

Topic: Clothing

Notes for parents and teachers

The production of textiles and clothing was labour intensive work and many stages of the production, from spinning to weaving and sewing. Much of this labour was regarded as women's work as it could be undertaken in a domestic environment and it was compatible with childcare. The main type of textiles that were worn in the ninth century were wool (most commonly), linen was worn by the more affluent, silk had to be imported and it was rare, so it was used for decorative cuffs and trimming on outfits of the elite, furs and embroidery would also mark clothes of high status.

Commonly women wore a long woollen dress, with a woollen cloak pinned at the front and the hair was often tied back and covered with a veil, hood or cap. Wealthier women might have a tight fitting long undergarment, over which a looser outer garment with wider sleeves would be worn. Elite Scandinavian women's dress was characterised by an underdress of linen, with an outer garment that was pinned at the shoulders with a pair of oval brooches. Such women would have worn additional jewellery such as strings of colourful beads.

Men commonly wore a knee length tunic over tight fitting trousers. Under the tunic men may have worn a linen undergarment. Over this they would wear a woollen cloak attached with a brooch at the shoulder. Different brooch styles were worn including circular brooches and ring-pins. Strips of cloth were worn around the lower legs to bind the trousers to the leg. Men were mainly bare headed but there are images of soft conical (or Phrygian style) caps being worn. Long garments might be worn for ceremonial occasions. The colour of clothing denoted the access to dye stuffs of the wearer the lower classes wore undyed cloth, or browns and yellows, the elites could wear clothes of more varied shades including blue, purple and crimson.

Certain types of outfit had specialised functions, for example ecclesiastical vestments, although monks and nuns tended not to wear distinctive habits at this time. Padded clothing would be worn for protection in warfare, mail coats and helmets were also worn, but these were very expensive. Leather aprons would be worn for some jobs such as smithing where some form of protection from heat and dirt was needed.

To dress well was an important mark of status in medieval society, so there was a burgeoning trade in furs, leather, and cloth of varying quality. Where samples of cloth have been found in archaeological contexts, these demonstrate different weaving techniques were used to create distinctive patterns in textiles. Ornate borders and braids that were

added to clothes were sometimes recycled. Great skill was deployed not just in weaving but also in embroidering luxurious garments.