

Norse Apron Dresses – One Interpretation

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Apron dresses are one of the more significantly Norse items of clothing seen in the SCA, and yet they are a garment with a great many interpretations. If there are any complete extant finds, I've been unable to locate documentation of them. This is because the wool and linen textiles don't survive burial, unless they're in contact with metal, and there's not a lot of metal in female burials.

Frustratingly, there are also few depictions of women in Viking art, and those that appear are usually highly stylized depictions of women wearing shawls over their dresses, and so the dress layers are not visible. As a result of the lack of extant garments and the paucity of female depictions in art, there are a great many interpretations of the apron layer, ranging from the impractical to the eminently plausible. As Mistress Pora Sharptooth (C.A. Priest-Dorman) says in her web article, "*But That's How They Look in the Book!*": *Viking Women's Garb in Art and Archaeology* (<http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/roach.html>), "The description of apron-dresses as 'rectangular sheets' (page 200) is misleading, as it only represents one of the styles worn during the Viking Age. Recent archaeological evidence (see, for example, the discussion in Hägg 1984, 168-69) suggests that the shape of the apron-dress may have evolved over the course of several centuries, from the peplos phase in the late Iron Age through a tube-shaped phase and then a wrapped flat sheet phase to a tenth-century garment cut and pieced together. The apron-dresses found at Hedeby and dated to the tenth century demonstrated several sophisticated tailoring techniques--including tucks, darts, and pieced construction (Hägg 1984, 169-70)."

As mentioned in the quote above, there are a great many interpretations of the apron dress, and a great many incarnations of that layer over time. The one you choose should be based on where and when you want to live... or what you want to look like. I chose my interpretation based on what I thought was an efficient cutting pattern, and even more importantly, flattering. Given that it's a closed tube, tailored garment, it would fit in with the Hedeby apron dresses as described above. According to Priest-Dorman, the long tunic-type underdress and fitted, closed apron overdress that I favor is indicative of 10th century Western Scandinavia, in particular, Hedeby in Denmark.

Several basic cutting patterns for tailored apron dresses can be found on the Internet. The one that seems to be most prevalent is a three-panel cutting plan with gores, but I prefer a four-panel plan. The only differences between the two are the way the fabric is folded, and the way the cuts are measured on the fabric. I find the four-panel pattern places seams in places that allow tailoring to the figure, and places gores attractively. I first discovered this cutting plan during the reign of Thorson and Svava; the PDF file can be found here: http://thorsonandsvava.sccspirit.com/pdf_files/outfitting_fourpanelcutplan.pdf. Countess Svava gets all the credit; I just want to bring the information to the masses.

FABRIC

Apron dress fragments found in graves were both linen and fine wool; either would be suitable for re-creation. Twills are preferable, particularly broken-lozenge or diamond twill, but tabby weave will do, since commercially available twills are very hard to find. Smooth wools are preferable to slubby, highly textured fabrics. Patterns are fine, as are bright colors. While the textile fragments unearthed are stained muddy brown colors, it is possible to achieve wonderful colors using natural materials available in Scandinavia in period.

HOW TO MEASURE

There are only three measurements that need to be taken: the largest girth measurement, the length from armpit to the top of the hip, and the distance from that point to where you want the dress to stop (I have seen Viking aprons in lengths from the knee to the ground; I like mine between the bottom of the calf and floor-length). I say largest girth measurement because I know that women come in all shapes and sizes in the SCA, and I don't want to make the assumption that one's bust is one's largest girth measurement. With all the vertical seams in this dress, it can be tailored to fit any shape.

Seam Allowance	= A
Largest Girth Measurement	= B
Hem Allowance	= C
Armpit to Top of Hip	= D
Top of Hip to Hem of Dress	= E

$8A + B$ is the width of the fabric. $4C + D + 2E$ is the length of the fabric. A rule of thumb is that the length is generally twice the width.

Fold the fabric into quarters widthwise. Mark the center point of the length. Next, at the center point of the length, measure the center point of the width of the folded fabric. In other words, if the folded fabric is 12 inches across, find the 6" point. Divide the armpit to hip measurement by two, and measure this distance to either side of the center point. For example, if your armpit to hip measurement is 12 inches, measure six inches to the left and six inches to the right of the center point. Draw a line from the leftmost point to the rightmost point, through the center point.

From the leftmost point, draw a line to the top edge, and from the rightmost point, draw line to the bottom edge. And finally, the last two lines: Draw a line from the corner of the left-hand lines diagonally to the top left-hand corner of the fabric. Then draw a line from the corner of the right-hand lines diagonally to the bottom right hand corner of the fabric. Cut along these lines. (See the [cutting layout](#) for how the lines should look once drawn.)

Assembly is quite simple. Sew together the one panel that was split due to being laid out on the selvedge, using a narrow seam allowance. Do the same for the split gore (though feel free to cut another gore out of scrap fabric if you want). Sew one gore to the left side of each panel (I like to sew the split gore to the split panel), and then sew the gore-panel assemblies together.

Try on the dress over at least one layer, with the center seam of the split panel in back. Have a helper take in the dress at the seams, curving them as necessary to fit the figure fairly closely. This is not a supporting layer, so it need not be skin-tight — this is an opportunity to make the fit flatter, and skim over curves as desired. I do find it more comfortable when the dress hangs from my ribcage somewhat. Plus, wool and linen stretch as they are worn, so it won't be as snug at the end of the day as it is when you first put it on. When the seam adjustments have been pinned, stitch them down, open the old seams, and press flat. Work seam treatments, if any, and hem top and bottom edges.

