

#320: VIKING DRESS



Much of our knowledge of the Viking-era material culture is limited, including information about their clothing. Little evidence has been found regarding Viking clothing because not much has been recovered. Since the clothing was constructed with natural materials, the garments have decomposed in the 1,000 years since the Viking era. The Vikings also left few images and written descriptions of their garments. However, based on Vikings Sagas and archaeological digs, historians have an idea of what these Nordic people wore, although interpretations do vary.

For all Vikings—men, women and children—clothing was utilitarian, comfortable and practical. Garments were constructed so that they did not bind or restrict movement, and so that they could adjust for varying temperatures. Wool and linen were the most commonly used fabrics. Fur and animal skins were used for warmth on garments during the winter. Leather was used for shoes, belts and, sometimes, outer garments.

Women were responsible for all the steps of clothing construction, including processing the fibers, spinning, weaving, cutting, sewing and dyeing the fabric and leather. Because making a garment was so labor intensive and required great skill, clothing was highly valued and carefully maintained, and the seamstress who made the garments was a highly regarded member of the household.

A Viking's wardrobe reflected their status in the community. Those who had a variety of well fitted clothing and adornments like brooches,

pins, belts and necklaces were considered wealthy. Dyed clothing was also a highly regarded and considered a sign of wealth.

A Viking man typically wore a long wool tunic with a belt around the waist. The tunic was pulled on over the head. If any fasteners were used, it was a button and loop. All but the poorest men had tunics decorated with braid, usually around the neck and sleeves. Very wealthy men would have braid around the bottom of the tunic as well. Only the wealthiest might have used silk to trim their tunic since it was extremely costly to import.

A linen undertunic was worn by most men beneath their tunic to avoid irritation to the skin from the scratchy wool. If the undertunic was longer than the overtunic, making it visible, people could see that one was wealthy enough to be able to afford such a garment.

The length of both the tunic and undertunic was determined by the wealth of the man wearing the garment. A poor man would have shorter garments so as not to add material that was not needed. A wealthier Viking would have longer garments, made from more material than was needed, to show that he could afford the excess.

A variety of woolen trousers were worn under the long tunic. Most pants were fastened with a braided belt or a simple drawstring, since trousers did not have zippers. Some pants had loops at the bottom that attached under the feet like stirrups and some were made with foot covers that resembled attached socks. Trousers and tunics had no pockets so everyday items were suspended from a belt, carried in pouches or carried around the neck.



Both men and women wore a long cloak to provide warmth and protection in inclement weather. The cloak was usually just a rectangular piece of wool that might be lined with another color. Reindeer hide was also used. Men wore their cloaks off center, with the right arm (the weapon arm) unencumbered in case they needed to extract their weapon quickly. Their cloak was probably held in place by a pin at the right shoulder. A women's cloak was probably held together by a brooch.

In general, women's clothing was made from the same material as men's garments, but thought to be much simpler in design. The main garment was a long loose linen dress with long sleeves, held closed by a brooch at the neck. Layered above would be a shorter length woolen dress or apron with straps connected by brooches or pins. These simple outfits might have been personalized with adornments such as handwoven belts, brooches, buckles, beaded necklaces and intricate trim. Color was also used to provide variation. As with the men's clothing, pockets were not part of the construction of women's garments. Women probably carried needed items suspended by a cord from brooches or from their belts. Basic head coverings, such as tied kerchiefs, were typically worn by women on a daily basis. Elaborate headdresses may have been worn on special occasions. It is thought that the type of head covering worn depended on whether or not a woman was married.

Considering the effort that Vikings spent on making and maintaining their clothing, along with the time they spent making adornments, they probably also spent time on personal grooming. In Viking graves, archeologists have found a number of hair combs and tools for cleaning teeth and ears. Historic images and saga writings claim that women kept their hair very long but knotted up while men had long beards and mustaches that were well kept.

Given the reputation of Vikings for being brutal and barbaric warriors and raiders, their clothing was surprising sophisticated. The design of the various garments demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of purpose. Construction showed skilled workmanship, with cloth that was of a finer weave, and stitching that was more detailed and exact than one would expect. Accessories showed exceptional craftsmanship, with an eye for functionality as well as an interest in personal adornment.