (Walton Rogers 2007)

I adapted these "button loops" to my problem, putting two on either side of the gown. I used two strands of a thick linen thread instead of a bundle of fine threads, and bound it with the silk I used on this project. They will be easily removable when (or honestly, if) I make a tabletwoven band and attach it to the edge. Until then, they are a documentable solution to a similar, if not identical, problem.

Problem 3: What color to use?

I was starting from a letter from Aldhelm to the nuns of Barking, Essex, written in the late 7th century (100 years after this persona). He begins describing the sorts of clothes nuns shouldn't

wear thusly (all quotes from Owen-Crocker):

'subucula bissina, tunica coccinea sive iacintina, capitum et manicae sericis clavatae'

which has been variously translated as:

'This sort of glamorisation for either sex consists in fine linen shirts, in scarlet or blue tunics, in necklines and sleeves embroidered with silk" (Michael Lapidge)

'In both sexes this kind of costume consists of an undergarment of the finest cloth, a red or blue tunic, a head-dress and sleeves with silk borders" (Sir David Wilson)

'... a linen shirt; a scarlet or violet tunic, hooded, and sleeves striped in purple with silks' (Gale Owen-Crocker)

I decided to go with bordered or striped with "purple silks." What shade of purple? Justinian I and Theodora, emperor and empress of far-off Byzantium in the 6th century, are depicted in the mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, wearing Tyrian ("imperial") purple robes. That helps, but should I be looking for a dark, almost brown purple like this picture of Theodora (Figure 6):

Figure 6: Theodora, Basilica of San Vitale. (Byzantio 2013)

Or a more reddish-purple, like this picture of Justinian (Figure 7)?

Figure 7: Justinian I, Basilica of San Vitale (Wikipedia 2014)

Vagaries of computer monitors and photography being what they are, I'm not sure what the "real" color is.

Wikipedia provided these two color samples which allegedly represent a range of shades that probably encompassed Tyrian purple (Figure 8):



Figure 8: Likely shades of Tyrian purple (Wikipedia 2014)

I compared these images to the silk actually available to me at the fabric store (G Street Fabrics, Rockville, MD) and bought the one that seemed closest, and which was neither slubby silk noil, nor sheer silk chiffon.

Construction:

Early on, I found a cutting diagram for the so-called for Grande Robe of Bathilde, belonging to a 7th cen. Frankish queen (Figure 9). (There is apparently some disagreement on the provenance of this garment; it may also be a 12th cen shirt.) It definitely follows the basic geometric dictates of early period cutting. However, when it came time to cut fabric, I wasn't sure how V gore in upper back would affect fit. It seemed like it would shove the shoulder seams a few inches down my upper arms, and that didn't necessarily sound flattering.

Figure 9: Cutting pattern for Grand Robe of Bathilde. (Turner 2011)

I've long used the geometric T-tunic pattern from *Tournaments Illuminated* (Forest 1996) with good results, including an open-fronted robe that fits and flatters. I opted to go with that pattern again, with a period-appropriate triangular piece cut out of front opening to create the V-neckline.

I attached all of the linen pieces to each other, finishing seams as I went. Then I applied silk bands to the wrists. I cut the opening and neck hole, and sewed in that silk band. It was too wide to lay flat around the neck with the inner edge already sewed down, so I folded it narrower from the upper chest to the back of the neck. Then I sewed the sides, redid a gusset, finished the side seams and hemmed the dress.

I used running stitches for everything except finishing seams and hemming, for which I used overcast stitches. My seams were sewn right side to right side, with the seam allowance turned in and secured with an overcast - so like hand-sewn French seams, I guess. I got all the stitches and the seam treatment from a re-enactment "gear guide" (Bray 1991) - they are sourced to other references, but I haven't checked them.

When it came time to hem, I wasn't sure if I should try for a nice even (modern?) hem, or allow the lines of the garment to suggest the hem. I looked at a photo of the Grand Robe for some guidance (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Grande Robe of Queen Bathilde. (Nauman 2013)

To me, it looks like the “corners” where the front flat panel attaches to the triangular gores are definitely there (especially on the left side of the image). I trimmed the edge a bit to smooth things out, but essentially followed the garment lines. This preserves the most fabric, which also seems to be a governing principle of early garment construction.

Length: My gown comes to mid-shin, not exactly by design. When I found the herringbone linen, I bought everything they had. That ended up being enough to make a coat this long.

Results

The coat fits me quite closely in the arms. I can wear it over an undertunic, but it's snug. I took the measurements from another overgarment that fits me well, but it has more stretch.

I think I may not have cut the neck hole quite deep enough in the back; the shoulder line seems to sit a little far forward.

As noted above, the silk bands are less well-supported, and there should be a tablet-woven band for the pins to secure through.

But overall, in materials and construction, this is a rather solidly authentic piece. I'm not well-versed enough in tailoring to know if the craftsmanship is okay or good.

Conclusions

All of that said, this is a personal best in garb-making for me. I am really happy with how it turned out, and I enjoyed the hand sewing very much.

Future Work

I have an undertunic yet to make; I can apply my lessons learned about the neckline and the tablet-woven bands to that.

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