

## **Leather Strap-On Dildo**

Lady Teleri the Well-Prepared  
Persona Pentathlon, KASF 2010  
Category IV

### **Summary**

- Dildos were well-known from ancient times
- Burchard of Worms gives penance for using one tied on with fasteners (1012)
- Penitential of Bede (Anglo-Saxon, eighth century, probably not by Bede) gives penance for nuns using one
- Probably the 'wrong' answer to one of the mini-riddles in Exeter Book Riddle 12
- 'Right' answer to the mini-riddle and answer to Riddle 12 overall ("ox"), together with common sense, suggest leather as construction material
- Hardened *cuir bouilli* leather a possibility; stuffed is another
- Fashioned dildo from leather using turnshoe construction techniques, stuffed with polyester batting
- Attached to leather base with slits for fasteners, so that they can be removed. This way, girdles or garters can be used instead of bands needing to be purpose-made.
- Fasteners might be tablet woven bands although there are many options
- It stays on although I can't say how well it works

## Overview

It's a strap-on leather dildo. It was used just how you'd expect.

No, not this particular one. It's okay to touch it.

## Contemporary Evidence

### ***Eighth century Anglo-Saxon nuns doin' it***

"If nuns with a nun, using an instrument, seven years [penance]." From the eight century *Penitential of Bede* (Murray 198). (*The Penitential of Bede* was likely *not* by Bede, but it was an Anglo-Saxon manuscript.)

### ***Tenth century Welsh slave doin' it solo***

Below are two translations of an Exeter Book riddle (c. 960 - 990) whose answer is "ox." (Williamson and Crossley-Holland count the book's riddles differently, hence the different numbers.) After the first two lines, the poem becomes a series of mini-riddles about things made out of oxhide. We see leather thongs, a leather cup or bottle, and an oxhide rug or mat. Then we get to a Welsh slave doing something quite obscure...

#### **Riddle 10 (Williamson)**

Foot-furrowing, I walk and wound  
Living I ravage the raw land;  
Lifeless I bind lord and servant.  
Sometimes out of my belly I bring  
The rush of drink to the fierce-hearted  
War-man. Sometimes the arch-wild,  
Fierce-footed woman treads my back.

Sometimes the dark-haired, drunken  
slave  
Lifts me up near the night fire  
With hot hands-turns, teases,  
Presses, thrusts, warm and wet,  
Down dark ways. Say what I am  
Who living plunder the down land  
And after death serve man.

#### **Riddle 12 (Crossley-Holland)**

I travel by foot, trample the ground,  
the green fields, for as long as I live  
Lifeless, I fetter dark Welshmen  
sometimes their betters too. At times  
I give a warrior liquor from within me,  
at times a stately bride steps on me;  
sometimes a slave-girl, raven-haired,  
brought far from Wales, cradles and presses  
me - some stupid, sozzled maidservant fills  
me  
with water on dark nights, warms me  
by the gleaming fire, on my breast  
she places a wanton hand and writhes about,  
then sweeps me against her dark declivity.  
What am I called who, alive, lay waste  
the land and, dead, serve humankind?

Rulon-Miller convincingly argues that the lines concerning the slave are actually a riddle within a riddle. The "innocent" answer is that she is constructing something, perhaps a bottle, using a *cuir bouilli* technique. That requires the leather to be wet, the stretched into place (often with some difficulty, hence her struggle with it) and then heated. The "obscene" answer suggests the use of a dildo made of oxhide (as it appears in a list of items that come from a dead ox). The two might be one and the same, with a leather bottle being used as a dildo.

### ***Early eleventh century German women doin' it in great and explicit detail***

Zacks provides a question that a priest might pose to a woman in confession (from Burchard of Worms, *Penitential*, Germany, 1012):

Have you done what certain women are accustomed to do, that is, to make some sort of

device or implement in the shape of the male member, of a size to match your desire, and you have fastened it to the area of your genitals with some form of fastenings and you have fornicated with another woman or others have done with a similar instrument or another sort to you? If you have done this, you shall do penance for five years on legitimate holy days.

