The Frauenwams from Lübeck
A 16th century working waistcoat for a Master’s widow

Entered in the category: Clothing Late Period (1451–1600 AD)

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Please note: All pictures can be found in the separate appendix.

Background
In 2005, I was in Lübeck for an SCA event. Before flying home, I visited Kulturforum Burgkloster. In one of the showcases, there were two front pieces of a silk lining from a woman’s 16th century Frauenwams – a woman’s waistcoat. There were no back piece, sleeves or gussets. This is an extant textile that – as far as I know – has not been published in any scientific article or book. It was briefly displayed and is now back in storage. I managed to get hold of the conservation documents, and I have used them for this project (picture 1).

This silk lining was found in the inner city of Lübeck in a sewer-like environment. The lining seems to have been taken out from the original garment and then discarded.

The edges of the lining were sewn down and there are remnants of the original silk thread that was used. They also found overcoat wool fibers (sheep) on the panel parts located at the back of the garment when worn.

The weave is a tabby, and the fibers are 100% silk (bombyx mori) and in a surprisingly good condition. The conservation of Textilobjekt 1402/2 K1 was done at Storstrøms Konserveringscenter in Næstved, Denmark.

In written German documents of the era, this upper body garment goes by many names. Brüstlein and the more dialectal Brüstla was used in Nürnberg. In other parts of Germany, the garment was called Joppe, Wams, Leib, Brustleib, Brüstle, Leibstück, Leibchen, Prüstla, and Mieder. There are also more specific names like Ärmelbrüstlein, which makes it clear that the garment had sleeves. (Textiler Hausrat, Jutta Zander-Seidel, p. 74.)

What I wanted to make
I have always wanted to do a Frauenwams like the one in Hans Wiegels Trachtenbuch, depicting a Nürnberg housemaid (picture 2). However, since the extant find from Lübeck is a silk lining, it was most likely worn by a bit more wealthy person than a house maid. Therefore I decided to go for a Tailor’s widow in her working clothes rather than a maid.

During the German Renaissance, the guilds knew that a Master could not run a household on his own. Thus his wife and daughters became involved in the business, learning bits and pieces of the trade. Furthermore, women were allowed to run their deceased husband’s workshop until they remarried. So, I figured I could portrait a Master Tailor’s widow wearing the clothes she would use while supervising the business. (Working women in Renaissance Germany, Merry E. Wiesner, p 32–33.)

Pattern
The cut of the extant Lübeck find matches the shape of the Frauenwams depicted in the Weigel Trachtenbuch (no pointed waist), making it perfect to use as a basis for this project.

With the help of Mistress Helwig and her apprentices (Lia de Thornegge, William of Richwood and Filippa Birgersdotter), I got a pattern for the Frauenwams. They started with three rectangles that were pinned together. Then they began shaping the Frauenwams on me while looking at the extant find from the conservation documentation.

The front is straight with no curve. All fitting is done in the side seams and aided by inserting gussets where needed. From the two extant panels it is obvious that there was one gusset on each front panel. However, it became clear while fitting that two gussets were needed in the back. The perfect locations for these were the seams towards the back panel (picture 5 is my pattern of the Frauenwams).

When looking at other extant jackets, of English origin, the construction logic seems to be that you insert as many gussets as you need to make the jacket fit. There is no rule of how many gussets you need to have. The Layton waistcoat from 1610–1615 has five small gussets, (Seventeenth-century women’s dress patterns – Book one, Susan North and Jenny Tiramani, p. 28.) A Linen Waistcoat with Blackwork Embroidery in Silk from 1620–1625, now in the V&A collection, has four gussets. This jacket has all four gussets inserted in the front panels, which makes the back piece as small as the one on Lübeck Frauenwams, (Seventeenth-century women’s dress patterns – Book one, Susan North and Jenny Tiramani, p. 52).

The differences between the Lübeck find pattern and most English waistcoats are that the side seam goes a lot deeper into the back on the Lübeck jacket, and it also has a V-neck cut instead of the more common regular curved neckline. The V-neck cut of the extant find is a bit of a conundrum since there is no pictorial evidence supporting this cut to my knowledge. However, it is hard to argue with an extant find.

Looking at pictorial evidence, none of the German Frauenwams seem to have the wings that English waistcoats have. Furthermore, the patterns from Aus-
trian 16th century pattern books discussed below also lack the wings.

The Musterbuch des Handwerks der Schneider von Enns from 1590 features a Burger woman’s schäuben und wams – a skirt and a waistcoat. (Drei Schnittbücher, Marion McNealy & Katherine Barich, p. 234–235).

However, this waistcoat has a totally different cut with a pointed waist and a dart for shaping. It also has a high standing collar and a very puffy separate shoulder part of the sleeve, while the lower part of the sleeve is tightly fitted to the arm.

The sleeves of the Nürnberg maid are puffed but still a bit loose in the fit for comfort, so I decided to go with an S-sleeve and just widen and extend it at the shoulder to fit the puff.

