

Veil and Fillet

Teleri the Well-Prepared
Persona Pentathlon, KASF 2010
Category II

Summary

- Aldhelm's scolding of monks and nuns wearing elaborate clothing is a typical source for conversion era (7th - 9th century CE) English garb, as archaeological evidence begins to dwindle and manuscript evidence has not yet ramped up
- Aldhelm's Latin is notoriously difficult to translate, giving rise to multiple interpretations
- He describes a veil for women under which hair framing the face could be seen
- Other evidence supports this arrangement of a veil
- Some extant gold-brocaded fillets are brocaded only around part of their length, indicating some of the band was hidden under hair or veil, but that some could be seen
- Nuns' veils should have been dark grey, but were becoming "white and brightly colored" and overly long
- A rectangular woolen veil pinned to a pair of tablet woven bands is the suggested reconstruction
 - "100% wool gauze" purchased was not 100% wool - contains stretchy synthetic fibers
 - A piece of "fine red tabby weave" was preserved in a grave near a woman's right temple; it may have been a red veil.
 - Mylar gold thread couched down around front edge of veil
 - Mid-6th cen example is described as having edging in "gold brocade"
 - One band from White Wolf and Phoenix, inkle woven in silk; it is hidden in the final arrangement
 - One band tablet woven from red perl cotton; first attempt at gold brocading (with gold mylar thread) failed, so thread was stitched through band as a "faux brocade."
 - Faux brocading only extends partway around the veil (roughly ear to ear) as in some period examples; plain sections of band are hidden by hair/veil.
 - Pin suite from Camelot Treasures; gold and garnet cloisonne would have been more appropriate
 - Third pin at top of head not meant as an ornament (and lacks evidence); used a plain sewing pin
 - Veil can be worn only with pin suite at temples, but a pin at the crown of the head holds the weight better

Overview

Veil

Historical Evidence

Owen-Crocker provides a condemnation by Aldhelm of Malmesbury (late seventh - early eighth century, in his *De Virginitate*) of the fancy clothes worn by some religious. The passage can, and has been, translated in various ways, since the syntax is convoluted and some of the words obscure. Let us consider the phrase relating to veils:

antiae frontis et temporum cincinni calamistro crispantur; pulla capitis velamina candidis et coloratis mafortibus cedunt, quae vittarum nexibus assutae talotenus prolixius dependunt (134)

Michael Lapige's translation, as given by Owen-Crocker:

the hair of their forelocks and the curls at their temples are crimped with a curling-iron; dark-grey veils for the head give way to bright and coloured headdresses, which are sewn with interlacings of ribbon and hang down as far as the ankles. (135)

Sir David Wilson's translation, also as given by Owen-Crocker:

the locks on their temples and foreheads are crimped by the curlers. In the place of dark head coverings they wear white and coloured veils which hang down richly to the feet and are held in place by ribbons sewn on them.

Owen-Crocker differs primarily in pointing out that "candidis" can be "white" as well as "bright," and that "vitta" generally means "a fillet" rather than "a ribbon." Her own translation is:

...dark grey veils for the head yield to white and coloured wimples which hang down from the grips of fillets as far as the ankles. (136)

She apparently has nothing to change about the curled hair. The primary difference in the three accounts is the role of the *vitta*, whether it is a decoration, a sewn-on tie, or an underlying or overlying fillet. Supporting Owen-Crocker's translation is the fact that many pins have been found at the temples in women's graves (Owen-Crocker 157), indicating that something was pinned there. Certainly, re-enactment experience tells us that the veil will be needed to be pinned to something. I have worn veils both pinned and secured by a tight fillet (causing "muffin head," as Cynthia Virtue puts it) and the pinning is much superior - less slippage, fewer headaches. And if the veil is any material other than the lightest silk, tying it on becomes an unlikely proposition as the veil becomes longer and heavier.

Another version, proposed by Walton Rogers, runs

...dark head-veils are replaced with pure white and coloured *mafortes* which, stitched to the clips on the head-bands, fall liberally to their ankles (165)

Walton Rogers references small, staple- and ring-like pieces of metal found near the temple in graves - she believes they may have been reinforcement points for the attachment of these long and heavy veils. She describes *mafortes* as a late Latin word describing a cowl-like garment, or else a narrow veil-like garment arranged like a hood. She also translates *vitta* as some sort of headband.