STRAPS

Apron dress straps found attached to metal brooches in graves are generally 4mm-10mm ($\frac{3}{8}$ "- $\frac{7}{8}$ ") in width, of the same color and fabric as the dresses themselves. This is far too narrow to sew first and then turn into a tube. The period solution seems to have been to cut a strip of fabric three times as wide as needed, then fold it in half lengthwise and turn the raw edges inward, then hemstitch. The solution I have been using (mostly because I end up making straps in the wee hours of the morning before an event) is to cut strips 2cm wide, fold in half, and bind the raw edges with blanket stitch.

The straps are made up of loops, through which the brooch pins are threaded and closed. The front loops are very small, positioning the brooches so that they overlie the top edge of the apron dress. I usually use a 2" length of strap, with about $\frac{1}{4}$ "- $\frac{1}{2}$ " poking out above the top edge. The shoulder straps are long loops, both ends fastened to the back, long enough to reach over the shoulder to the top of the brooch in front.

The length of the long strap and the positioning of the straps and small front loops must be left up to the individual. On my dresses, the front loops are positioned slightly to the inside of the front seams, which, coincidentally, is about in line with the nipples. On the back, the straps are between my shoulder blades, but not meeting at the center. The long straps are 15" long, measured from the top edge of the dress to the end of the strap — overall length ends up being approximately 16".

BROOCHES AND BEAD SWAGS

The typical paired brooches used to pin the straps were oval in shape, and dished, to resemble tortoise shells, hence the common name tortoise or turtle brooches. These could be extremely ornate. This shape was fairly universal where the brooches were worn, except on the island of Gotland, in Denmark, where the brooches were often shaped like animal heads.

The beads varied widely in composition. The beads found in graves are usually glass, but with a matte finish that may have fooled the Arab writer Ibn Fadlan into thinking they were ceramic. The glass beads came in all different colors. Some were even multi-colored, in an array of shapes and sizes. Beads were also made of "amber, carnelian, rock crystal, silver and gold." (Ewing, p. 65) Gems and semi-precious stones were rare, but many of the recovered glass beads seem to have been made to resemble such stones.

The beads were usually suspended between the brooches, usually from the catch at the top, but sometimes from the hinge at the bottom. Other items that might have hung from the brooches are keys, knives, ear spoons, needle cases, scissors, and tweezers. Bead necklaces were also worn, both shorter, choker length strings as well as long strands of beads.

UNDER THE APRON DRESS

Two other layers were worn under the apron dress. The smock, worn closest to the body, was a long tunic, usually of unbleached linen. Over that was worn a wool or linen gown, with long, straight sleeves. "Much care was lavished on the ornamentation of the sleeves and torso of this layer of clothing in the form of embroidery, appliqué, silk trimming, and tablet-woven bands." (Priest-Dorman) The neckline of these two layers varied with the time and place, ranging from wide oval "boatneck" styles to keyhole necklines, closed up with tiny (1") silver penannular brooches. The 10th century undergowns found in Hedeby, Denmark, were particularly advanced in style, featuring "set-in sleeves, shoulder seams, and gores" (Priest-Dorman).

OVER THE TOP

Over everything was the outer garment, often a shawl or a long-sleeved coat or caftan (these items are generally found earlier than 10th century). Headgear is a hit or miss proposition; it seems unlikely in cold climates such as Scandinavia that people did not cover their heads, but there is little evidence for women's headgear in graves. The headgear that has been found has ranged from brocaded bands worn as fillets to scarves to coif-like caps, but as often as not one might think that Norse women wore nothing at all on their heads.

$(4A + B) / 4 = \text{width}$
 of folded fabric

Cutting Layout

$C + E =$
total length
of skirt
(repeated
on other end
of pattern)

$4C + D + 2E$
= length
of fabric

$2C + D =$
Length of
bodice
pattern

Seam Allowance: _____ (A)
Largest Girth: _____ (B)
Hem Allowance: _____ (C)
Armpit to Hip: _____ (D)
Hip to Hem: _____ (E)

Width of Fabric: $4A + B =$ _____
Length of Fabric: $4C + D + 2E =$ _____
Width of Folded Fabric:
 $(4A + B) / 4 =$ _____

Assembly



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carolyn Priest-Dorman. "But That's How They Look in the Book!": Viking Women's Garb in Art and Archaeology, <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/roach.html>

Ewing, Thor. Viking Clothing, Tempus Publishing, Ltd, Gloucestershire, England, 2006

Much of what I have written is a synthesis of knowledge gained from my participation on the Norsefolk_2 email list at Yahoo!Groups, where I have been a member for the past four years. The group can be found at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Norsefolk_2/

OTHER WEBSITES OF VALUE

<http://histvarld.historiska.se/histvarld/draekter/vkvinna/index.html> -- Swedish website; recreation of a woman's costume from Birka. The smock and the apron straps are done differently from the outline in this handout.

<http://sca.uwaterloo.ca/mjc/sca/aprond.html> -- Monica Cellio's three-panel interpretation

<http://www.ostvik.org/articles/vikwomen.html> -- webpage from small group of Viking re-enactors in the MidAtlantic states

<http://www.thebeadsite.com/MG9-1-02.html> -- pictures of glass beads, both found at a dig site and made modernly as a re-creation

<http://www.frojel.com/index.html> -- These folks really know their stuff. The page is worth looking at just for the gallery, never mind the articles.

WHERE TO GET SHINY THINGS

<http://www.quietpress.com/vikingbrooch.html> -- Sir Raymond The Quiet sells gorgeous bronze brooches at a very reasonable price, and will gold and silver plate them for a fee upon request.

<http://www.northan.net/main.aspx?pageID=front> -- Alban Depper makes exquisite period jewelry. His wares are not cheap, but they are well worth the expense.

<http://www.urweg.tk/> -- Urweg makes truly beautiful brooches in bronze and sterling silver.