

Anglo-Saxons and Viking Hosen

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(Pictures coming soon)

During the early Middle Ages, what did people in Northern Europe wear over their feet and under their shoes? Call them socks or hose or leggings. Exactly what were they? And are any of these terms interchangeable? To answer this, I examined some illuminations, some archaeological finds, and a study of traditional hose manufacture from Telemark, Norway. I hope to shed some light on how hose were made, what they are, and how they were worn.

Little survives in the archaeological record from the Viking and Anglo-Saxon eras in the way of textiles, especially as far as foot coverings other than shoes are concerned. The nalbinded sock fragment is the lone example thus far discovered. From some written sources and period illustrations certain information may be learned about foot coverings. There are several possible styles of lower leg and foot coverings discernible in written sources and in illuminations (Fig. 1, A-D). Owen-Crocker (1986) gives the most elaborate overviews of these articles of clothing. These styles can easily be divided into three types; a textile or leather tube referred to in Old English variously as caeles, hosa, meo, and socc; gartered, wound or crossed bands, possibly referred to by the term winning; and long hose or pants known variously as braecce or braccas, brec-hraegl, and broc (short trousers common by the 13th c.).

The calf covering tube that at least partially covered the feet was fastened below the knee with the aid of a band or a strap that was either buckled or tied. These straps may be separate or attached to the top of the tube. There are several Old English terms for these bands, such as hose-bend, sceanc-bend, and sceanc-gegirela. Numerous fine strap ends (Fig. 2A) that date from the 7th to 11th century have been found in burials near the knees suggesting that they were common decorations for these straps. Numerous small triangular hooks (also known as tag hooks) (Fig. 2B) come from the same period. A pair of these found just below the knees in an unsexed grave at Winchester suggests that they may have been used to support stockings. Owen-Crocker notes that these tag hooks are not very substantial and probably would not put up with a lot of strain. This conjecture is supported by the number of tag hooks that have been recovered with broken hooks and eyes. But, how much strain would a pair of hose apply? I feel that the use of these hooks would explain why many men in period illuminations are wearing calf coverings that sag. The hook could be sewn to the hose and then hooked to the pants or braccas. It appears on some illuminations that there is an additional band that runs from the knee diagonally down the side of the calf to the heel on top of the calf cover (Fig. 1C). I suggest that this is a support that is sewn to the side of the fabric of the calf cover that is hooked at the knee by means of the afore mentioned tag hooks. One other possibility is that the hooked tags act much like the ACE bandage clip on a separate garter belt which could be also described as a hose bend. I have used both replica hooks and small buckles attached to light leather straps to help hold my soccas for the last three years and have found both to work well.

The second type of covering is a complete or open wrapping of the lower leg and possibly foot with woven bands. Cross-gartering (Fig. 1A), apparently adopted from the Frankish and Germanic dress, is used to tie down the pants leg or hold a stocking in place. This system of cross gartering can be seen on Roman statues of Germanic prisoners and various depictions of King David. The lower leg could also be covered with a wide band of cloth wrapped in an overlapping spiral just as the puttees of World War I and II were worn (Fig. 1B). I was able to find WWI puttees and have worn them to see how they work. Interestingly, they end at a point with a narrow band attached. This single band is then wound around the top of the calf several times and is tucked into its self. This holds it very securely for I never have had them unravel or sag. Interestingly, strap ends are commonly found in male burials around the lower leg. Unfortunately, most texts that I have run across do not state how many strap ends are recovered per grave. If only one pair is found or one strap end per leg, without a buckle, mightn't this support the puttee system? If two pairs are found, one pair per leg, without a buckle, that might argue for cross gartering or a separate garter at the top

of the leg. It is unfortunate that site data such as this is unavailable on this side of the Atlantic. However most of the site reports that I have seen, except for the most recent ones, lack even plan views of most burials and instead concentrate on the more spectacular finds such as brooches and weapons. But enough of this digression.