Owen-Crocker and Walton Rogers provide several illustrations showing various styles of veil

draping. A few are consistent with this notion of a smooth drape over the top of the head that leaves the forehead and sides of the face visible. While a modest wrap about the throat is possible to achieve with the ends, the existence of spectacular necklaces like the Desborough necklace, and more humble ring-and-bead necklaces, in the conversion era seems to indicate that some women left their throats and upper chest uncovered. (Necklaces have been found in graves as late as the eight century, when the practice of burying with grave good was dying out (Owen-Crocker 146).) But based on a lack of earrings in the record, the ears were probably covered by the veil (Owen-Crocker 148).

Shape

I typically wear a long oval veil, pinned to a tablet-woven fillet worn underneath it (Figure 1). It frames the face nicely, and the edges fall quite gracefully, but it also hides most of my hair, most definitely including the locks at my forehead. Certainly it hides the fillet, which I will suggest could, in some contexts, also be meant to be seen. The long oval seems appropriate to later veils but is not the thing Aldhelm is discussing.



Figure 1: A long oval veil covering most of my hair

To get a smooth drape over the head suggested by Aldhelm's account, it seems that one need only pass a straight edge of fabric over the head. A long, narrowish rectangle would be a very simple and plausible solution. Medieval cloth typically came in narrower widths than we are used to today; a length of this, enough to hang down to the feet or ankles, as Aldhelm says, draped over the head, would be one way of achieving the effect. The two long ends of the scarf might be, in this period, tossed back over the shoulder to hang down. But by crossing them in front and then putting them over the shoulders, one can generate a look similar (although not really identical) to that seen in later manuscript illuminations. It might be an evolution of the style of wearing an unchanging piece of headgear.

After coming to this conclusion, I found it reproduced in Walton Rogers' book as Figure 5.30. She shows four "Late Phase" (seventh - eighth century) reconstructions, including a veil edged with a tablet woven band, a rectangular veil worn with a band fillet, a veil wrapped around the shoulders as in later manuscript illuminations, and a pleated veil worn with a cap (Walton Rogers 168).

Arnegundis

The seventh century, Continental, Arnegundis veil may have been similar. Most reconstructions have, until recently, looked like Figure 2, below. (The tunic is thought to be

short to display the ornate leather cross-garters.) However, a French museum display of the artifacts from the grave (ianuzzell) has developed a new interpretation based on new evidence, shown in Figure 3. The veil indeed appears as a long rectangle pinned high and close on the forehead, behind the hairline, and revealing her gold earrings. Certainly, if she chose to curl and crimp her hair, it would be visible.



Figure 2: Traditional reconstruction of Queen Arnegunde's costume, after Fleury and France-Lanord (per a caption in an ianuzzel photo)

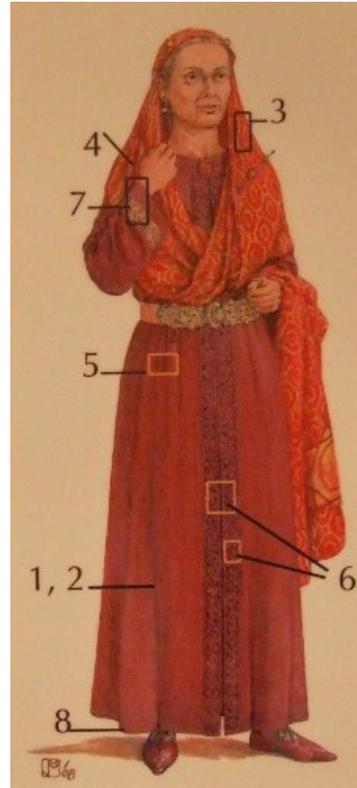


Figure 3: Updated reconstruction

Based on a gold ring inscribed with the name "Arnegundis" and the wealth of the burial, the woman was once thought to be Queen Arnegundis (note difference in spelling). In the early 1990s, researchers at the Louvre concluded that the burial could not be earlier than the seventh century; based on the estimated age of the skeleton, it was concluded that the woman was not the queen (Effros 123).

Material

Silk and linen are typically recommended for veils in the SCA. Silk is very possible; the Arnegunde veil in Figure 4 was a silk veil. Aldhelm mentions that the tunics worn by the monks and nuns were striped or embroidered with silk. But that seems to imply that only smaller amounts of silk (for stripes or edge bindings) or silk thread were available. While it may be that the very richest could afford an ankle-length silk veil, it seems unlikely that *most* nuns were sporting silk veils.

Linen also seems problematical. It does not take dye well, so why would nuns living a simple and unadorned life have "dark grey veils"? A plain linen veil would be white or taupe in color.

