

Anglo-Saxon Tunics: a brief study.

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This short piece is primarily designed to inform the reader of the style of Anglo-Saxon tunics, their construction and materials used, and a brief commentary upon their decoration. It will be immediately obvious that this work is male costume oriented, an admitted short coming which may be amended in a subsequent articles on Anglo-Saxon costume. I have used two main sources for the information below, that of Phyllis Cunnington's "A handbook of medieval costume" and C.R. Dodwells's "Anglo-Saxon Art - A new perspective". It is my hope that the reader may become interested in the subject of researching costume, and a comprehensive series of articles thereby published.

At present within the society there is a lack of understanding of the differences between Anglo-Saxon and Viking costume. It is conspicuous at any society event that a Viking and a Saxon look identical, with a few minor cosmetic differences. Both are clad in identically shaped tunics, with the ubiquitous and seemingly obligatory tablet braid decoration at the cuffs and the neck, and in extreme cases at the bottom hem, on the legs as gartering and on the sword as a peace-strap. The materials used are mostly wool of plain tabby weave, or linens of plain weave (cottons in extreme cases), which give the overall appearance of drabness, whilst furthering the myth that clothes in the medieval period were simple, coarse and largely plain. It is my contention that this myth needs to be shattered, in the way that the notion of wearing horns on helmets has been, by a demonstration of authentic Anglo-Saxon kit by the society to the public.

I do not propose to delve into the complexities of the standard Viking wear, if indeed anyone can propose a standard Viking costume when considering the geographical diversity and ethnic identities involved in the generic term Viking. Although I have a reference to a Dane in the reign of Edward the Confessor who was dressed in a sheepskin garment which stretched to his feet, who was considered to be "handsomely attired": the fact that he had the opulence of bracelets on each arm and a gilded axe may have influenced the Anglo-Saxon eye somewhat.

For the Anglo-Saxon however, being a geographically isolated and politically discrete culture, there are codes of dress to be observed for the individual to adhere to within that society. Furthermore there are styles of decoration and the methods of decorating the garments which are Anglo-Saxon and not Viking, and vice-versa.

The materials used in the construction of Anglo-Saxon garments varied according to the social position and wealth of the individual. An excellent work on the subject of costume in the Tenth to Eleventh Centuries, though by no means comprehensive of the field, is that by Phyllis Cunnington (1968). In this handbook the styles of the various elements of the Anglo-Saxon costume are given, with the proper terminology for the garments and clearly identified illustrations. The description of the tunic, is taken from this source, with some insertions of my own.

The Anglo-Saxon Tunic.

The Tunic is worn over the undershirt, of linen or silk, and under the overtunic (Roc), of linen, silk or wool, and may be categorised in the following way.

Length.

- A. Short in length, to about the knee or slightly above, being on some garments slit at the sides to facilitate better mobility.
- B. Long, flowing, ankle length, ceremonial garments worn by the nobility on special occasions.

Neck shape.

- A. Large round aperture sufficient in size to allow the head to freely pass.
 - B. Smaller round shape with a slit at the front.
 - C. Square in shape, either large or with a slit.
- The slit has an area of decoration which is usually rectangular or triangular in shape, executed in silk and decorated.

Sleeves.

- A. Tapering down the length becoming close fitting at the wrist, and having many folds at that point. This indicates that the length of the sleeve was constructed to be longer than the arm.
- B. Loose and open at the wrist with the long tunics.

Decoration.

This was in the form of embroidery at the neck, hem, sleeves and on the garment itself, the beauty of the embroidery was famed throughout Europe. There is little evidence that tablet braid was used to decorate Anglo-Saxon costume except on the poorest of garments.

The style was either a late Trewiddle or more commonly the emerging Winchester style with acanthus leaf predominating.

The embroidery was executed in silks, gold and silver wires and sometimes precious stones. Dodwell (1982) comments.

" On the whole, in Anglo-Saxon society, wealth and rank were indicated not by the style or fashion of dress but by its quality and by the costliness of its adornments."

The decoration of these garments took many forms and involved precious gems and metals. There are references to elaborate patterns, to stars, crescents and great circles in gold, to a chequering effect created by gems and gold and the ever present acanthus leaf in gold. Anglo-Saxon dress, for the wealthy, directly reflected that wealth.

Materials.

Wool was the material for the peasantry whilst the nobles utilised Linens and silks, using wool only for winter garments. Fur was also much evidenced for capes and stoles, linings to cloaks and trimmings to winter garments. The wealth of the individual dictated the quality of the fabric, the poorest contending with coarse wool, the affluent dressed in silk. Dodwell (1982) comments that.

