

Introduction to European Women's Short Cloaks of the 16th and Early 17th Centuries

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the short cloak as worn by 16th and early 17th century women. The paper begins with a brief history of the short cloak prior to the 16th century. It continues with an overview of short cloaks by selected geographic region, comparing visual characteristics from period art and period tailor's patterns, for both women and men. This paper does not contain information about ecclesiastical cloaks or other cloak-like vestments worn by priests, nuns, and other members of religious orders during this time period.

Introduction

My goal for this research was to learn about women's short cloaks in this time period, and to start adding them to my SCA wardrobe. I was inspired by a class that I took: Master Charles de Bourbon's Fur Master Class, as well as my desire to reproduce this stunning Hungarian 16th century silk fur-lined short cloak and matching gown.



Figure 1: Hungarian 16th century fur-lined cloak with matching gown.

A Brief History of the Short Cloak from Prehistoric Times through the 15th Century

People in the European medieval world believed that the beginning of human existence, and the beginning of clothing, takes place in the Biblical account of God creating the first outer clothes for Adam and Eve from animal skins. We can imagine early European humans wearing cloaks of animal skins to provide warmth and protect them from rain, wind, and snow. However, my story of the cloak begins with its earliest representation in art and in the archeological record.

The earliest European evidence of a cloak in statuary is the Himation, a mantle or wrap worn by Greek men and women from the Archaic through the Hellenistic periods (c. 750–30 BCE). A large rectangle of fabric, the himation was draped in different ways, as a shawl, a cloak, or a head covering. The Romans adopted this cloak-like garment, calling it a pallium. The Romans also developed their own additional styles of cloaks, including shoulder-length, hip-length, knee-length, and ankle-length styles, worn by both men and women, which can be seen in statuary from the period. (Scott, 2007)

Anglo-Saxon women were famous across Europe for their embroidery skill and elaborate textiles, yet in surviving early manuscript illumination (circa 900), they were portrayed as swathed or shrouded in their clothes. Few details of rich fabrics or embroidery are seen, and even the details of their clothing are not evident, other than veils, occasionally a hood, and an under and an over tunic. We do not know if they wore cloaks. (Scott, *Medieval Dress and Fashion*, 2007)

The cloak reconstruction shown in the following image is likely representative of styles worn in Denmark during the 10th Century, and not specific to a men or women. While earlier cloaks were likely much larger (such as the Thorsberg cloak), there is reason to believe later cloaks during the Viking Age were somewhat smaller in size. (Burch & Kidd, 2019)



Figure 2: Danish short cloak reproduction, Burch and Kidd

Based on textile fragments and the sagas, it is thought that Viking era cloaks could be embroidered, or trimmed with tablet woven braid. Typically they hung to somewhere between the knee and the ankle depending on the wealth of the owner. The sagas tell of much longer cloaks, called a *slæður*, so long that they trail on the ground. Tiny statues of women from Viking era archeological finds depict long shawls or cloaks that trailed on the ground.

Iceland exported wool in the form of homespun cloth (*vaðmál*) or ready-made cloaks (*vararfeldur*), and also a shaggy cloak (*röggvarafeldur*) during the 11th -12th century. (Short, 2020).



Figure 3 Shaggy fleece fragment, Iceland, 10th - 12th century

Because much of the evidence is fragmentary, we are not able to conclusively prove that shaggy cloaks were worn only by men.



Figure 4: Life, Passion, and Miracles of St. Edmund, c.1130

Modern reconstruction methods use tufts from the fleece of the sheep looped around warp threads but not pulled tight, leaving a large loop. The resulting garment may have resembled a patchy lamb fleece.

The oldest manuscript image, circa 1130, of a short cloak that I have found to date shows two poor men receiving alms from King Edmund.

Their cloaks are depicted as “shaggy” in appearance, perhaps woven in a similar fashion to the Icelandic röggvarafeldur described previously, or actual Icelandic export cloaks, from the same time period.