The third type of covering, the long hose or trousers is much more problematic because the depiction of legs in Anglo-Saxon art which is not always clear, because of the knee length tunic which is common to the period covers either the tops of the long hose and their support system or the tops of trousers. Long trousers are in the Germanic tradition as witnessed once again by Roman art and by the footed trousers from Thorsbjerg, Germany. These trousers have very narrow legs, only about 30 cm at the calf. These narrow legs could explain the tight fitting garments that are depicted in Anglo-Saxon art. It should be noted that not all depictions of men in this art indicate the wearing of a separate calf covering. I find it interesting that when men are depicted in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts with bare feet they are also bare legged including the thigh. If long hose were worn then the brocs should be showing and if hose were worn over the braccas, then the lower part of the braccas's legs should be drawn near the ankle. This may argue for footed trousers that would have to be taken off or not worn without shoes to protect them. By the 13th C. the fashion of wearing knee length trousers with long hose over lapping the bottom part of the short pants was common. Whether or not this fashion was in use in the 11th C. is not clear.

It would be interesting to see how the depiction of these articles of clothing change through time and vary by region, but lacking access to a complete guide to Anglo-Saxon miniatures I am unable to make any correlation. Which of these articles were worn obviously depended on several factors such as wealth, social status, occasion, the region where the individual lived, and season of the year. So there seems to be no shortage of ways to cover the feet and calves. All of types previously mentioned are feasible, but without physical evidence, leaves which of these methods might have been used, open to debate. There is however, other information from slightly later time periods that might shed additional light on some of this matter.

No complete calf, foot, or leg covering has yet been recovered from Early Medieval England. However hose from the 13th and 14th centuries have been recovered from burials and bogs in Greenland and Scandinavia. I have only found one pair described in any detail. This pair is from the Bocksten Man, a fully clothed body that was found in a bog in Halland, Sweden, which dates to the 14th century. Nockert states that these hose are of essentially similar construction to a pair that date to around 1250. These long hose came above the knee and were suspended from three points by leather straps. The hose were footed and heavily worn with evidence that the soles had been replaced. They were made from a single loom width of fulled wool twill that was cut on the bias. The seam ran down the back of the leg. The feet were constructed from a triangular piece of cloth that was attached to the bottom of the leg tube. The corners of the triangle folded around and under the foot and sewn to a rectangular piece of wool (Fig. 3). Underneath the foot of the long hose were four other pieces of cloth of different wool fabrics. These foot wraps are not described in detail other than that they were made from pieces of worn out garments and that the custom of foot wrapping continued until this century. A third hose was found with the body but its exact location with the body is uncertain. This hose is very similar in construction the other two except that it has no foot (Nockert, 1987).

Olsen (1980) pictures three hose recovered from the graveyard at Herjolfsnaes, Greenland. One appears to be very similar to those of the Bocksten Man's. Another looks identical to those from Telemark described below. The third appears to be made of a single long rectangular piece of homespun, folded in half width wise, sewn completely closed in the back and 2/3 from the top down leaving a hole for the foot. This hose is the shortest of the three pictured; probably only reaching mid calf. There is no mention of age or sex or date of the graves they came from. The site reports I have seen sited for Greenland all appear to be in Danish, which I am unable to procure much less able to translate.

In Aagot Noss's Study of traditional hose from manufacture from Telemark, Norway, four types of hose construction are discussed. These hose were made till the second half of this century though the patterns and appearance hearken back to a much earlier age. All of the varieties Noss discusses are made from homespun wool cloth. He notes that the only difference between men's and women's hose is the color,

black for women while white or gray were for men. One pair of adult hose could be made from an ell, two feet, of homespun cloth. The hose are knee high and were held in place by finger braided or woven ribbons or leather straps tied below the knee. The hose could or could not have feet or toes. Separate foot wraps were common but it seemed to be a matter of preference as to what style the person used. That these hose were durable is demonstrated by hose that two informants state that they wore them every day except on Sundays for ten or more years.

Noss notes two kinds of hose. The first is cut on the bias while the second is cut with the grain. The first type is preferred because of the ease with which it can be taken off and put on and being cut on the bias they use less home spun. The hose cut on the bias are made without a toe. (Please note that the Viking in Fig. 4 has toeless hose.) Noss's informants state that either foot wraps, toe caps, or knitted toes sewn on to the end.

