

The Gruesome Truth About What Goes Underneath!

It's all about comfort.

Presented By Mistress Conagh O'Neill O.L. 19 September 2004

We all know what a Scotsman wears under his kilt, right? Socks!

But what does a lady of the sixteenth century wear under her gown that gives that shape, and comfort?

If we want to take a from the skin out approach then we would be looking at a staggering array of items:

Underpinnings

- ❖ *Stocking*
- ❖ *Draws*
- ❖ *Slips*
- ❖ *Underskirt*
- ❖ *Bum rolls*
- ❖ *Farthingales*
- ❖ *Corset*
- ❖ *Chemise*
- ❖ *Partlet*

Then the dress

- ❖ *Dress: as a single dress, or a separate skirt and bodice.*
- ❖ *Sleeves*
- ❖ *Jerkin*
- ❖ *Doublets*
- ❖ *Loose gown*

Then the accessories

- ❖ *Shoes and chopines*
- ❖ *Pouches & purses*
- ❖ *Girdles & belts, hand mirrors, fans, pomanders,*
- ❖ *Miniatures*
- ❖ *Books, scissors, mirrors, needle cases, Muffs*
- ❖ *Gloves, rings, kerchiefs, flea catchers, bracelets*
- ❖ *Dress jewelry, brooches,*
- ❖ *Ruffs*
- ❖ *Pendants, necklaces,*
- ❖ *Partletts & gollars*
- ❖ *Hats, coifs, hair jewelry; including false hair, hat jewelry, veils, circlets, crowns, coronets*
- ❖ *Earrings*
- ❖ *Riding masks, makeup and spectacles.*

Underpinnings.



Stockings of crimson silk with garters from the Toledo burial



Wood cut of a Venetian Courtesan late C16



Extant Italian draws late C16



Flogging a Spanish female criminal 1532 from the Trachenbuch.



Extant linen chemise C14



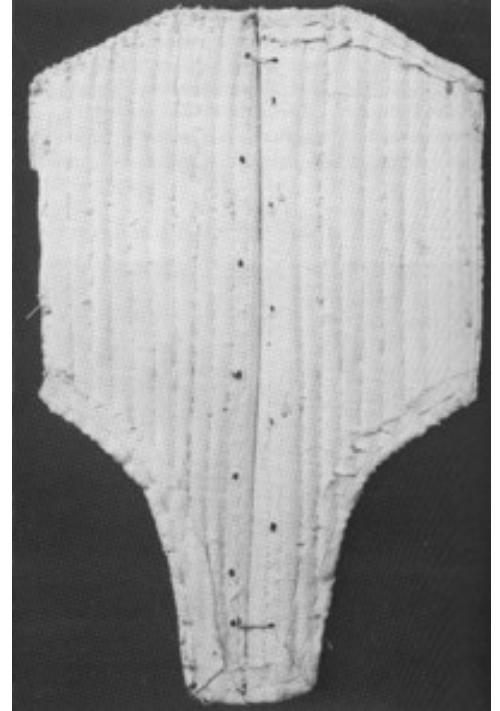
Fresco Venice 1565 showing an underskirt.



Farthingale: this shows early Spanish style farthingale.



Bumroll being fitted.



Extant late 16th century Italian reed corset



Extant Venetian chemise from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Cesare Vecellio's Costume Plates 1589. Venetian woman bleaching her hair in the sun on a rooftop gallery



Partletts can be worn under or over the dress.

