

# Background:

## A tenth century smokkr from Hedeby

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### What is a smokkr?

Archeological evidence has been found for a sleeveless garment worn over a long-sleeved undergarment (serk). This garment was held with strap that were pinned just below the shoulders, on the chest, by a pair of domed oval brooches, colloquially called tortoise or turtle brooches (other shapes were found, but the oval ones seem to be most common). This garment goes by several names:

- Hängerock (German, coined by Agner Geijer)
- Trägerrock (German)
- Hängselkjol (Swedish)
- Pinafore (sometimes used by British reenactors)

The term “apron dress” seems to have been coined by Carolyn Priest-Dorman in the 1990’s. Because this term was featured in *Compleat Anachronist #59: Women’s Garb in Northern Europe, 450-1000 CE: Frisians, Angles, Franks, Balts, Vikings, and Finns*, it spread widely and was perpetuated throughout the SCA, and even into other reenactment groups.

However, Thor Ewing, in his book *Viking Clothing*, says that he believes that the garment was called a *smokkr*. He bases this assertion on a translation of a verse from the *Rígsþula*, an Eddic poem found in the Codex Wormianus.

Sat þar kona/sveigði rokk, breiddi faðm/bio til vaðar; sveigr var a hofði/smokkr var a bringu, dúkr var a halsi/dvergar a oxlum.	The woman sat/and the distaff wielded; At the weaving with arms/outstretched she worked; On her head was a band/on her breast a smock; On her shoulders a kerchief/with clasps there was.
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In this verse, Ewing believes that the item called a “smokkr” is not a smock in the English sense of the word, but rather a garment pulled over the head and fastened with brooches -- the clasps or “dwarves” mentioned in the last line. He also believes that the dress was a closed tube, not a wraparound garment as is sometimes speculated:

The word *smokkr* could not be easily applied to an open garment which is wrapped around the body, as in the reconstructions envisaged by Geijer and Bau. It is worth noting that the English word ‘smock’ typically describes a longish garment of cotton or linen, which is put on over the head and often includes a pleated section on the breast. (*Viking Clothing*, p. 39).

It is interesting to note that some *smokkr*s, particularly those found in Køstrup, Fyn in Denmark, are also posited to include a pleated section on the breast. However, the fitted, unpleated

version posited by finds in Hedeby has long been my preferred version (in part because I did not know of the Køstrup finds), so that is what I have chosen to focus on for this project.

## What did a smokkr look like?

Honestly? We don't know for sure. What we think the Hedeby smokkr looked like is extrapolated from some rather small fragments of garments that were torn up, covered in tar, and used to caulk a ship that was recovered from the harbor at Hedeby. Other fragments for other styles of dress were recovered from graves in Birka, Køstrup, and Pskov, as well as minor finds in other locations such as Kaupang and Adwick-le-Street.

We *think* they were sleeveless top-layer garments with no fabric covering the shoulders from the armpits up, held up by long, narrow loops extending from the back over the shoulder, and short front loops, held together by domed, oval brooches. The bodice can be fitted, loose, or pleated, depending on time period and location of the find. We only have the barest idea of what the skirts must have looked like nor how long, but in the SCA I have seen skirts that are straight(ish), slit, and flared, ranging from knee length to trailing on the ground.

As far as we know, the Hedeby style smokkr were fitted at the bodice. Fragment H14A, which was a piece of woolen cloth torn from a finished garment, covered in tar, and used to caulk a ship that was later found in the harbor at Hedeby, is more or less trapezoidal, measuring 30 cm high, 16-23 cm wide and 0.1 cm thick. Both long edges show stitching holes, indicating that they were sewn to pieces on either side. The top edge is turned over 1cm and stitched down using "Ösenstich", modernly known as "catch stitch", "plaited stitch", or "herringbone stitch". This technique is used for hemming in modern couture sewing because it moves and flexes with the garment.

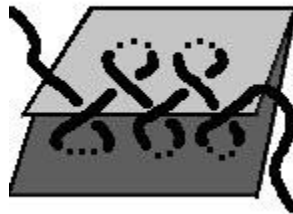


Image from *Archaeological Sewing*, by Heather Rose Jones  
(<http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/wool.html#WEHem>)

Additionally, there is a small dart, 2mm-5mm wide, starting 7 cm down from the top of the fragment and extending to the bottom edge. Presumably it went farther down the garment, but that portion has been torn away. At the widest point of the dart, about 15cm below the top edge of fragment, the fabric is felted and there is a hole worn through it. This damage could indicate the wear of a belt, but is by no means definitive. Contrary to modern practice, the ridge of the dart was apparently on the outside of the smokkr. A six-strand braid, 1-2mm wide, in red and yellow, was stitched over the dart.

A second fragment (H14B) was found, appearing to be from the same garment. It is wider (12x24 cm), so it is supposed to have been positioned lower on the body. It also shows the dart, but the braid is missing. Stitch holes are visible along one edge.

