



Northwest Viking Alliance Authenticity Standards for Female Clothing

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Introduction

The standards outlined in this document and other authenticity documents will be the basic standards for all Alliance sponsored events, and most strictly enforced where the Alliance is engaged with and educating the general public. This includes the Althing, Market, museum demos and any other demo/event that is Alliance sponsored rather than by one of the member groups, in which case the requirements are determined by that group. A basic kit is the foundation upon which a reenactor or living history enthusiast may build their overall impression. From this foundation members can expand and personalize their impressions, keeping in mind that while some speculative elements and exploratory archeology are perfectly fine, these elements should be based in something substantial and realistic.

The Alliance is a place for discussion and education, and as such there is a wealth of information amongst its membership and people generally are happy to share what they know regarding patterns, colors, materials, grave finds, etc. Beyond this group, with proper attention given to the reliability of sources the internet can be an extremely valuable research tool. Museum collections and publications are fantastic and often free resources. Though not at all perfect, some Facebook groups such as Viking Clothing; Viking Age Studies and Reenactment; Viking Age History and Culture: Study Group and The Authenticity Office can provide a good bit of help in finding and navigating resources along with answering questions.

One thing that the Alliance elders do not suggest is copying other reenactors. While another reenactor's outfit may be appealing, it may not necessarily be correct. If you find that you are intrigued by another person's kit, see if you can find evidence for the elements of it that interest you. Or even send them a message and see if they might be willing to tell you what they based those things on.

A basic kit truly is a great place to start your reenactment. Not everyone in the early medieval world had "Jarl" level clothing, jewelry, and weapons. The overwhelming majority of people in any time period have been average people. They were farmers, hunters, fishers and tradesmen, many of which rarely went further than 100 miles from their place of birth; among other aspects of life, their clothing would reflect this. Barring differences in status, wealth, etc, it can also be beneficial group groups to use fabric of similar quality and color when making clothing; while this is in no way a requirement, it can simulate a community's shared access to a common resource.

At the root of it all, as a living history organization we should reflect, to the best of our ability, the lifestyle of the people and time period we are recreating. Also remember, as living historians, that which we know to be accurate could change tomorrow with new discoveries, and as frustrating as it can sometimes be, we need to be willing to accept the changes and conform to them. Thank you for reading, and we hope that you find the following pages helpful in guiding you toward building a kit that meets the standards of the organization.

The Materials

Textiles

Wool – The most common textile used for clothing during the Viking Age; natural fiber harvested from sheep. Fabric weights can range from heavy winter wools to super-light summer wools. Rare felted remnants have been found in Viking Age graves, but whether they were originally like that or if the felting is a product of being buried is unclear. In general, unfelted wool is preferred. 100% wool is suggested, but sufficient wool blends are accepted.

Linen – Natural plant fiber processed from flax; similar to cotton in texture. On average it was more expensive than wool, but only rare in Gotland and Western Norway. It was often used for undergarments, though a decent number of linen outer garments have also been found. Note: Linen and other vegetable fibers do not take natural dyes as well as wool. Blue (woad & indigo) dye impregnates the fibers rather than coating them, and is one of the few colors that will take well. In the absence of linen, a linen-like cotton fabric will be accepted.

Nettle – A less expensive plant fiber for garments than linen, and likely more common during the period.

Hemp – Like nettle, used as a cheaper alternative to linen as well as for rope and other items.

Silk – Expensive, imported fabric from Asia and the Middle East; primarily used as trim or decorative strips for clothing. Should only be used to portray wealthy individuals.

Leather – Vegetable tanned animal product; generally used for accessories such as belts, pouches and shoes.

Fur – Due to decaying easily, there is very little evidence of use of fur in clothing. The few known finds appear to have been used for trim and linings, but this tends to be fur from short-haired animals rather than long hair which is often used in modern reenactment. Evidence has been found of shoes made from hide with fur left on. Additionally, “varafeldr” made from hile-pile woven wool to has been found in a number of graves from the period and descriptions of its use range from decorative trims on garments to entire cloaks made from the material.

Metals

Bronze/Brass – Copper alloy metal; used as a material for decoration on clothing and accessories. Also used to make brooches, cloak pins and other small items. Often referred to as simply “copper alloy” in archaeological reports due to the variety in compositions.

Copper – Base metal most often used in production of bronze and brass but sometimes as a standalone, depending on application.

Silver – Precious metal used for jewelry, clothing decoration and currency. The majority of remaining tablet woven bands from the period were also brocaded with silver wire.

Gold – Precious metal used to a lesser extent than silver for jewelry, clothing decoration and currency.

Iron – Base metal used primarily for manufacture of tools, equipment, weapons and other such purposes; but also used for belt buckles, brooches, etc.