- ❖ *Stocking: worn for warmth and for comfort with shoes. They could be knitted as the Toledo ones are, or made of bias cut linen. Garters in the form of long strips of fabric are needed to hold them up.*
- ❖ *Draws: worn for warmth and for comfort. Made of linen as most undergarments were. These were long in the leg and could be embellished with embroidery and lace. Front fastening with either a button, hook and eye or a tie.*
- ❖ *Slips: worn under the corset to protect the corset from body grease, and for personal comfort. Because the chemise or carmice is worn over the corset there should be something against the skin for the wearers comfort and to protect the corset. I now believe that this was not exclusive to the Venetian dress code.*
- ❖ *Underskirt: worn for warmth and to help protect your valuable skirts from the dirt of the streets. Some dress codes only require an underskirt to be worn under the skirt. NO bum-rolls or farthingales required.*
- ❖ *Bum-rolls: one of the extremes of body sculpture of the sixteenth century. This padded sausage like item helps to hold the shape at the waist and hips of skirts seen in the English, French and Spanish styles.*
- ❖ *Farthingales: again not necessary with all sixteenth century styles. These give a distinctive bell silhouette to the skirts. English, French and Spanish styles use this the most.*
- ❖ *Corset: the quintessential instrument of torture. They can be uncomfortable if they are not fitted properly, just like a bra can be. Without a corset the silhouette will not be as it is in the portraits. The only way to achieve that very flat front is with a corset.*
- ❖ *Chemise: these come in a variety of style that is a variation on a theme. Mid thigh to ankle length, long sleeved. Open neck or high neck. Cuffs or open sleeves. Generally linen again, occasionally silk, infrequently cotton, as this was less available as it is today. Drawstrings are not obvious, but are very useful for our purposes in the SCA. Embellishments of embroidery, usually monochrome are frequently seen. Lace trim in white, black and occasionally gold thread was used in the lace.*
- ❖ *Partlet: this is an optional item of dress. Sometimes the wearing of one was associated with your marital status. That is dependant on your geographic location as much as anything. I would consider wearing a partlet under a doublet an essential. A variety of variations on this exist also. They could be as simple as a scarf folded on the bias and pinned in at the neck opening, or fully structured with a collar and ruff. This one little item of underpinnings could be made almost as ornate as you liked. Beading, embroidery, lace, couching go nuts on this.*

Whilst many items of dress are common to many regions during the sixteenth century, a key term to remember is 'regional differences'.

The custom of wearing an item of dress may differ significantly from region to region, and time frame to time frame. What is acceptable in Italy may not be acceptable in Spain for example. The partlet is one such example. Worn closed in England by a married lady, and open if the lady is single. No such protocol seems to exist in Venice at the same time.

The construction of items of dress while similar is also a regional concern. The base undergarment of a Chemise would appear to be generic in its nature. To some extent this can be true. When looking closer at this item there are some variations that are peculiar to a region. Some chemise have a high neck while others are open necked and use a partlet for this look.

Embellishment also differs dependant on region. The style of blackwork on an English smock will most often be different to that of a French Chemise. Lace generally does not appear on a German chemise while the Venetians loved this lavish trim.

These undergarments whilst they may seem to be surplus to requirement, do add a level of comfort and shaping to the finished dress that would otherwise be missed. Trust me, I questioned the comfort factor when I began, but I don't any more, they knew what they were doing.

Social status is also an indicator by which the level of your dress is determined. In the SCA we are all resumed to be at minimum minor nobility. When we start our skills are not at their peak so it is safe to think of this as the beginning of our journey in social standings also. As our skills develop this show through what we wear, just as some one would have done when climbing the social ladder in the time we are choosing to recreate.

Fabric choices. Linen is the big one; this is the most document able textile for pre 1600 under dressing. Linen is also the most practical for our climate in Australia. Silk is the most luscious and the warmest textile. Cotton while less frequent in pre 1600 is probably the most cost effective for most of us. Synthetics and synthetic blends should be avoided as they don't breath and often don't look right.

My biggest recommendation for those wanting to get the 'Look' right, buy a mirror. Look at the portrait that originally inspired you and then look at yourself critically in the mirror. Look at the shapes and silhouette you are creating, and then look at what is in the portraits. You will learn a lot by doing this.

I have not included construction notes in this collegium. Rather this is a separate lesson that should concentrate on each item of undergarment in its turn at a later date. To try to do this in an introduction would not do justice to the various items of dress and key points could be missed.

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Web pages that might be of help.

Drea Leed <http://costume.dm.net>

Festive Attire http://homepage.mac.com/festive_attire

Lady Katerina da Brescia's home page <http://home.iprimus.com.au/adeptus/kat/>

Kas McGann <http://www.reconstructinghistory.com/beginners/chemise.html>

Marc Carlson's: Some Clothing of the Middle Ages. www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/hose.html

Modern History Sourcebook: William Harrison (1534-1593): Description Of Elizabethan England, 1577 from Holinshed's Chronicles)
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1577harrison-england.html>

Oonagh's Own: Gruesome Truth http://oonagh.actewagl.net.au/gruesome_truth.htm
(yours truly)

V&A Museum website <http://images.vam.co.uk/ixbin/hixclient/exe?>