One could argue that the puff part of the sleeve could be a separate piece, like in the afore-mentioned pattern from the Enns Musterbuch. However, the cut of that sleeve rather fits the Frauenwams from Hendelberg depicted in the Weigel Trachtenbuch (picture 3). The Hendelberg Frauenwams has a much more pronounced puff, and the sleeve below is tightly fitted to the arm, which makes it impractical to cut it in one piece.

The S-sleeve that I chose to go with, has been used in the Fustian Waistcoat embroidered with silver thread, 1630s, in the V&A, (Seventeenth-century women’s dress patterns – Book one, Susan North and Jenny Tiramani, p. 65.)

The S-sleeve pattern divided in two parts is also seen on the Woman’s Lieb Rock in the Leonfedner Schnittbuch, (Drei Schnittbücher, Marion McNealy & Katherine Barich, p. 251). The Lieb Rock is the slightly longer kind of a waistcoat/short skirted gown often seen on farmer’s wives at the market in 16th century woodcuts (picture 6, 7, 8 & 9).

**Materials used**

I have used a shot silk taffeta with a yellow warp and blue weft for the lining. The weave corresponds to the regular tabby of the Lübeck find.

Other colors in warp and weft are also documentable prior to the 16th century, but there is a padded and pinked wams (man’s doublet) of shot silk taffeta from circa 1610 in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (picture 10), (In Mode – Kleider und Bilder aus Renaissance und Frühbarock, edited by Jutta Zander-Seidel, p. 85.)

Albrecht Altdorfer, Portrait of a Lady, circa 1525–1530, depicts a woman that appears to wear a dress made out of shot silk (picture 11).

Schillerdaffet (shimmer taffeta), which is the 16th century term used for shot silk, is specifically noted as a lining fabric. (Textiler Hausrat, Jutta Zander-Seidel, p. 402.)

The extant lining from Lübeck had wool fibers on it, but the conservation document does not state whether this was on the outside or inside of the lining. It either indicates that a woolen dress was worn underneath the Frauenwams or that the outer fabric of the Frauenwams was made of wool.

In this project, I chose to interpret the find of wool fibers as a sign of a woolen outer fabric. I chose a lightweight herringbone twill.

The pictorial evidence does not support embroidery on the German jackets. They seem to be one-colored with an option of guards of a contrasting fabric or made of brocade/damask with guards. This is also supported by the few written sources I have been able to access (Textiler Hausrat, Jutta Zander-Seidel, p. 74–75 & p. 79).

In those few records, pure wool fabrics are not mentioned, but Schamlot is. Schamlot was originally a goat or camel hair weave, but it is also noted as a mixed fiber fabric in the Enns Musterbuch. (Drei Schnittbücher, Marion McNealy & Katherine Barich, p. 68.) Schamlot is also the recommended fabric to use for the Frauen Wammes in the Enns Musterbuch.

The English records compiled by the authors of The Tudor Tailor, used as teaching material at their workshops, show that woolen waistcoats were quite popular in Essex wills. 39 waistcoats in the documents have the fabric they were made of mentioned and out of those 38% were Russet (coarse wool), 23% were Cotton (surface treatment of wool, not cotton fibre!), 21% were Cloth (a standard wool) and 10% were Fustian (mixed fiber linen with either wool or silk). The remaining 3% were made out of Holland/Canvas/Stammel.

The herringbone weave might not have been very popular in the 16th century due to many fabrics being fulled.

However, the Says or Worsted were made from the longer and straighter fibers of a sheep’s fleece, possibly from the top coat fibers, which would match the find of woolen fibers on the Lübeck lining.

This was the least expensive of the woolen fabrics, since they were thin and woven from relatively coarse, strong, and long-stapled yarns, often with a diamond or lozenge-twilled weave. (The Medieval broadcloth – Changing Trends in Fashions, Manufacturing and Consumption, edited by Kathrine Vestergård Pedersen and Marie-Louise B. Nosch. Three Centuries of Luxury...
Tools: modern scissors for cutting out the pieces of the garment, a handmade sewing needle modeled after medieval and renaissance sewing needles, modern pins since I like to use a lot of pins when merging parts of the garment (I did not have enough of my period pins), and hand-forged snips to cut thread.

I studied how the gores had been inserted in the 17th century jackets in the book Seventeenth-century women's dress patterns – Book one. While doing this, it became clear that there are as many gusset insertion methods as there are jackets. This indicates that the person sewing the waistcoat chose the method that worked best for him or her.

I chose to stitch my gussets in with the back stitch and the drawing stitch, both accounted for in the sewing stitches identified in the jackets from the 17th century (picture 14 & 15) (Seventeenth-century women’s dress patterns – Book one, Susan North and Jenny Tiramani, p. 17.) I stitched them in almost to the top on both sides with the back stitch. To make the top of the gores look nice, I stitched the last bit in from the outside using the drawing stitch. After that I felled the seams of the gores with a simple whip stitch.

Before sewing any of the long seams in the Frauenwams, I pinned the layers together and basted them (picture 17).

The seams were then stitched with the back stitch and felled using a simple whip stitch.

