



## **An Infant's Clothing – Swaddle, Gown, Shirt, and Coif**

**Charlotte Johnson (Lady Mathilde Bourette)**

**[mathilde@mathildegirlgenius.com](mailto:mathilde@mathildegirlgenius.com)**

Atlantia Kingdom Arts and Sciences Festival – March, 2006

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This 15<sup>th</sup> century outfit for a baby consists of a linen swaddle, wool gown, linen shirt, and linen coif. The inspiration was from both artwork and archaeological finds.

## **The Swaddle**

The medieval baby could expect to spend quite a bit of time swaddled in linen cloth or bands. The belief was that keeping a baby's limbs straight would protect them from growing crookedly.<sup>1</sup> There may even have been a belief that swaddling would prevent babies from plucking out their own eyes.<sup>2</sup> In any case, swaddling calms young infants, and helps keep them warm and safe from some external dangers.<sup>3</sup>

It is unclear if swaddles were always narrow bands of fabric, larger pieces of cloth, or could be either. See figures 1–5 (Appendix A) for images of swaddled babies. It appears that either option may be possible. For our purposes, I chose to use a larger piece of linen. We swaddled our child at home until six months of age, and for safety purposes I did not want my son to simply be wrapped in long strips of linen, as it could be too easy for him to entangle himself. He is not able to free himself from the linen wrap, so the wool bands used to secure the swaddle do not pose as much of a hazard. Fig. 3 shows a baby with red bands securing the swaddle. I used wool strips to represent this, for their simplicity and slight elasticity. See figures 19–28 for my swaddling interpretation.

## **The Coif**

In many swaddling images, the baby's head is covered. While this may have been part of the swaddling cloth, for our purposes, I chose to make a simple linen coif. While we swaddled at home, my son is not used to having his head covered, and seemed uncomfortable with an all-in-one wrap. The coif does not bother him, and in this case, having a comfortable child trumped the issue of what may be the most historically accurate solution. The coif is now too small on him, as it was sized to fit at about three months of age.

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<sup>1</sup> Orme, p. 62

<sup>2</sup> Karp, p. 110

<sup>3</sup> For more information on swaddling, please see Appendix B, *On Swaddling*.

## The Gown

Figs. 4–9 show young children, and all are wearing a simple gown, some belted, some unbelted. It is unclear whether or not babies wore anything under the swaddle, but once they reached an age where they could sit, crawl, and walk, they would likely be left unbound more often. While older children often wore miniature versions of their parents clothing, a very young child was often depicted wearing a gown. The practicality of this is obvious: a loose gown can be made to fit a fast-growing child for a longer period of time than more fitted clothes, and the process of disrobing a non-toilet-trained infant would have been far simpler if they are wearing a gown. No parent would want to fumble with hosen pointed to the doublet of an 18 month old several times a day.

In illustrations and texts, there are references to the “Ages of Man”. Depending on the author, there are anywhere from three to seven ages. It is likely that the end of the first stage of life was marked by weaning the child from the breast. In the Middle ages, this usually occurred between ages one and three.<sup>4</sup> The transition from gowns to “adult” clothing may have occurred at this stage, or may have occurred at toilet-training, another practical (though less symbolic) point for change. In the meantime, all available evidence seems to indicate that boys and girls were dressed alike.

There is little proof as to the actual pattern of the gown. While it is a late 14<sup>th</sup> century example, I chose the Herjolfsnes 61 gown (figs. 11–13) as a model as it gives a look similar to what is found in 15<sup>th</sup> century art, and it is sized, as found, for a baby. The original garment was found in so poor of shape that it is impossible to determine the neck shape, or if there were sleeves. The contemporary Herjolfsnes 62 gown (fig. 14) was also sized for an infant, so the neckline and sleeves of that garment were adopted to complete the pattern for the 61.<sup>5</sup> Though there is no evidence that the original 61 garment was lined, for comfort’s sake because of the coarseness of modern wool fabric compared to medieval wool weaves, I chose to line the reproduction gown in a lightweight linen. Figures 15–18 show photos of the gown in progress. In the future, I will probably choose a neckline with a keyhole shape and tie, or other closure. To get the neck to fit over my son’s unusually large head, the opening almost falls off of his shoulders.