"Imported silk, as we have seen, was used by the Anglo-Saxons for particularly costly garments and vestments. This must have added richness of colour and delicacy of texture to both. And also a much needed variety, for neither changed very much during the Anglo-Saxon period. .. the chief method of diversifying garments for those who could afford it was by decorative embellishments. Stripes and trimmings in purple and other colours gave variety to some of the secular garments. Others were enhanced by delicately embroidered patterns, which are often seen in manuscript paintings and drawings of the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, in the centres of wealth the enhancement common to both secular and religious attire was gold embroidery, supplemented on rare occasions by pearls and jewels."

Whilst silk, both plain and woven with designs, was undoubtedly held in high regard by the Anglo-Saxons, the highest prize was a fabric called Purpura. Some have identified this as merely meaning purple in colour, however the evidence points to it being a fabric for there are references to red, white, green and black purpura.

The qualities of the fabric are that it had the gleam of light, it was lustrous like silk but clearly different from ordinary silk, it was of more than one colour and it was a thick material. This is a perfect description of a material we have today; namely shot silk Taffeta

I hope to have demonstrated in this piece that there are obvious traits which identify the Anglo-Saxon costume, although I have only concentrated on the tunic. The materials of which, for the peasantry may be coarse in texture, plain, or rustically decorated with braids, whilst the wealthy within society wore exquisite fine materials, a costume adorned with silk, gold, silver or colourful embroidery decoration at the hems and on the body of the garment. Consider that William, according to the Histoire of Guillaume de Poitiers, upon returning to Normandy after the conquest paraded the costumes of the Anglo-Saxons, whereupon the Normans were much astounded by the opulence displayed and thought that they rendered worthless anything they had seen before. Such was the splendour and richness of Anglo-Saxon dress.

Annex 6 - PRACTICAL NAALBINDING

To sew a sock in the naalbinding technique, you will need a blunt needle with a large eye and some thread. The thicker the thread you use, the quicker the sock will grow. Fibres in very thick wool tend to split apart and distinguishing between the loops that you have added and the splits in the thread may be very difficult.

Probably the most difficult stage in naalbinding is starting off the first series of loops around the central stitch. Study the following instructions and diagrams carefully before starting off.

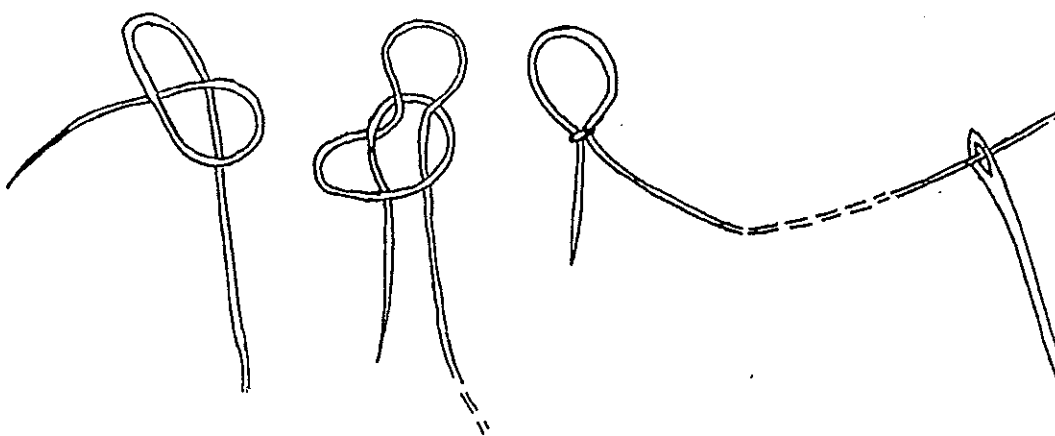


Figure 48a

1) First of all cut a length of thread about 18" - 46cm. long and make a loop at one end and pass the other end through the needle, (figure 48a). As a rough guide this loop should be no bigger than the circumference of the end of you little finger.