In my opinion, the lack of women portrayed wearing shaggy cloaks in manuscript art does not conclusively prove that shaggy cloaks were only worn by men or by the poor in England.

From the 12th through the 15th century, women’s cloaks are depicted. But, as far as my research has taken me to date in manuscript art and tomb effigies, they are universally shown as floor length or longer. Cloaks for noble women are often depicted with ermine or vair fur lining.



Women wearing a hood, with or without a small shoulder mantle are depicted in manuscript images and archeological evidence. 14th century women's hoods are separate garments and not part of a cloak. (Crowfoot, Prichard, & Staniland, 2001)

The short cloak worn by a woman has not yet made its appearance.

Figure 5: The queen and her ladies in waiting, Historie Alexandre le Grand, Paris, c 1420

Figure 6: Women wearing hoods, with and without a cloak, from The Parement Master, France, c. 1380



Some 16th and Early 17 Century Short Cloaks by Geographical Region

Cloaks were worn by men and women of all social classes in Europe during the 16th and early 17th century: nobles, merchants and the middle class, servants, and peasants. They could be stand-alone garments or part of a matching suit of clothes. (Barich & McNealy, 2015).

England and Scotland



The cloak appears frequently during the Tudor period in the wills of both men and women. English cloaks were constructed in varied lengths, and may have collars, sleeves, and/or hoods. They were circular or semi-circular in shape and needed to be at least three-quarters of a circle to provide any practical purpose for warmth and protection from the weather. Many pictorial sources, as well as fashionable extant cloaks, show no evidence of fasteners or strings.

Figure 7: Earl of Essex by Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1585-1595

They appear to just hang effortlessly from the shoulders, as in the portrait of the Earl of Essex. (Mikhaila & Malcolm-Davies, 2006).

Fur was used for fashionable warmth and decoration, including lining for cloaks. The 1533 Act of Apparel denied fur to agricultural workers and husbandman, who likely needed it the most, not even English lamb or rabbit. The middle class and merchants were allowed a variety of affordable lamb, fox, martin, civet cat, wild cat, and coney (rabbit) fur. Squirrel (fashionable for cloak lining in previous centuries) and mink were seldom mentioned in wardrobe accounts, but leopard was available to gentry and other wealthy persons. (Mikhaila & Malcolm-Davies, 2006)

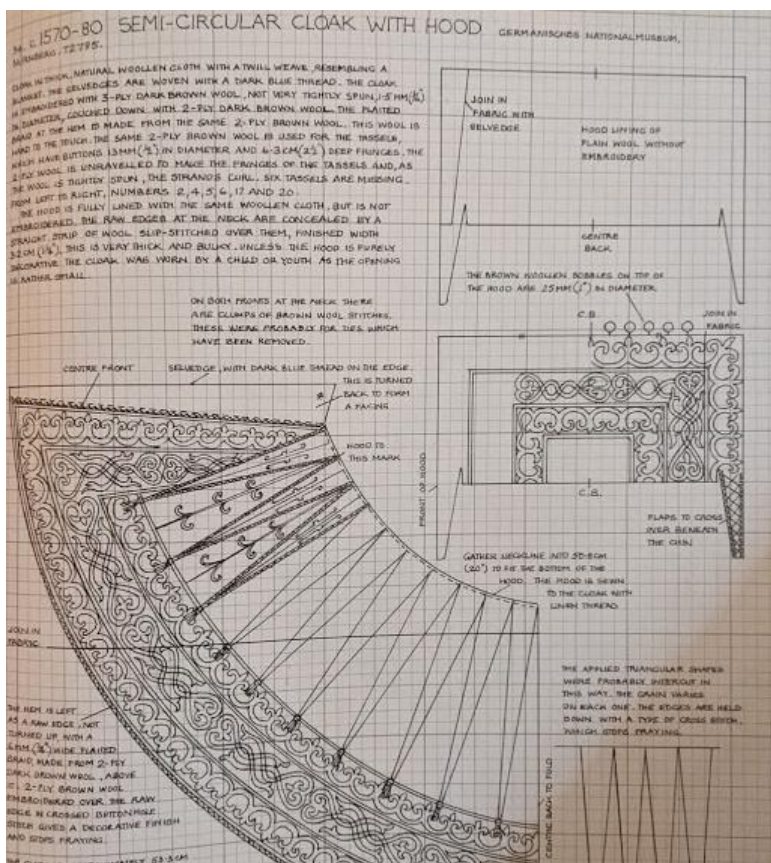


Figure 8: Scottish woman in a fur-lined short cloak, by Wenceslaus Hollar, c. 1644