Steel – Iron alloy containing various amounts of carbon, which generally determine its use. Used for many of the same purposes as iron where a stronger metal is desired.

Lead – Primarily used for weights. Most period alloys also contain small amounts of lead.

Other

Bone – Used mostly for items such as spoons, combs, etc.; but also used for clothing accessories such as cloak pins and belt buckles.

Dyes

Woad – Used to produce blue and (less commonly) green dyes. Can be mordanted with iron to produce a near-black midnight blue.



Madder – Used to produce red and orange dyes



Walnut – Used to produce brown dyes. Can be mordanted with iron to produce a near black color as shown below.



Weld – Used to produce yellow dyes.



Kermes – Used to produce red dyes. Only used for garments of wealthy people; commonly found in silks.



Cochineal – Used to produce red and pink dyes. Found in wealthy grave finds, usually on silks.



Yellow X – Used to produce yellow dyes. Unclear origin; almost always found along with indigotin.



Orchil Lichen – Used to produce purple and pink dyes. Not found in Scandinavia, but rather in Northern Germany, York and Dublin.



Dog Whelk – Used to produce purple dyes. Found only in Ireland.



Mordants

All natural dyes must be combined with a mordant, which allows the dye to better adhere to the fibers of the cloth. Generally, the cloth is soaked in warm water with the mordant for several hours prior to being put into the actual dye bath.

Alum – Most common mordant.

Iron – Used in some dye processes. Tends to darken colors, but must be thoroughly washed out afterward to get rid of residue.

Calcium Carbonate – Another common mordant.

Tannin – Derived from acorns.

Notes on colors:

Generally, deeper and richer colors were a sign of wealth due to the amount of dyestuff needed to produce them. Blues, reds and purples are generally found in wealthier graves with blues being most common of those and reds and purples less so. This implies that blues may have been available to a wider range of people at least in the middle to upper class, but reds were generally limited to nobility and purple, if used at all, would have been an expensive import for royalty. Given that few to no Scandinavian grave finds have yielded purple-dyed cloth remnants, it is less used in a Norse context and more so for Hiberno-Norse and Anglo-Saxon kits. Kermes and cochineal were both expensive imports as well, but are appropriate for Norse nobility due to their being found in Scandinavian graves. Grey colors could also be the result of natural coloring in the wool as well as mordanting with iron, or a combination of these factors.

Notes on decoration:

The majority of clothing finds from the period lack decoration such as silk, contrasting fabrics, tablet weaving, etc. It's likely that aspects such as weave quality, color, construction, and other inherent factors carried a lot of social value at the time even without extensive decoration. Where such decorations are found, they are most often used on necklines and cuffs of tunics and dresses. Additionally, there are a few examples where the edges of a cloak were tablet woven along with the main weaving during its production. Most tablet woven bands that remain were brocaded with silver wire and a few with gold. However, this may be a case of survivor bias as there are a couple of examples with no metallic elements, and more may simply have not been preserved well enough to be found. Note, though, that most tablet woven bands, as with fabrics in general, are monochromatic rather than composed of multiple colors of yarn. Regarding silk, outside of Rus kits any silk decoration should only be used as trim (no large chest panels, etc.) or potentially strips on a kaftan and should generally not be wider than about 1-2cm. As stated above, it is only to be used for wealthy kits. Similar to silk, posament is mostly found in high status (male) graves, and is generally found around the head and waist.

The Clothing

A beginning note: While inner seams may have serging and machine stitching as they are not visible, all visible outer seams such as cuffs, hems and necklines on ALL apparel should either be hand-stitched or discreetly machine stitched and overstitched with a more visible thread to create the look of handsewing. Should a person use contrasting fabric (silk is a prime example due to its tendency to fray) as a decoration on a garment, it is also completely acceptable to serge the edges and fold them under to sew it down.

Head

In general, head coverings for women include hoods, Dublin caps and headscarves, though it was also common for women to wear no head covering at all. Additionally, a headband may be added to the headscarf, and for Rus and Slavic kits attached temple rings may be added. There is little confirmed evidence for the use of hoods by women, but it is also a practical and logical item and is accepted. Hair is best left loose, plaited or in a bun.



Woman wearing a Dublin cap



Headscarf with a headband and temple rings



Woman in a wool Skjoldehamn style hood

Torso

Female clothing includes an underdress or sark made from linen in an appropriate style with a keyhole style neck opening, which may be covered by a woolen overdress of the same pattern and an optional smokkr (apron). The opening on the sark may be closed using a pennanular or

trefoil brooch. A smokkr must be worn with brooches (preferably tortoise shell, animal head or round shape; depending on portrayed region), and generally are mid-shin length. For summer wear, if a standard weight wool smokkr is too warm over the dress, a light wool is still encouraged or just no smokkr at all. Though less common, some linen smokkr fragments have been found, so those are accepted as well. It may also be decorated along the top with tablet woven or silk trim or small embroidery, but large embroidered designs on them are not allowed as this is a modern reenactorism with no historical evidence. The scarcity and context of embroidery finds suggest that it was an extremely high status feature, and they are always relatively small. Regarding silk decoration, see the “Notes on decoration” section above.