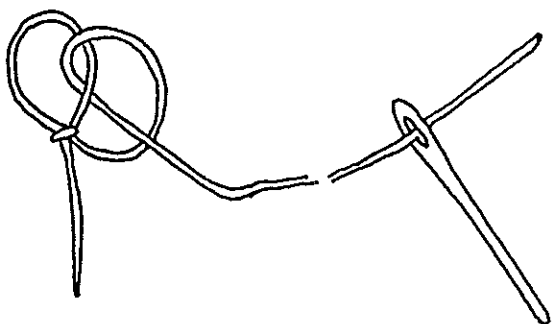


Figure 48b

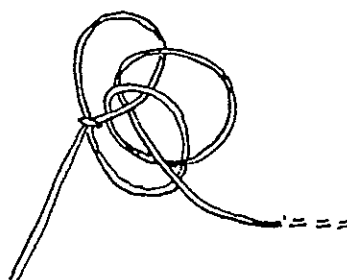


Figure 48c

2) Hold the loop by the knot between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand (assuming you are right handed) and with the right hand pass the needle and thread down through the loop, bringing it back up through the centre of the new loop you have created. (Figure 48b) Pull the thread through until this loop is the same size as the initial one.

3) Now hold the new loop firmly in position using the thumb and forefinger of your left hand and make another loop by passing the needle down through the initial loop again and bringing it back up through this new loop and the previous loop, (see figure 48c).

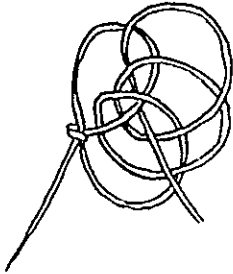


Figure 48d

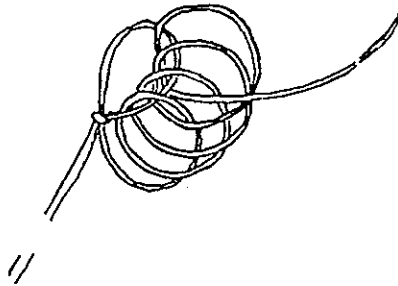


Figure 48e

4) Hold the new loop firm. Now we are ready to sew the first real stitch. Make another loop as before, but this time bring the thread back up through the new loop and the last but one loop. (Figure 48d). Once you have managed this initial step, you will find it easier going from now on.

5) Repeat the last step. (Figure 48e)

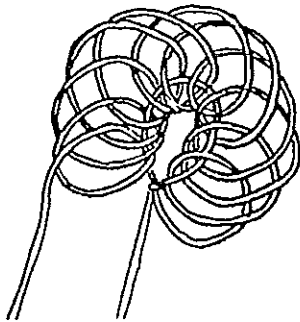


Figure 48f

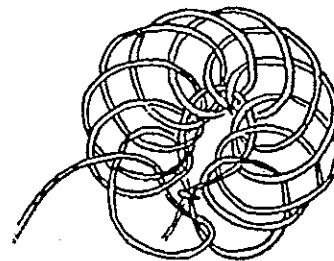


Figure 48g

6) Continue in this way until you have a series of stitches all the way round the initial loop. (Figure 48f)

7) You have now completed one row. The next row has to be built up on the this row instead of the initial loop. Pass the needle down through loop 1 of row 1 and back up through the last but one loop as usual. (Figure 48g).

8) In order to expand the fabric you have to work two stitches into each loop of row 1, so pass the needle down through loop 1 of row 1 again and back up through the last but one loop. (Figure 48h)

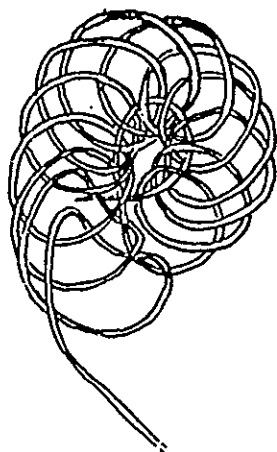


Figure 48h

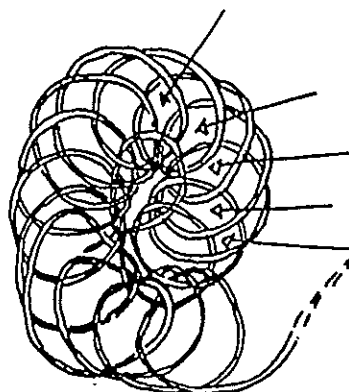


Figure 48i

9) In the same way work two stitches through loop 2 of row 1, (figure 49i). Continue in this way as indicated by the arrows working around the fabric. You'll find the more you do this the easier it will become as the previous row's loops become progressively easier to find as the fabric spreads out.

If you have floundered already, do not despair. You probably will not be able to sort out the mess, so start again. It sometimes helps to begin with a larger loop size until you get the hang of it. Try to keep the loops an even size and hold each loop firmly whilst you make a new one. It usually takes several attempts to get it right.