Queen Elizabeth’s wardrobe according to the Stowe Inventory in 1600 included 96 cloaks. The cloaks are made of a variety of materials including velvet, satin, silk, wool, and one mentioned specifically made of leather. Many were decorated with embroidery, lace, and other rich trims. The details of the shape and style of the cloaks are usually omitted from the inventory, some are described simply as long, or round, or short, or with sleeves, or Dutch (a short cloak with sleeves, worn by both men and women.)

Fur lining is noted for only a few of the cloaks. One cloak in particular is described as being lined with mink, and the collar and edges lined with sable. (Arnold, 1988).

Unfortunately, I was not able to locate an image of Elizabeth I wearing a short cloak.



Janet Arnold’s analysis of extant cloaks and her pattern line drawings give us a detailed view of the workmanship of these garments, many of which were likely worn by upper class men. (Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion c1560 - 1620*, 1985). One cloak, because of its small size is attributed to a child or youth, however no mention is made of whether it was for a boy or a girl.

Figure 9: Analysis of an extant embroidered wool cloak by Janet Arnold, from the Victoria and Albert Museum, c. 1570-1580

Spain

I have included short cloaks from Spain because of their importance to men in the period, as well as the number of surviving extant examples. Unfortunately, the short cloak appears to only be men's fashion apparel in Spain, as I was unable to find any images of Spanish women wearing short cloaks.

The circular short cloak, as well as the sleeved Dutch cloak shown in the following Figure, are both popular styles.



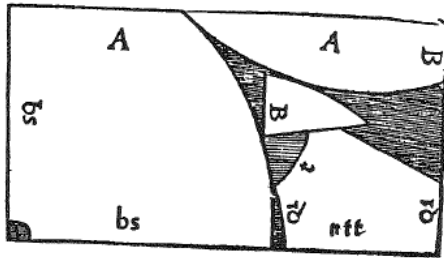
Figure 10: Alexander Farnese by Alonzo Sanchez Colleo, circa 1560, wearing a Dutch cloak.

Figure 11: Don Carlos, by Alonzo Sanchez Colleo, circa 1555-1599, wearing a round fur lined cloak.



The pattern book of Juan de Alcega contains ten stand-alone cloak cutting diagrams that, although not specified as such, and judging solely by their size and circular shape, I believe could be worn by men or women.

f.15 Cloak⁶ of cloth.



3 x 2 ells

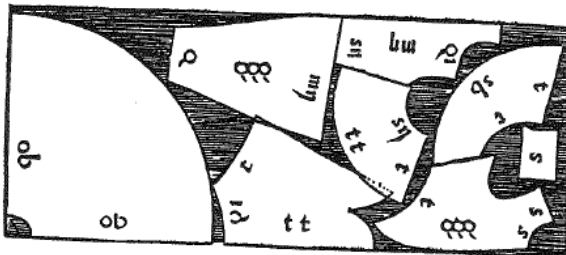
The Front of this cloak is folded over the Back⁷. In addition to the lengths of the cloak, cut the hood along the fold. The lengths of cloak and hood fit

exactly along the fold, as the cloak is $1\frac{1}{2}$ ells long and, without the hood, requires $2\frac{1}{3}$ ells of cloth. The hood is $\frac{2}{3}$ ell long, making 3 ells of fabric in all. Cut the piecings (*camas*) along the selvedges; their extra-pieces (*pieças*) can be cut in the middle. Note that there is no more fabric than the lengths of the cloak and hood, so you must measure the cloth carefully for if it is cut short the cloak will not be long enough. If the cloth is cut in the house of a merchant who measures in inches (*pulgadas*) the cloak will not be as long as shown in the pattern.