If portraying a later period or lower class woman a smokkr is less likely to have been worn as they went out of fashion over time and appear more in higher status graves, and the brooches that accompany them are not found in graves dated later than 1000 AD. For Gotlandic kits, a peplos may be worn as an alternative to the smokkr; this is best worn with animal head or “box” brooches. Additionally, a kaftan type coat may be worn over any combination of garments; these are generally closed with a trefoil brooch.



Basic linen underdress (sark)



A woman wearing a smokkr with a richly decorated bead strand



Woman in a Gotlandic style peplos dress with animal head brooches



A woman wearing a richly decorated kaftan type coat

Legs

No evidence has been found of trousers worn by women under or instead of dresses, so they are not recommended with female clothing. If worn, they should not be visible.

Feet

Low shoes or ankle boots of the proper toggled or laced style are suggested. Modern footwear is not accepted within the living history context unless of passable appearance. Socks may be worn, but it is suggested that they are either nálbouned or of a similar crocheted style if visible. Other socks of passable appearance are accepted.



Jorvik style two-toggle turnshoes



Vlaardingen style shoe



Oseberg style laced turnshoe

Jewelry

Women seem to have worn jewelry much more than men, including items such as necklaces with beads and pendants; rings; arm rings; etc. If these items are worn, they should be made in an authentic design. “Viking wire weave” necklaces are encouraged. Bead strings between brooches on a smokkr should be limited to one string unless portraying a very wealthy woman. Beads would have been worked and polished; as such, raw or rough beads and amber chips are accepted but not encouraged. They should also not be symmetrically organized across the strand, but symmetrical strands will be allowed.



Danish Mjölknir pendant, replica



Birka cross pendant, replica



Twisted silver arm ring



Silver and gold hoard



Wealthy female kit featuring multiple strands of beads and pendants

Accessories

Unless portraying a Hiberno-Norse woman, it is suggested that any belts worn not be leather or closed with a buckle; leather belts should be no more than about 1” wide. The most authentic

options are braided or tablet woven belts with a tied closure, or no belt at all. Pouches and bags should generally be of a circular or sewn rectangle design with optional wooden handles. Cloaks should be of a square/rectangle design with no attached hood; they may be suspended from the brooches of a smokkr (as shown in the above section). A smaller shawl can also be used and worn in such a way. Small knives are allowed as for any person, but should be limited to one. Other items such as keys, needle cases, hygiene sets, etc. may be suspended from brooches if wearing a smokkr. If portraying a Rus or Slavic woman, additions such as temple rings and lunula pendants are welcome along with other appropriate decorative elements.



Rus woman with temple rings, a tablet woven belt, a lunula and a brass cuff



Woolen bag with wooden Birka handles



Details of the oval brooches and loops which fasten the smokkr



Circular Hedeby drawstring pouch with silver coins

Learn a skill

This goes a bit beyond kit, but we are, first and foremost, a demo organization. The Alliance was formed to do demos, to help regular people learn about Late Antiquity through the Early Medieval era. Is there something you've always been interested in? Blacksmithing? Weaving? Woodworking? Cooking? There are so many things in the daily life of the era that need to be demonstrated. Having trade skills and demonstrating them really brings a village life together for a demo. Even warriors had to have skills, whether it was sewing, making shoes, repairing or making armor, cooking etc. Find something you could be passionate about and study it. Ask questions of those already doing it. Find academic reports and books on the subject. Therefore, we do this; to learn so that we may teach.



Jorunn demonstrating food processing, prep and cooking



VilhjálmR demonstrating smithing techniques

In Closing

This is but a basic guideline for Authenticity standards. Other organizations may have much more stringent basic authenticity standards, but we feel this effective while being feasible for most people to do. We understand that wool and linen are not cheap, nor is leather, and that you may not have the skill to make your own clothing. As mentioned above, while we strongly encourage creating a kit that is authentic as possible, it's acceptable to start out with a blend or alternative fabric that is convincingly close to the period fabric in order to get on your feet. For ready-to-wear items there are places on the internet such as Etsy and people within the Alliance who make clothing, shoes, belts etc.; and there are also a number of merchants in living history oriented Facebook groups who make excellent quality reproductions. Talk to people in your group or others in the Alliance; everyone is more than willing to help point you in the right direction if they can. If things seem too expensive, save your money and see if there might be loaner gear to get you by temporarily. The best advice is to take your time and get it right without compromising and regretting it later.

Thank you for reading,

The Elders of the Northwest Viking Alliance