

## ANGLO DANISH COSTUMES AND FASHIONS



Viking age fashions worn by Cnut and Emma

### *Introduction*

This is a basic costume guide to give a general idea of what was worn by the Vikings, focusing Viking side of fashion rather than Saxon fashion styles, but covers what the clothing was made from and what it looked like and aims to dispel some of the common wrong ideas held about Viking clothing. Hopefully enough information is included for you to start making some yourself. Try to avoid asking your mum to sew your clothes up for you as a modern seamstress won't produce as accurate a result as if you made it yourself using what you have learned from reading this. Learning to sew will also help you with other skills later such as leatherwork and you will be able to apply your own research on something you have made yourself. If you are having trouble you can feel free to bring your fabric along to meetings for help from an experienced member. The club also stocks some accurate materials for sale to members.

If you use a sewing machine only sew the internal seams and leave the hems to finish by hand so that no machine stitching is visible. But for accuracy it is best to hand sew garments particularly visible seams. Some common stitches were running stitch, whip stitch, or blanket stitch. Hems and seam allowances were often rolled or folded in and whip stitched down.

## *Fabrics*

The only fabrics available in Viking times were wool, linen or silk. All clothing had to be woven, dyed and sewn by hand from the resources available and woven on a warp weighted loom. Most was produced by the household rather than by a textile industry, however it is a common misapprehension that all medieval fabric was fuzzy and coarse or drably coloured. Cloth was commonly finely well woven in complex weaves and dyed in bright colours. Even finer decorative or speciality fabrics were also imported from the continent or the east. Patterns are simple as wastage was a big concern, fabric was time consuming to produce and valuable and used as a currency in Viking times.

Wool is the most common fabric used for clothes; the wadmal (homespun) of the Vikings was twill wool woven to a set width and quality and had a set value as currency. Wool could be dyed before or after spinning or being woven into cloth. Sheep or goats' wool could be used and could be woven including the outer guard hairs for its waterproofing properties for weather cloaks or ships sails, or could use the softer inner hairs for fine soft material.

Linen was produced in England and most commonly made from flax but could also be made from nettles or hemp. It was usually woven in a tabby weave which was very hard wearing due to the full length of the flax fibres being spun in the thread. Linen was often used for shirts and underwear and often worn white or undyed as linen doesn't take dye as well as wool. Linen was somewhat costly especially in the early Viking age and wasn't available to everyone. According to Adam of Bremen Norway and Gotland in particular relied on their flocks for clothing.

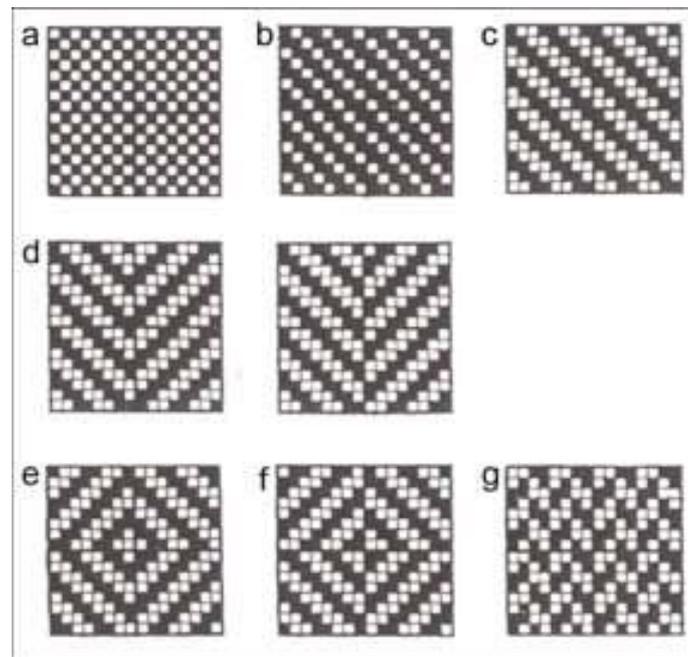
Cotton was not known to the Vikings in the early middle ages

Silk was an imported luxury in Viking times and an important commodity. It became more common after the 9<sup>th</sup> century when trade routes opened up to the east and was highly prized by the Vikings. Whole garments made of silk are very rare and it was often cut into decorative strips down to 1cm wide and sewn on as appliqué or used to enclose hems. Silk samite was a patterned twill silk with decorative pattern woven in. The original pattern does not seem to have been a concern when cutting and these strips are the most common form of decoration on Viking clothing.