The first type of hose are constructed as follows:

A square piece of homespun is cut diagonally into two triangles, one for each hose. Folding the triangle: first they fold the corner toward the diagonal and cut off the material that overlaps at the center, then they fold the corner on either side towards the middle. The size of the fold gives the width of the and length of the of the hose. The folded homespun looks, when it is all done, like the back of an envelope (Fig. 5). Using a sewing machine they first attach the sidepieces to the mid-piece, then they sew the seam at the back of the leg. A short slit is left open at the top of the seam. This is to make it easier to pull the hose on and off. The upper end of the hose is opened up. The leg, heel and heelcap are one and the same piece, however the leg is rounded off a bit for the heel. The front of the leg can be made in two ways (Fig. 5 A and B). The foot can be either open without a toecap, or it can have a toe cap, of knitted or woven fabric, attached.

- A. The leg with the gore that lies forward on top of the foot. A slit is made at the front of the leg. A square cut gore is inserted. The foot has no toe or toecap (Fig. 5 type IA).
- B. The leg with the gore that goes under the foot to the toe and is made at the front on either side the leg, a square cut gore, "the bottom", is inserted (Fig. 5 type IB). The piece between the two slits lies forward on the top of the and is equivalent to or has the same function as the gore mentioned under A. The foot may be open without a toe-cap, or a toe-cap, Knitted or made of homespun, is attached to the foot (Noss 1989). The second type of hose, those that are cut with the grain, are constructed as follows.

A piece of homespun is cut on the straight into two rectangles, one for either of the hose. They fold the piece double and make a seam that runs down the leg and under the heel. At the top of the seam is a slit (Fig. 6).

The front of the leg has been made in different ways. The foot can, as with the bias cut hose, either be open without a toecap, have a toecap attached, or the whole foot including the toecap can be made of homespun.

- A. Leg with foot of homespun. At the front of the leg a slit is made and a gore inserted. The sole, "the bottom" and the toecap are made of a rectangular piece of homespun that is cut straight at the one end and rounded off for the heel at the other (Fig. 6 type IIA).
- B. The leg and the heel are one piece and from part of the bottom of the hose. A slit is made at either side of the leg and a piece of homespun, a gore, that covers the sole to the toe, is inserted (Fig. 6 type IIB). The piece between the two slits covers the top of the foot. The foot may be open without a toecap, or it may have a knitted or homespun toecap attached (Noss 1989).

Discussion

There is little first hand information on the types of hose or calf coverings that were used in the early Middle Ages in England. What does exist is some vocabulary, artistic depictions, and one nalbinded sock

or toecap fragment. This is not a lot to go on but provides a lot of fuel for speculation. Owen-Crocker (1990), recommended that a statue of a seventh century king and acolyte for the Lindisfarne Priory Museum be depicted as wearing wound, puttee like, strips on his calves. It is also conceivable that, depending on the weather, various combinations could be worn. Social status, wealth, and occasion also indubitably determined which was worn. From the work of Noss and Nockert there is evidence of at least one type of foot and calf covering. Both discuss hose made from homespun that is cut on the bias with and without feet and the use of foot wraps. None of the patterns are overly complex and all need some form of additional support either in the form of leather straps or some sort of garter. Except for the length of the hose, which reached it's maximum in the 15th C., we see a continuous tradition of hose from at least the 13th C. to the 20th C.

As a last note, I found that an easy way to make a pair of what I believe are reasonably period socks is to take a pair of cheap second hand wool pants and first pull them inside out. Then pull the bottom of the leg over your foot and up to your knee. Then pin and chalk some of the excess fabric behind the calf. The sock should fit close to the upper calf and a little loose around the lower calf. Remember there has to be enough room to draw your bent ankle through the now reduced tube. cut the pants leg off near your toes. Then cut the excess from the calf and heel and sew together. I suggest that a heavier piece of wool be used for the sole of the sock. Use Noss's patterns as a guide. I have made two pair of socks made close to the with grain pattern described by Noss. They work reasonably well but are made from thin wool and not home spun so do not provide great warmth. I usually wear a pair of sport socks inside of them for extra padding and warmth.

Bibliography

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