### **Construction**

Wood suggests itself at once, being readily carved to shape and of sufficient hardness. However, it also seems *too* hard; an overenthusiastic partner with the wrong angle could be painful. Also, splinters. Fabric might be stitched to shape and stuffed, but either linen or wool would be very uncomfortable. Silk might not chafe too much, but that's a very expensive and quickly ruined object. Leather, on the other hand, presents a smooth surface (it is, after all, skin) and a certain resistance to water. This intuition is supported by Rulon-Miller's analysis of Riddle 12 from the Exeter Book.

As Rulon-Miller's "innocent" answer to the mini-riddle within Riddle 12 suggests, leather could be stiffened into an appropriate device by the *cuir bouilli* method (or family of methods). There are many variants on exactly how to do *cuir bouilli*, but basically water, leather and heat must be combined. Usually, water-soaked leather is left in hot water for a few minutes, then stretched and pressed to shape and left to air-dry. There are no hardened leather artifacts extant from Anglo-Saxon England, but experts (e.g., Waterer) believe the technique was around.

Perhaps more simply, leather can be sewn to shape and firmly stuffed. Wool roving seems like a good option.

Turnshoes of the period were sewn using two kinds of stitches; I have chosen the simpler stitch, a flesh-to-skin stab straight through the leather (Carlson). Waxed linen thread is then whipstitched over the edge to fasten two pieces together. The whipstitch was used in this era (Carlson), although leather thongs rather than thread would have been more common. The thinnest thongs available commercially were too large for my purposes.

Once stitched inside-out, I soaked the leather and then turned it, as is done for turnshoes. To help it keep its shape as it dried, I stuffed it with polyester batting. (Wool roving would be the correct period substance but I didn't have any.) The batting also provided adequate stiffness for the finished product, and I decided to abandon the *cuir bouilli* experiment.

To give it more stability when fastened on, and to allow the straps to be removed, I then sewed the stuffed dildo to a small triangular leather base using backstitch. This does not show up in Carlson's list of leather stitches, but it was used (as stem stitch) in embroidery of the time (see the tafl game documentation). It seems reasonable that a nun who knew backstitch for embroidery might use it for other purposes.

Tablet-woven bands would make sturdy straps. I doubt very much that they could be made purposefully for the dildo - that would represent a good deal of fiber resource and time for an object made and used, one assumes, clandestinely. But one might repurpose long garters or a girdle from one's daytime clothing for this. The band on display is an inkle-woven wool band from White Wolf and Phoenix; it is one of a set of two I usually use to hold up my hose.

### **Conclusions**

*It wasn't supposed to be that big!* (Figure 1) I was leaving seam allowances like I do for fabric, not leather, and I ended up placing my needle-holes 1/8" - 1/6" from the edge instead of 1/2" or more, and since the edge was whipstitched, I couldn't trim it down after stitching. It turned out, er, *ambitious*, although not impossible.



**Figure 1:** The completed project

A very simple harness actually did fairly well at holding the thing on. I threaded the band through the bottom point of the triangle and then brought each free end around either leg. I threaded each through a slit at the 'top' of the triangle, in either corner and then tied the band to itself. It stays up.

I didn't consider angle when sewing the dildo to the base; it's sticking straight up from the base - so straight out from the wearer, with some droop from gravity ). Depending on one's favored position, this might not be the best angle. It wouldn't be hard to shape the dildo slightly differently to point it up more, perhaps using later codpieces as a model.

I'm somewhat concerned with the seams and how they'd interfere with operation. However, I don't see how you're going to get a leather tube without some kind of seam. This particular seam shows too much thread, I suspect. I tried to make the stitches tight, but it looks like I didn't do a good enough job. I *think* it's soft enough that it wouldn't be uncomfortable but it hasn't been test-driven, so to speak.

## References

Carlson, I. Mark. *Footwear of the Middle Ages*.

<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM>, accessed 5 February 2010.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The 'Exeter Book' Riddles*. Penguin Books, 2001.

Murray, Jacqueline. "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage. New York, 1996, 191-222.

Rulon-Miller, Nina. "Sexual Humor and Fettered Desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12" in *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. John Wilcox. Boydell and Brewer, 2000, 99-126.

Waterer, John W. *Leather and the Warrior*, 62, 66

Williamson, Craig. *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*. Chapel Hill: U. of NC Press, 1977.

Zacks, Richard. *History Laid Bare: A history of sex, love and perversity from the ancient Etruscans to Warren G. Harding*. HarperPerrenial, 1994.