The lining of the sleeves was sewn together with the outer fabric at the wrist, turned and the bottom hem was finished with the prick stitch (picture 16).

The sleeves were sewn into the arm eyes of the outer fabric, in accordance to the construction of the Layton jacket (Seventeenth-century women’s dress patterns – Book one, Susan North and Jenny Tiramani, p. 32).

I decided to bag line my jacket since this was a method used in the Pink silk Waistcoat (picture 12 & 13). In the Pink silk Waistcoat, the raw edges of the outer fabric were turned and stitched down. Then the silk lining was folded under and sewn to the waistcoat’s outer fabric using the running stitch.

I chose to backstitch my lining to the outer fabric, turn the Frauenwams, close the hole at the neck with the drawing stitch, and then use the prick stitch around the entire edge.

I chose to take a step away from the construction, since I want the Frauenwams to be able to withstand modern machine washing and I fear that a running stitch would not hold up.

The last part of attaching the lining was to sew it in place around the arm eyes (picture 18).

At the front where I would put the closure, I did three rows of prick stitches to give the front edge the support it needs for the hook and eyes.
Looking at the picture of the Schwabian maid from the Weigel Trachtenbuch, it becomes pretty clear that there are several rows of prick stitches supporting the front edge (picture 4).

I used hand-made brass hooks and eyes (picture 19) for the closure. I know how to make hooks and eyes myself, however my then hurting hands made it hard, so I had a friend make them for me. In the 16th century, hooks and eyes were sold by Haberdashers – small goods merchants that sold ribbons, beads, purses, gloves, pins, caps, et cetera. So, it is entirely authentic to buy your hooks and eyes [http://www.haberdashers.co.uk/content.php?p=company-history]. In Germany, the hooks and eyes were made by the Heftelmacher – Pin maker. That can be seen in the woodcut Das Hefftelmacher in Jost Ammans Das Ständebuch from 1568 (picture 22).

Hooks and eyes were used in the embroidered linen waistcoat from c. 1615–1618 from the Burrell Collection in Glasgow (picture 20), (Patterns of Fashion – The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560–1620, Janet Arnold, p. 51.) Hooks are also seen in the padded and pinched sleeves in Germanisches Nationalmuseum, (Patterns of Fashion – The cut and construction of clothes for men and women circa 1560–1620, Janet Arnold, p. 39).

During a renovation of three houses in Kempten im Allgäu, they found everyday objects from the 15th and 16th centuries hidden in the walls. Amongst these was a collection of hooks and eyes in different stages of production (picture 23). (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BChlberg-Ensemble).

The hooks were sewn down in three spots and the eyes in spots corresponding to the way hooks and eyes on the extant garments were sewn on (picture 21).

In pictures 24, 25 and 26 you see me wearing the Frauenwams based on the Lübeck find with the sleeve matching the Nürnberg house maid from Weigel’s Trachtenbuch.

What I would do different

In the pictures, I wear the Frauenwams over a sleeveless woolen dress. This dress is made of a thicker fabric than the dress the pattern was fitted on. The gussets could have been cut a bit higher towards the waist since the fullness of my skirt now pushes the jacket a bit upwards, making more wrinkles at the waist for my taste.

This was the first attempt at a recreation of the Lübeck Frauenwams. I will make another one for which I want to buy a loomstate worsted twill and then vegetable dye the fabric. I will then make a plain sleeve using the S-sleeve in two parts from the Leonfeldner Schnittbuch.

I would also want to attach the lining as it was attached in the Pink silk Waistcoat, since that method would correspond with the edges of the silk lining in the extant find from Lübeck having been stitched down. Another thing that would be interesting to try is to cut the garment using the width of cloth corresponding to the 16th century measurements.

Bibliography


Working Women in Renaissance Germany, Merry E. Wiesner, Rutgers University Press, 1986.


The conservation documents of Textilobjekt 1402/2 K1. This object was displayed at the ”Kulturforum Burgkloster” in Lübeck.

Trachtenbuch – Habitvs Præcipvorvm Poplovrm, Tam Vironvr Qvam fœminarum Singulari arte depicti, Hans Weigel, printed 1577 in Nürnberg. Below a link to an original owned by Nationalmuseet in Stockholm: http://digitaltmuseum.se/011013855224

[....]
I am sorry that I cannot publish the picture of the actual find. The museum has not given permission to do so. The shape of the extant front panels of the lining can be seen in picture 5.
Hans Sebald Beham – a section from September and October, 1546-1547.

Barthel Beham Peasant Woman with Two Jugs, 1524.

Barthel Beham, 1527, a section of Church anniversary Holiday at Mögelsdorf.

Hans Sebald Beham, c. 1540, Marketwoman.

Photo: Germanisches Nationalmuseum.
Rough translation of the text from the woodcut by Katrine De Saint Brieu:

I make stickpins out of brass wire
Well brushed / round / clean / smooth /
with round heads good and sharp
Any kind that one might desire /
I also make hooks and eyes well
pointed and made / therewith one
can close up their bodice woman and also man
so that their clothing can lie smoothly