Figure 12: Cloak of cloth with hood, unspecified as for a man or a woman, from Alcega

Five additional cutting diagrams by Alcega are for a cloak and matching jerkin, cut from the same piece of cloth. All of the patterns for cloaks with matching jerkins are, judging by the shape of the front of the jerkin, designed for men.

f.20a Cloak¹ and jerkin⁴ of cloth.



$3\frac{1}{4} \times 2$ ells

To cut this jerkin and cloak you need to cut the cloak, hood and jerkin Front along the fold². Cut

the sleeves and jerkin Back along the selvedges. The back and front skirts and the collars (*collares*) will come out of the cabbage (*medios*). All these pattern pieces have the nap running downwards (*pelo abaxo*). The edging (*ribete*) and other garniture (*adereço*) can be cut from what is left of the cabbage and from the curved off-cuts (*despuntaduras*). The jerkin can be cut wider and longer altogether. The curved off-cuts along the cloak [round its hemline] are not marked out because one half of the cloak is folded over the other⁵, as shown in this pattern.

Figure 13: Cutting diagram for a cloak and matching jerkin by Alcega

The Netherlands

Short cloaks in the Netherlands look very similar to those constructed and worn in England and in the rest of Europe at this time. The Dutch have the distinction of a style of short cloak specifically named for their region, which was worn throughout Europe.

Abraham de Bruyn, the artist who brought us the image of the Dutch gentleman in the previous illustration, also portrayed the Dutch cloak worn as a riding cloak by German and Spanish gentleman in very similar poses.



Figure 14: Dutch gentleman riding, wearing a Dutch cloak with hanging sleeves, by Abraham de Bruyn, c. 1577



Figure 15: German gentleman wearing a Dutch cloak, Abraham de Bruyn, c. 1577

We have to turn to other illustrators of the period to view versions of the Dutch cloak worn by women, as well as other illustrations of women's cloaks worn by Northern and Central European women of the time.

North and Central Europe

Continuing north east and then south, we see short cloaks worn by both women and men from Germany, Poland, Austria, and Hungary. For detailed pattern references, I consulted two Austrian sets of Tailor's cutting diagrams by Enns and Leonfeldner. (Barich & McNealy, 2015).

These two pattern books contain only three women's cloak patterns. While there are many more cutting diagrams for men, Barich and McNealy suggest that the lack of women's patterns may be due to the fact that women's fashions varied less than men's, and there are greater similarities between the styles that different social classes wore, thus the number and variety of women's garment patterns was much lower than men's. (Barich & McNealy, 2015).

There are diagrams for one circular short cloak, one semi-circular short cloak with seams and a collar, and a long circular cloak. Although there are few cloak cutting diagrams for women, contemporary illustrations show a large number of women in short cloaks and a variety of styles that were worn.

The scene to the right, from a German tailor's shop, we see finished garments hanging on a pole.

Figure 16: Tailors Shop from De zielenvisserij, c. 1560 - 1600

One tailor is cutting up a chasuble, while the other tailor is fitting a short cloak on a female customer. The cloak appears to be in the Dutch style with narrow sleeves. (Barich & McNealy, 2015)



In the following illustration, a Hungarian man and woman both wear fur-lined cloaks. His is a long cloak, with characteristic frog closures. Her cloak is a short circular cloak with turned back facings and a collar.

Figure 17: Hungarian couple in fur lined cloaks by Crispin van der Passe, 17th century

Upper class German women, as well as their counterparts in other areas of Europe, sometimes wore short cloaks with decorative elements that matched or complimented their gowns. In the following illustration of a German couple, we see the man's cloak has a spotted fur lining, possibly cheetah, ocelot, or leopard.

