Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAXON BOY'S COSTUME H193



The Anglo-Saxon age covers a very long period from about AD 450 to AD 1100. Fashions changed over that period, but the basic garment for both men and women was the tunic (above), just as it had been for the Romans. In its simplest form a tunic is a rectangle of cloth folded over, with slits left for head and arms, which was belted around the waist. Sometimes sleeves were added to this basic garment.

Few items of clothing have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period, but it is possible to find out what people wore from manuscript illustrations and from special objects like the Bayeux tapestry. The Museum of Reading has a copy of the Bayeux tapestry on display and the photograph on the next page is from this source.

Children's clothing was the same of that for adults - though smaller, of course!

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The picture shows a scene from the Bayeux tapestry in which Harold (later King Harold) is introduced to William the Duke of Normandy. William is seated, while Harold is standing to his right.

The main difference between William and Harold is not in their clothes, but in their hairstyles. The hair of Norman men was cropped short in fact they are always shown in the tapestry with the back of their heads shaved bare. The English are shown with fuller hair and, often, a large moustache.

Apart from this detail, the clothes of the English and the Norman men are the same. They wear belted a tunic which reaches to just above the knee and which often has a decorated border around the neck opening. This decorative band may have been embroidered or made by tablet weaving. Tablet weaving was common among the Anglo Saxons and involved the use of a small wooden board to produce long decorative bands. The breeches are bound with fabric (called winninga) that was laced up the calf. These winningas can be clearly seen on both Duke William and the guard standing behind Harold. Some trousers had feet sewn in - it is often difficult to tell which kind are being worn in the tapestry, but clearly men seldom went about with bare legs. Shoes were mostly ankle high and of simple construction. Finally, there is a cloak pinned with an expensive brooch at the right shoulder. It is clear from the tapestry that cloaks were only worn by rich and important individuals.

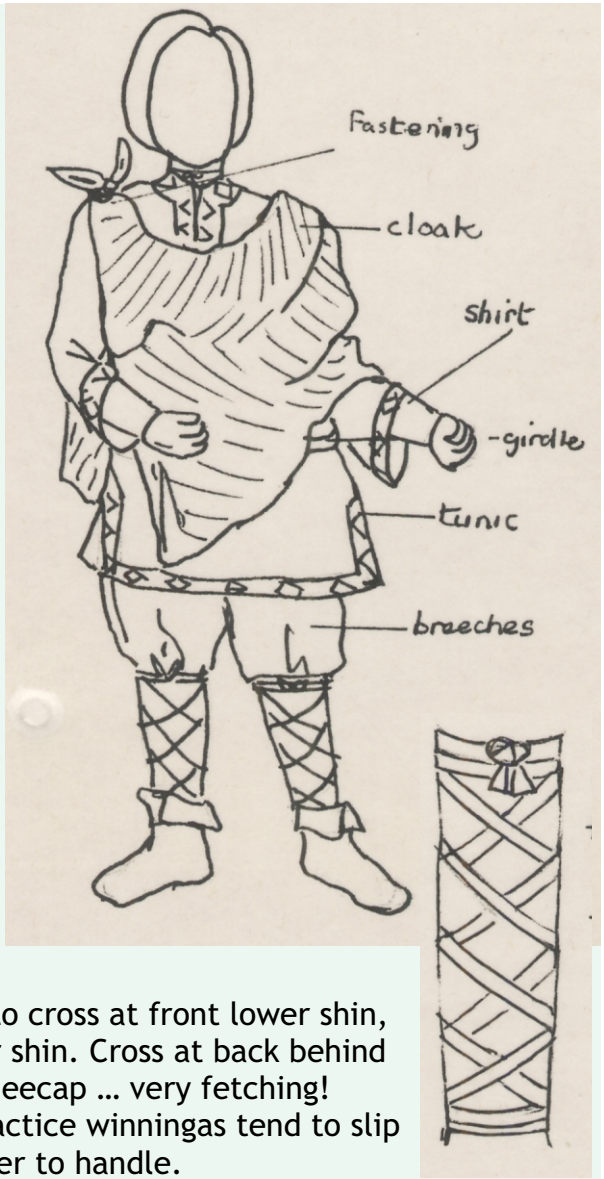
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The Clothing in this Box

1. The Shirt. This simple linen undergarment was the same basic shape as the tunic.

2. The Tunic. The short wool or linen tunic worn by the Saxon man was usually seamed at the sides, the seams left open below waist level to allow freedom of movement. The applied ornamentation was of geometric design. The tunic was held at the waist by a girdle.



3. The Breeches. Worn under the tunic. Usually long cloth stockings were worn to cover the legs. These were held in place by strips of cloth called winningas. To put them on find the half-way mark and place below the kneecap. Take both ends to the back of the knee, then bring to front, crossing at mid-shin. Take to back of ankle, cross, take both ends round front of ankle and to back again. Take up to cross at front lower shin, cross at back, bring forward to lower shin. Cross at back behind knee, bring to front and tie below kneecap … very fetching! Unfortunately, even after a lot of practice winningas tend to slip down - shoe-laces are definitely easier to handle.

4. The Cloak. Worn as an outer garment, the cloak was generally rectangular in shape and fastened at the shoulder with a brooch by passing two corners through a ring.

5. The Boots. These were made of soft leather in a pull-on style and were ankle length.