

Costume for a 12th Century Lady

By Timothy J. Mitchell

One of the most beautiful of the exhibits in the Medieval Treasury of the London's Victoria and Albert Museum is a carved whalebone panel depicting the Virgin Mary. Entitled 'The Adoration of the Magi' the panel comes from northwest Spain of the first half of the 12th century (see Figure 1). The lady is not shown in costume of the biblical period, but rather as wearing the garb of a 11th-12th century noblewoman. The carving is very detailed and specifics of clothing, drape and decoration make this a wonderful source for the early period costumer.

The Head Dress

The lady wears a complex head covering, consisting of at least three separate parts. Covering the hair, except for a narrow band in front, is some kind of close fitting cap. It is unclear what precisely this is, though the texture of the carving may give a clue. It is possible that this is the artist's rendition of some sort of patterned cloth, but the deep relief and circular pattern of the carving lead me to interpret it as a knitted cap.



Figure 1

Over the cap is worn a veil. It is set back on the head, off the forehead, pulled loosely under the chin and tucked up on the side. The edges are decorated with a thin strip; possibly woven in, possibly fine embroidery. Over the veil and securing it, is worn a wide, decorated band. This is most likely fabric with the decoration (see Figure 2) woven in or embroidered.

The Cloak

From the bunching of the cloak that is visible about the shoulders, it is almost certainly of semicircular cut (see Figure 3) without a cutout for the neck. The fabric is soft and draping, not a heavy, thick material. There is a decorative band (see Figure 4) running along the front (straight) edge. The cloak clasp is hidden behind the wimple, and so is a matter for speculation, but a single decorative brooch, or two brooches connected by cord or a cloth

strip are reasonable (see Figure 5). From the panel it is impossible to determine the length of the cloak, but it would have been approximately floor length.

The Dress

The over-dress (see Figure 6), while being full and loose elsewhere, has a tight bodice. If you examine the area to either side of the Christ-figure's up-raised right arm (see Figure 1), you will notice a series of fold lines crossing the bodice of the dress. These are consistent with the pull lines that can be seen across the bodice of a back-laced dress when the wearer bends forward slightly.

The sleeves are widely flared at the cuff, and appear to be moderately loose fitting at the upper arm. The folds and draping along the arms indicate that the sleeves are a bit longer than wrist length and are pulled up some.

The skirt of the over-dress is very full and loose, with many folds pulled up into the seated subject's lap. As the skirt is hiked up, the length of the dress is unsure, but from the number of folds in the lap, I think the hem would be at least ankle length.

Both the hem of the over-dress and the cuffs of its sleeves are decorated with the same pattern (see Figure 7).

The Under-dress

On the carving the under-dress is partially visible beneath the hem of the over-garment (see Figure 1). What can be seen is a very loose and flowing floor-length skirt, with a thin band of decoration at the hem. The under-dress is also visible protruding from under the right sleeve of the over-dress (see Figure 1). The material of the sleeve is gathered and bunched, suggesting that the under-dress sleeve is much longer than the arm it covers.

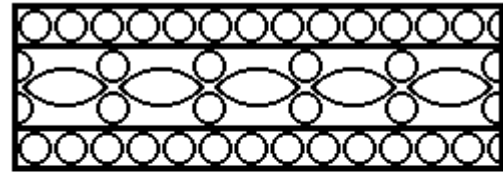


Figure 2

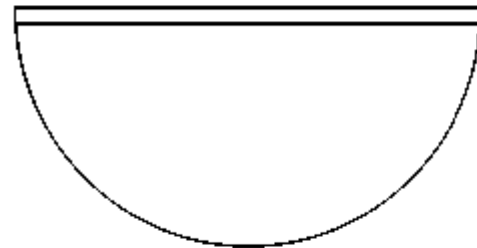


Figure 3



Figure 4

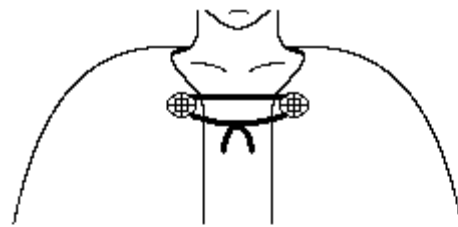


Figure 5

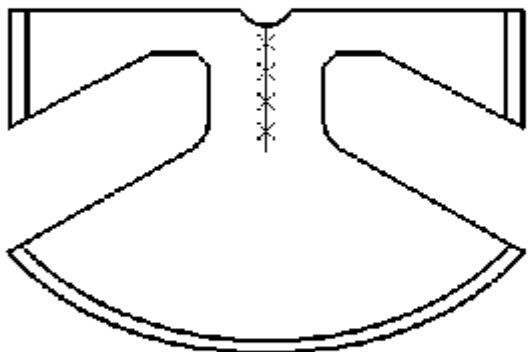


Figure 6

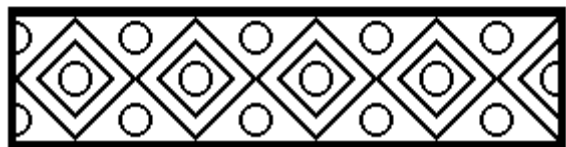


Figure 7

Conclusion

Although simple in cut and construction, the garb depicted would make a challenging re-creation project for the costumer or embroiderer. The richness of the fabric, the fit and drape, and most especially the decoration are all carefully recorded by the anonymous artist; making this a first-class primary source.

Sources

The Adoration of the Magi, Whalebone, North-West Spanish, First half of the 12th century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Medieval Treasury, Invoice number 142-1866.

Janet of Arden, "Interpreting Costume in Certain Medieval Sources -- A Pragmatic Approach." *Elf Hill Times*, #12, pp. 40-64. This article is a wonderful example of 're-creative' research. The author draped a live model with a succession of fabric shapes and sizes, until the drape and hang of the material matched that of the original carving, illumination etc. If you are interested in the design of early period cloaks, this is a must have.

Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York, Harper and Row, 1965. A photo of the carving 'The Adoration of the Magi' can be found on page 169, Figure 182. Please note that the source of the carving is wrongly given as English.

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