The woman's cloak has Polish style closures on what appear to be slits in the fabric that were either completely decorative or actually opened to let the wearer put their arms through the cloak sides. (Barich & McNealy, 2015)



Figure 18: German couple in short cloaks by Matthias Beitler, c. 1582

In the following illustration, we see a German woman in a short cloak with her arms through the open sides. Originally, I thought the slits were merely decorative as in the previous illustration. But in this case, we see they are indeed useful. We also see that the child is not wearing a cloak.



Figure 19: German woman in a short cloak with split sides, by Jost Amman, 1599

Perhaps my favorite period illustration, showing the similarities between men's and women's short cloaks shows Margaret of Austria on horseback, followed by a man in her

procession, also on horseback. Both appear to be wearing identical short cloaks.

Figure 20: Margaret of Austria by Raffaello Schiaminossi, c, 1612.



Exotic animal fur was available to both men and women of Central Europe, as it was to their counterparts in England. I believe it was put to its best fashion use in the late 16th and early 17th century as a kind of uniform accessory wrap by Polish and Hungarian military officers. Men wore the full animal pelt on the shoulder, much like a cloak, while women would have lined or faced their cloaks with exotic animal fur rather than wear the full pelt.

Figure 21: Hungarian Captain in full military dress uniform, early 17th century

Italy

For information about Italian cloaks, I consulted the wardrobe accounts and

images from 16th century Florence, as worn by Eleanora de Toledo and her contemporaries.

Several different types of cloaks are described in Eleanora's wardrobe, as well as in woodcuts and paintings illustrating the contemporary Italian fashions for both men and women. In the image to the right, we see two women wearing fur lined mantellina. Mantellina had various forms, some very short and described as for the neck, shoulders, and underneath. Some were made of wool, but Eleanora preferred velvet and satin, lined with ermine or false ermine (sheepskin decorated with black tails). (Landini & Niccoli, 2005)



Figure 22: Noblewomen wearing mantellina, by Abraham de Bruyn, Florence, 1577.

They could be fastened at the front with what have been described as Hungarian or Polish style “frogs” and some have revers with turned-back collars, possibly to show off the fur lining. The mantellina in the previous illustration has slit-like openings just down from the shoulders on both sides, so that the wearer can put their arms through the slits. The woman on the right has puffy sleeves that are described as sleeves on the mantellina. However, I think these sleeves could be her gown sleeves, pulled through large side slit openings. The gown and the mantellina clearly have the same style of trim and so I feel it is hard to make a conclusive statement about the sleeves. In other descriptions, only Dutch cloaks have sleeves, and this cloak is not described as being a Dutch cloak.

The Dutch cloak is also described as being circular and covering the hips, normally with sleeves which could be used or just left hanging for a woman. For a man, a Dutch cloak was

described as being worn over just one shoulder. Italian waterproof cloaks known as feltri were actually leather cloaks made from fine otter skins, making them naturally waterproof.

Figure 23: Line drawing of a feltri worn with mantle and faceguard by Pietro Bertelli, 1594



Feltri were worn by both men and women. In the illustration, we see a man wearing a feltri as a riding cloak in the rain. The short hood with mantle is described as an additional piece sometimes worn over the feltri for additional protection. Eleanora owned several feltri, in both red and white. (Landini & Niccoli, 2005)

So, now we have come full circle (pun intended) from the earliest European humans, to the fashionable men and women of the 16th century Medici court, both wearing cloaks made from animal skins for protection from the elements.

Conclusion and Future Research

In conclusion, I feel that I still have more research to do in order to fully explore women's short cloaks during the 16th and 17th centuries. It has been frustrating at times, surprising (no Spanish women's short cloaks among all of the extant artifacts, and no images of Elizabeth I in a short cloak, a woman who owned at one point in her life 96 different cloaks), as well as rewarding. I am also conscious of the lack of consistent expert commentary on this subject.

When I feel that I have completed my research, I will share it to a wider audience for additional input. In the meantime, I am starting to make the Hungarian fur-lined silk short cloak and matching gown shown in Figure 1. I intend to have it completed for our first indoor, formal SCA event, when we are able to meet in person again.

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