## The Shirt

Fifteenth century men and women regularly wore plain linen shirts and smocks to protect their clothing from soil. Fig. 10 shows two small children, one wearing only a white shirt, and the other a gown with a shirt underneath, shown by the white at the hem and neckline.

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<sup>4</sup> Orme, p. 66. For more information on weaning, see Appendix B, *On Weaning*.

<sup>5</sup> Østergård, pp. 192–194

## Appendix A: Images



**Fig. 1** Note the tightly swaddled baby. The head is covered, and it appears that thin linen bands were used for the swaddle.

Saint-Pathus, Guillaume de, *Vie et miracles de Saint Louis*, France (Paris),  
Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 2829, fol. 115, end of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 2** As in figure 1, it appears that linen bands were used, and again, the head is covered.

*Vigiles De Charles VII*, France, Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 5054, fol. 195v,  
end of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent



**Fig. 3** Whether linen bands or a large piece of cloth was used for this swaddle is unclear. The swaddle is bound with red bands to hold it secure. This image was the model for the swaddle I created.

Bodleian Library, MS Douce 276, fol. 110b recto, 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 4** It appears from this image that the swaddle is a large piece of cloth as opposed to narrow linen bands. Also note that the small child in the walking frame is wearing a simple gown.

Bodleian Library, MS Douce 276, fol. 110b., 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 5** This image shows another example of a swaddled infant (Abel). The swaddle allows the infant to safely rest in the cradle while his parents (Adam and Eve) go about their business. The older child (Cain) is wearing a simple, loose gown.

Colombe, Jean; *Heures de Louis de Laval*; Tours/Bourges; Bibliothèque Nationale, Latin 920, fol. 11; ca. 1475



**Fig. 6** Images showing the ages of man depict many age ranges in one scene. This image depicts six ages of man, though there are others that show three, four, or seven. The young child under seven years represents the first age, and wears a long green robe, the color of youth.

L'Anglais, Barthélemy; *Le Livre des propriétés des choses: The Six Ages of Man*; France (Anjou, Maine); Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 9140, fol. 102v; 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 7** Note that the two fully visible young children are wearing gowns.

Aristotle; *Politique, Éthique et Économique*; France; Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 22500, fol. 6; 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 8** The young child in the walking frame is wearing a gown.

Barthélemy l'Anglais, *Le Livre des propriétés des choses: The Four Ages of Life*; France (Anjou, Maine), Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 134, fol. 42v; 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 9** This young child is wearing a gown, unbelted.

*Romans de la Table ronde*; France, Paris; Bibliothèque Nationale, Français 116, fol. 593v; 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 10** The child in the foreground is only wearing his shirt, with no gown. The child in the chair has a shirt under his gown, as evidenced by the white showing at the neck and hem.

Bodleian Library, MS Douce 276, fol. 110b. 15<sup>th</sup> cent.



**Fig. 11** The front of the Herjolfsnes 61 gown.  
The text accompanying the image reads:

Garment for a small child sewn in Greenlandic *vaðmál* in 2/2 twill. The present-day colour is light reddish brown, but originally the garment was white. The garment consists of a front and back, each with a 350 mm high two-part gusset inserted. The length is 540 mm. Two panels in each side increase the fullness of the garment to c. 1480 mm, but since the garment is very poorly preserved this measurement is uncertain. It is equally uncertain whether the garment had sleeves, and how the neck opening was shaped.