However, a veil made from natural wool could well be dark grey. Bleaching it to whiteness or dyeing it could both be done to create the "white and brightly colored" veils described, and either process could be seen as unnecessary (and hence catering to vanity). Wool takes dye very well so it could certainly be brightly colored. And in a wet English winter, a wool headscarf might be a most pleasant thing to have. Certainly, fine wool headscarves, woven in a light netlike tabby were found in sixth century Yorkshire and seventh-century Kentish graves (Walton Rogers 68). A fine white wool veil was found in the contemporary Osberg ship burial (Owen-Crocker 148).

Walton Rogers mentions a find of red tabby fabric in a fine weave preserved on the back of a brooch which had fallen against a woman's temple (Walton Rogers 157-158) but does not give the date of the burial.

Ornamentation

A grave tentatively dated to the mid-sixth century contained a wealth of gold thread around the female skeleton, outlining a region from the top of her head to mid-thigh. Walton Rogers describes it as "gold brocading" (158). Owen-Crocker mentions a late ninth-century grave that contained textile near the head, edged in a gold braid (158).

Construction

Fillet

Some of the extant brocaded bands, found at the heads of skeletons, have brocading only on a section a few inches long, probably indicating that while that section would be seen, the rest of the band might be hidden. While Owen-Crocker thinks the band would be hidden under a hairstyle, it is also possible that the band might have been hidden under a veil. It seems reasonable, although not mandatory, that a sumptuous veil might have been affixed to an equally sumptuous brocaded fillet.

I undertook the brocaded fillet only having read the Crowfoot and Hawkes paper and having some basic experience in making tablet woven bands. Using red cotton and gold (to emulate the Anglo-Saxon "gold and garnet" look), I began a band, trying to re-create the pattern she gives in their Figure 13 as #5, a Kentish design (reproduced as Figure 4 below). Very quickly, it became apparent that I was not doing something right. The brocade didn't show well and the weaving got befuddled. In response, I undid the brocade and finished an all-red band. Then I went back with the gold thread and used a simple running stitch to "faux brocade" each edge.

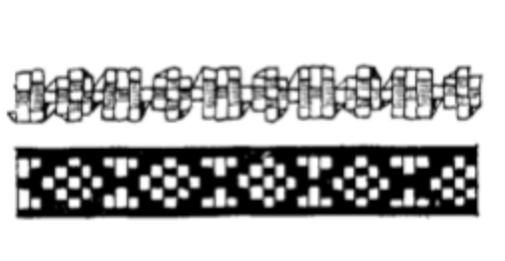


Figure 4: A Kentish brocaded band after Crowfoot and Hawkes

I have since acquired Nancy Spies' excellent book but have not had the opportunity to follow

her instructions to create a better band.

Veil

I ordered "100% wool" gauze in red for the veil. At 62" wide, I decided to use it "sideway," cutting it to just over 24" wide, which seemed like a reasonable period width for fabric. I hemmed the raw edges using a "zig zag baby hem" or "fine machine hem" - a small zig-zag stitch right at a fold in the fabric, with the excess then trimmed.

In the front, I threaded some gold DMC mylar thread under the machine stitching. It is neither brocade nor a braid, but it follows in the general idea of ornamenting a veil with gold thread.

Results

I put on the fillet, draped the veil over the crown of my head and pinned it at the temples (embellished pin suite from Camelot Treasures). I found that it could be worn this way, but that the weight of the veil pulled back significantly on the front of the band. I suspected I would get a headache after a while.

To distribute the weight better, I put a second tablet woven band (a silk inkle-woven band purchased from White Wolf and Phoenix that I happened to have on-hand) around my head, from the nape of my neck to the crown of my head. I pinned the veil to this at the crown, leaving enough veil in front of the band to cover it but not so much that it obscured my forehead. At the temples, I pinned the veil to both bands where they crossed. This looked good and also felt much better.

The veil does not go to my ankles, as Aldhelm noted. It could have - I bought enough wool - but I wanted to be able to wear it at events. I am usually active enough that such a voluminous headpiece would be in my way. (I find my waist-length current veil to be pushing things.)

Conclusions

This arrangement of a colored veil looks much more appropriate to a conversion era Anglo-Saxon context, based on extant illustrations. My old oval veil always looked too Norman. A future revision, using actual 100% wool or linen for the summer, edged with a brocaded band, is a possibility.

Resources

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ianuzzell. "Queen Arnegonde's Grave Finds." Amateur photographs of a museum display of Arnegunde's grave goods, probably the Louvre, October 2009.
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Owen-Crocker, Gale. *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*. Boydell and Brewer, 2004.

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