Swedish archaeologist Inga Hägg pointed out that garments and fragments recovered from Hedeby indicate that clothing was cut closer to the body, and showed an advanced level of tailoring skill, using diagonal cuts and curved shapes to make the garments fit the body. This assertion is borne out by the shapes of the cutting waste, as well.

Okay, so the bodice was fitted. What did the skirt look like?

Again, we don't know. And since most of the fragments that we do have were either ship's caulking or in a grave in contact with metal (metallic salts from bronze jewelry preserves the textiles they contact), it's unlikely that we will ever know. My interpretation has a rather full skirt, about three times the circumference of the bodice. Other interpretations have a slimmer, less full skirt, citing concerns that Norse women would not have been so profligate in their use of fabric both expensive to produce and expensive to obtain. Not only do we not know the width of the skirts, we don't know the length. I choose to make my skirts longer, from mid-calf to ankle length, both for warmth and because I feel that a shorter length makes me look shorter and wider than I am. Sometimes you just have to bow to vanity.

That takes care of the dress itself. What about those straps you mentioned?

Ah, straps. These take so many forms in the SCA. One form that I see frequently is a wide flat strap with the brooches pinned through it, and through the dress. While I obviously can't say for sure that this never happened, I can say that it isn't supported by the archaeology, nor is it supported by practical experience. Piercing the fabric with the pin puts stress on the fabric itself, because the pins of the brooches are quite heavy, as are the brooches themselves. As the garment is worn, the brooches pull on the fabric, stressing the fibers and causing bigger holes to appear. Eventually the fabric will tear, which isn't a huge problem modernly, but in the viking age when it was all made by hand, it might be a problem indeed.

Most reenactor depictions of smokkr straps consist of very short loops attached to the inside of the top edge on the front of the dress, and very long loops attached to the inside of the the top edge on the back of the dress and extending over the shoulders. I have also seen one clothing merchant who makes Viking dresses where the straps over the shoulders are wide flat straps with loops sewn at the distal end. While it's an interesting interpretation, I think it's very silly. The short straps are borne out by the discovery of the top edge of the garment extending some 2cm inside the brooch.

Many of our conjectures about the smokkr are based on the fact that the brooches appear with loops of textile wrapped around the pins, and the fragments clearly show a top edge hem. In some instances, there is one loop around the top end of the pin and one around the bottom. Sometimes there are multiple loops on the bottom. Sometimes there are multiple loops on the top. Sometimes there are multiple loops at both top and bottom. These multiple loop arrangements are part of Swedish textile historian and archaeologist Agnes Geijer's argument for a wrap style dress, but they are also an argument for the apron-like rectangular piece of fabric hanging down in front that is quickly becoming popular in the SCA, as well as for a train or mantle hanging down the back. (Hanging mantles don't seem to have taken off in the SCA the way the front piece has -- I have yet to see one in the East.)

(There is some evidence that the dress might be worn without brooches, perhaps as a hand-me-down to a servant or child, with the straps sewn to the dress, but I have opted for the slightly earlier, certainly fancier version.)

Some theories of the shape of the smokkr include a version suggested by Swedish textile historian and archaeologist Agnes Geijer, consisting of two overlapping rectangles, one wrapped around the left side of the body and the other wrapped around the right, with loops sewn on the top edges and held by one set of brooches. Such an arrangement would seem to be borne out by the presence of multiple sets of loops inside the brooches.

Swedish archaeologist Inga Hägg, however, argues that the garment must have been closed, based on the way that the woolen garments lie horizontally across the body between the brooches, and because there is only ever one woolen layer around the body, rather than a second, overlapping layer as would be found with a wrap style. Additionally, the multiple sets of loops found in the brooches could be explained away by layering a woolen dress over a linen one.

In Birka grave 464, the top edge of the garment extended some 2 cm behind the brooch, indicating that the front loops were quite short.

Evidence also points to some of the wool smokkr having been lined with linen and trimmed with strips of silk, though this evidence is very limited and the linen could be evidence of a serk (shirt or undergown) worn under the smokkr.

## So... how did they fit?

The Hedeby fragment shows a very shallow, yet fairly long everted tuck or dart running the length of the 30cm fragment. Since this fragment is believed to come from the back of the gown, this is evidence that the dress was fitted to a certain extent, in contrast to the looser, pleated dresses from Køstrup and Kaupang. There is no evidence for how long the dart ran, but I have a hard time believing it would run the length of the skirt, since there's no point to it. 30 cm is equivalent to nearly 12", which is the length of my torso from armpit to hip, so it's not unreasonable to think that the dart ran the length of the torso and opened up as the skirt flared away from the hips.

## Were they decorated?

We don't know... but there doesn't seem to be much evidence for it. In contrast to what is commonly seen in the SCA, the only example we have of herringbone stitch on the outside of the work is on a cushion found at Sutton Hoo (6th and 7th century) and at Mammen (late 10th century), near Viborg in Denmark. While the Mammen embroideries are more or less contemporaneous with this dress, they are still on men's clothing, and we have no examples of clothing fragments identified as female with the kind of stitch holes and remaining stitching as we do for male. That's not to say women's clothing was decorated; it just means we don't know.

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