Eventually, you will run out of thread. The easiest way to join in a new piece by bringing the thread up from the back of the fabric and letting it lie next to the end of the old thread. Hold the thread firmly in place whilst stitching and worry about working the ends in afterwards! (This is not necessarily the best method but it works.)

As the rounds increase, you will end up with an oval shaped piece of fabric large enough to cover the end of your toes. At this point you no longer need to work two stitches into each loop of the previous row - only one. After working several rounds in this way you will begin to see the sock shape emerging. If you need to increase the size slightly to fit the sock over the ball or your foot or instep, work an extra stitch every 10th or so stitch, by working twice into the row above. (Decreasing if necessary is achieved by missing a loop in the row above.)

Finally your sock will be large enough to cover the foot from the toes to the front of the ankle. This is often worked as a separate piece then joined to the 'foot'. By now you should be able to work this technique out for yourself. Just work a new piece in the same way as you did the toe until it is large enough to cover the heel. Then join about half the circumference of this piece to the lower half of the 'foot' and work in rounds to form the 'leg' of the sock. (Figure 12)

Penannular brooches varied in size from perhaps 1" (2.2cm) in diameter to some Irish 'monsters' that had pins over a foot (30.5cm) long! These were hollow cast silver, but belonged to a very aristocratic Viking!

For our purposes simple brooches for fastening clothing or cloaks can easily be manufactured from mild steel, brass, bronze, or copper bar. All these materials will require a heat source to work - such as gas blowlamps (butane or propane) or even a gas cooker. A hammer, two pairs of pliers and a hard work surface such as a block of steel or plate of brass will also be needed.

Initially the metal will have to be annealed, for nonferrous metals ie brass, copper, bronze. heat up the metal to a dull or cherry red colour and immediately plunge into cold water. To anneal ferrous metals such as mild steel, heat up until cherry red and leave to cool slowly, in an oven or on a 'low light' gradually cooling down.

For the brooch you will need a round metal bar 8" (20cm) long by 1/3" (8mm) in diameter. For the pin you will need a thinner bar 4.75" (12cm) long by 1/8" (3mm) in diameter.

Make the pin first. Anneal the first 1.125" (3cm) of each end of the bar. Hammer one end flat and the other to a rough point as in figure 49a. Form an 'eye' in the flat end of the point by hammering around the brooch bar. You should ideally end up with an eye that is about 1/2" (1cm) in diameter as in figure 49b.

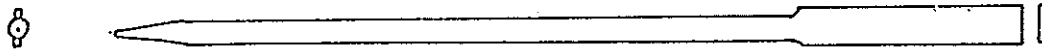


Figure 49a

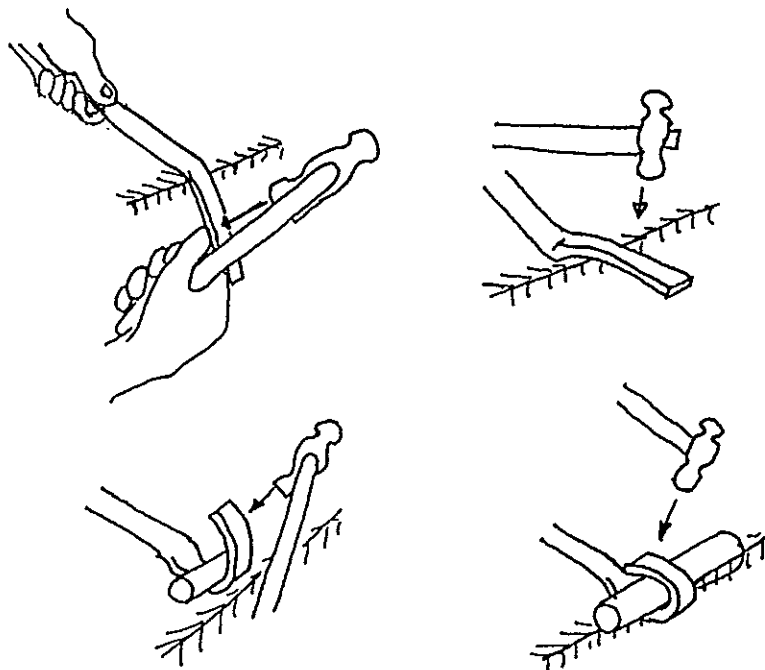


Figure 49b