Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAXON GIRL'S COSTUME H193/B

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 - 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 photographs used here are from this source.

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

Only three women are shown in the main section of the Bayeux tapestry.

One of these women is named as Aelfgyva, but it is unclear who she is or why she is shown at all.



King Edward's wife, Edith, is shown at the deathbed of her husband. (She is at the left of the picture)



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Finally, an unnamed English lady is shown running away as the Normans burn down her house.

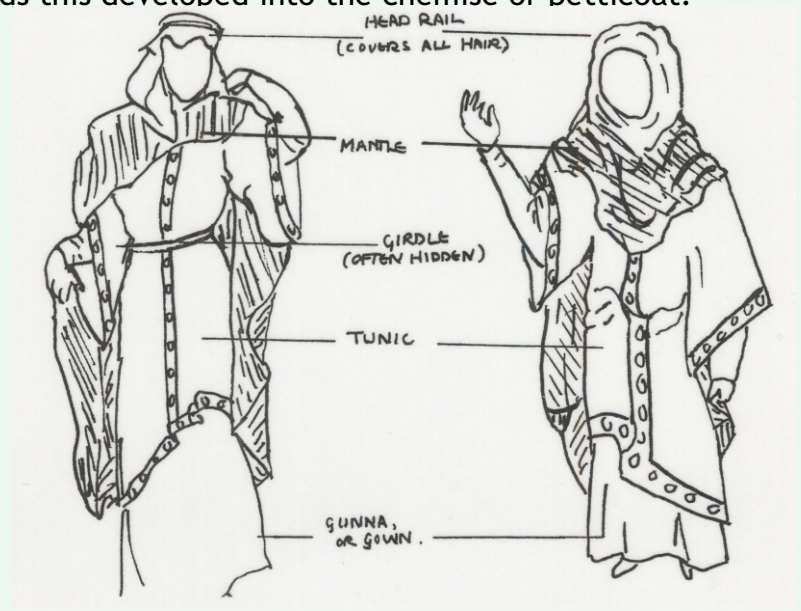
As these images show, Anglo Saxon women were expected to be well covered up. Apart from the face and hands, very little is left uncovered.



The Clothing in this Box

1. The Gown (or Gunna). This garment had sleeves which fitted closely round the wrists, though they were often long enough to pull over the hands in cold weather.

Underneath the gown, next to the skin, there would probably have been a linen shift. In coloured illustrations this is generally white, indicating linen, although poorer woman may have had little choice but to wear wool next to the skin. In later periods this developed into the chemise or petticoat.



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2. The Tunic (simlar to the one shown above) was worn over the gown and usually the girdle around the waist was used to create a bloused effect. The right side was often hitched higher than the left so that the hemline was slanting. The sleeves of the tunic were often very wide, reaching to the elbow. The woman running away from the burning house clearly has very long, dangling sleeves! The Bayeux tapestry suggests that by the eleventh century the tunic, like the gown, reached all the way down to the feet.

3. The Mantle was made circular, with a hole cut off-centre through which the head passed. Out of doors the head rail was so arranged that the ends concealed the neck opening of the mantle.

Anglo-Saxon women also wore a head rail (not included in this box). Women seem to have been expected to cover their head both indoors and out. The head rail should be put on by first laying the material across the head, with one end reaching to the left shoulder. The long end is then passed around face under the chin, over the left shoulder and round the back of the neck. The end can then either hang forward over the right shoulder or be passed again under the chin to hang over the left shoulder.

Sometimes a circlet held the head rail in place and by the end of the Saxon period the circlet had become so common that the head rail was simply draped loosely over the head, hanging evenly on either side of the face, secured by the band.