When buying fabric it is better to buy 100% wool or linen but these are often hard to find and expensive, so blends are OK but avoid a synthetic content of more than 50% both for accuracy, breathability and safety near fires. Avoid any fabric with gold or coloured flecks or slubs that are in modern natural fibres and try to avoid fabrics that are heavily worsted or felted (processes that hide the weave) for most clothing applications.

## Weaves

Fabric in the Viking age was usually woven on a vertical warp weighted loom which uses weights at the bottom to tension the threads and the size of the frame gave a maximum width of about 90cm. The warp is the thread going down or along the fabric and the weft is the threads going across the cloth. The weft was often slightly thicker and looser spun than the warp but this style of uneven weave is not common today. Fabric was not generally felted leaving a visible weave structure.



Weave types

Tabby weave (a) or plain weave is the basic weaving structure where the weft is woven alternately over and under the warp in a simple crisscrossed pattern. A warm weave due to the dense weave pattern, it was quite common for wools and the norm for linen; it can be woven very tight and fine, and was popular in Norway and Ireland. Rep is a variant of tabby with a much thicker warp than the weft giving a ribbed effect across the cloth.

The most common weave for the Viking age is called twill (b), where each warp thread is passed over 2 or more weft threads with an offset between each row giving a distinct diagonal pattern. Most common in Viking weaving was to have the warp passed over 2 threads and the weft passed over 2 threads. This is called 2/2 twill, though 2/1 twill (c) where the warp crosses 2 threads and the weft only one became popular in the later Viking age. Twill is hard wearing and thread counts can be high, it is common nowadays for clothing as it drapes well and maintains the cloth's shape.

The diagonal step in twill can be reversed at regular intervals to create a zigzag pattern called herringbone twill (d) this was often used for making leg wraps. If the reversals are very close together it forms a pattern called cross twill (g) that is not common but has been found on items such as imported luxury cloaks from Norway.

In diamond twill (e&f) the reversals produce a diamond pattern. These were often found in a high end imported fabric with very fine examples found, particularly in rich women's dresses at Birka, but it is very hard to find commercially now.

Often commercial versions of these twills have a different coloured warp and weft, while this has been found at sites such as Elisenhof it was not always the case and a monotone fabric was more common.

Patterned weaves such as stripes checks and plaids were used by the Vikings though don't seem to have been as common as in earlier ages, examples of multicoloured plaid are known from cloaks and striped or checked fragments are well referenced from sites such as Oseberg, Skjoldehamn and Hedeby, though I would suggest that imported silk and other luxury fabrics largely took the place of decorative home woven fabrics.



Examples of textiles from the Coppergate excavations

## *Dyes*

Natural colours were of course the easiest colours available and dyed clothing distinguished social rank. Naturally available colours for wool were white, grey, brown, or black. Depending on the method of production, linen had either a grey or yellowish shade which would usually have been bleached white in the sun, the more expensive grades being bleached whiter.

There is a lot of evidence for dyeing fabrics bright colours. Reds and blues are the most common colours obtained from madder or woad respectively. Other dye plants known from York were weld for yellow, oak galls for brown, lichen for purple and other colours and shades could be combined to give other variations. Most natural dyes need a mordant such as club moss to fix the colour and make it light and water resistant, but colour fastness was a problem and not all fabric would be evenly dyed. Linen especially is hard to dye and may have frequently been white.



Some natural dye colours