(Østergård, p. 192)



**Fig. 12** The front of the Herjolfsnes 61 with seams marked.

Østergård, p. 192



**Fig. 13** The back of the Herjolfsnes 61.

Østergård, p. 193



**Fig. 14** The front of the Herjolfsnes 62. A description of the artifact indicates that “there are added sleeves. The left one is 185 mm long, while the right one has only been preserved to a length of 20-60 mm.”

Østergård, p. 194



**Fig. 15** Gown lining



**Fig. 16** Lining front with seams marked



**Fig. 17** Front of gown with sleeves not added



**Fig. 18** Front of gown with seams marked



**Fig. 19** Fold down one corner of the swaddle cloth. Place the baby with his shoulders at the fold.



**Fig. 20** Hold one arm down, and wrap one side of the swaddle around the baby, securing that arm in the process.



**Fig. 21** Tuck the first side under the baby firmly.



**Fig. 22** Pull the bottom triangle of the cloth up, and tuck over the shoulder, or into the first fold, depending on fabric size.



**Fig. 23** Wrap the third side around the body, while encasing the second arm.



**Fig. 24** Tuck the end of the fabric in. It will be held better by the swaddling bands.



**Fig. 25** The swaddle is wrapped, tucked, and holds the baby firm. The swaddling bands provide additional security.



**Fig. 26** With the center of the swaddling band across the back of the shoulders, wrap the bands around the baby in a criss cross fashion. Additional care may be taken to ensure that the arms are held firm.



**Fig. 27** Tie the end of the swaddling bands behind the feet. The baby is now secure and his limbs are held straight.



**Fig. 28** The baby may now be safely placed in a cradle, unable to pull himself out.



**Fig. 29** Gratuitous baby picture

## Appendix B: Relevant Quotes

### *On Swaddling*

One major difference in the medieval care of babies was the practice of tying them securely in their clothes: 'swaddling' as it came to be called. The Anglo-Saxons wrapped their babies in clothing, but it is not clear whether they bound them as well. By about the thirteenth century, on the other hand, a baby's clothes were fastened into a compact bundle, the arms laid down the sides and the legs straight out. This was achieved with long strips of cloth, known as 'cradle bands', 'swaddle bands', or 'swaddling bands', wound in a criss cross fashion. The custom reflected a belief that babies' bodies were flexible and that limbs, if not constrained, would grow crookedly. It may have had other advantages: promoting warmth in cold houses and even protection from animals. Children wrapped in this way could be held on a lap, or placed to lie in a cradle – an ancient invention, although the word is not recorded in English until about the year 1000.

- Orme, p. 62.

During the Middle Ages, European parents kept their babies immobilized in a tight, bulky swaddle for the first four to nine months.

- Karp, p. 109.

Parents also believed wrapping prevented their infants from accidentally plucking out their own eyes or dislocating their arms.

- Karp, p. 110.

### *On Weaning*

Weaning from breast-feeding seems to have been done at any time from one to three. The Scottish poet Rait, who wrote in the early fifteenth century, defined the first age of human life as lasting from birth until three, perhaps with weaning in mind as the terminus. One of the medieval lives of the Virgin Mary tells of her being weaned by St Anne at three, and the Nurse in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* recalls the same about Juliet.

- Orme, p. 66.

From ancient times, weaning was regarded as a significant point in a child's life. To adults, it was the first milestone after birth, marking a stage towards independence.

- Orme, p. 66.

Weaning (or the period up to it) occurs as a landmark in medieval records as well. Edward the Confessor was said to have been sent to France to 'spend his infancy, the time of his weaning'. Pope Adrian IV, born near St Albans, was believed to have been 'nourished there until the time of his weaning'. The account of the pretended Edward II in 1313 talks about him being brought up by the queen's nurses 'until his weaning'. In consequence, the time at which the child ceased to be breast-fed may have been significant: remembered by adults as Shakespeare implies in his picture of Juliet's Nurse. Sometimes there may have been a family celebration of the event.

- Orme, p. 66.

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