Early Gaelic Dress
An Introduction

by Scott Barrett, known in the SCA as Finnacan Dub (barrett1@cox.net)

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Introduction

There may be no other culture in historical reenactment more given to debate and passionate discourse than that of the Gaels, namely Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. So many have an affinity for these countries and their heritage, yet in historic reenactment and living history groups there is much heated exchange concerning the evolution of Gaelic fashion. Agreement is difficult to find and so much misinformation is paraded as truth to the newcomer that these cultures eventually become almost a satire of themselves. Those seeking to declare “kit” guidelines sometimes dismiss new or overlooked information in an attempt to maintain order and a type of uniformity not found in history. Some turn to fantasy literature, forgetting that even a surprisingly accurate description in fiction is still not a dependable resource (though some is more researched than others).

I once had this terrible headache. The pain appeared at the back of my skull in the early nineties, when I asked myself what an Irishman might be wearing when King John visited Ireland during the Norman Conquest. Everyone had an answer. Some were better than others. One person might say, “I don’t know”. Another would say, “I don’t know, you won’t know, no one ever will, so let it go.” He was cheerful. Another would attempt some logic and suppose that Ireland simply went Anglo-Norman in its dress within a decade, so dress Norman. “Ooo, and put knotwork on your clothes, Irishman love knotwork!” They do? Was there a meeting? The headache was getting worse. Finally, there were the few that told me to go, find out, return and bring them back whiskey while I was at it. They also insisted I share whatever I had learned, no matter how fragmentary or disorganized it might seem to me. They felt that I could put together something both a newcomer and an old-timer could use, especially since a movie is eventually going to attempt to define early Gaelic dress for us.

So I have composed this guide in an attempt fight off any future Hollywood historic horrors, as well as ease the frustrations of a sincere newcomer. This guide is not intended to be a source in and of itself, but more of a torch lighting the way to more comprehensive material for those who truly wish to honor the history of the Gaelic nations. I know what it is like to lose sleep wondering what sort of shoes they wore as they fought the Battle of Clontarf, or what kind of wool to buy while standing in a discount fabric outlet. If this guide helps just one of you sleep a little better, I consider it a success. The headache is gone now. The cure, I discovered, was to keep learning, searching, asking and sometimes letting go of beloved yet flawed ideas on the subject. It is my hope that once you read this guide you will feel confident enough to attempt your first ensemble of appropriate clothing from the Early Christian Era through the Viking Invasions up to the Norman Conquest, be you Irish, Scot or Manx. This guide is not the end of your path, just the beginning. Relax, it will be a fun journey.

A Few Terms

The Gaels

Before getting to the really juicy stuff, I need to establish some terminology. First, let me clarify what *Gael* and *Gaelic* mean. The Gaels were those tribes and nations that spoke a language called *Gaelic*, a language that is part of the Goidelic group of early European languages. It was once a more singular language than it is today, as each Gaelic country now has its own dialects.

So when I refer to Gaels, I’m referring to the Irish, the western Scots and the Manx. I don’t use the term *Celt* or *Celtic* because these words don’t clearly identify these cultures. Goidelic tongues were just one language group in a whole family of Celtic languages. It’s also important to remember that the early Irish and Scots did not call themselves “Celts”.

The Irish

The Gaels were the early peoples of Ireland, called *Eire*, and quite possibly conquerers of the island in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. Historians believe the island had a native culture that was interrupted by the arrival of these European people, yet debate rages as to precisely when this occurred, or how quickly the invaders changed the predominate culture. One thing that is certain is the sudden appearance of more European objects and jewelry in Ireland that correlate to later Bronze Age art and ornament found on the continent. As the Iron Age gave way to the Dark Ages, the Irish had developed an original framework of art, spiritual thought and social interaction. By the time the SCA begins the countdown of the Medieval Era--i.e., 600 A.D.--the Gaels are the established inhabitants of all Ireland and have been for centuries. Their language, the Old Irish *Gaeilge*, is probably the root tongue for the Manx and Scottish dialects.

The Manx

As the Irish traded with and raided their neighbors, they established their culture on the Isle of Man in the middle of the Irish Sea. Man had a native farming and fishing culture before Iron Age Gaelic influences appear. Most Manx historians conclude that the native people were originally from Europe, via Britain. As Irish missionaries settled in Man, the natives became more Gaelic. This culture was heavily influenced by Norse settlers, however; more so then any other in this guide. Manx Gaelic, called *Y Gailck*, borrowed some from the Old Norse and is a language unlike any other, with both Goidelic and Brythonic roots.

The Scots

Scotland has long been considered a Gaelic nation, but its origins are a dangerous subject, leading to raised voices and angry dispute. Before the influence of Gaelic culture, Scotland was the native home of a people called the *Picts*. The Picts were the reason the Emperor Hadrian built the wall (to defend Roman Britain from the Picts as well as control trade and commerce). What little remains of Pictish art shows a people engaged in original religious and artistic expression. Ancient chronicles state that an Irish dynastic clan called the *Dal Riada* arrived in western Scotland in the 5th century and ruled a kingdom called *Argyll*, eventually uniting with the Picts under a king named Kenneth MacAlpin about 400 years later. However, new theories concerning the arrival of Gaels have appeared. These new theories suggest not only that Gaels were in western Scotland much earlier than assumed, but that they were not as dependent on Ireland and its customs. In fact, it may very well be that the Dal Riada were the ones who introduced many fashions and social norms to Ireland, reflecting Roman, Pictish and even southern European inspiration. Grave finds and archaeological discoveries appear to support these positions so far. History learns something new every day.

The Isle of Iona, situated between Ireland and Scotland in the Irish Sea, became a bastion of insular Christianity, and the new religion spread throughout Scotland with all of its distinctive Gaelic trappings. Picts converted, fought with the Scots of Argyll, married them as well, and soon began to adopt elements of their culture and language despite regaining control of much of Scotland in the last years of their existence. Within a generation of the first Norse settlements, the Picts were no longer a distinct and separate people. Scotland was by then a predominately Gaelic country, though home to many Scandinavian folk. Scots Gaelic, or *Gaidhlig*, would result from a sprinkling of Norse and Pictish terms into the original language of the Argyll Scots.

Types of Research Sources

This next set of terms is of use when approaching any subject, not just historical dress. Learn to distinguish your sources. Having a source is an excellent way to avoid unsubstantiated conjecture. Better still is being able to spot the different types of sources and knowing which carry more weight.

A **primary source** is exactly what it sounds like. It's a shoe, or a brooch, or any other extant item that can be examined, measured and possibly replicated. A primary source may not solve every archaeological mystery. Certain items are enigmas. We aren't sure how they were used or what their significance was. As our body of knowledge grows, the mystery item may reveal itself in the bigger picture. It could remain a thing of conjecture for centuries, mute and never giving up its secrets. However, sometimes it's a shoe after all.

A **secondary source** is less immediate, yet still can be of immense help in historical research. It is usually a direct recording or accounting of an item or event. Examples include paintings and sculptures, literature and poetics that describe the event or item, similar events or items in the same timeframe and area, even excavation reports on finds lost or destroyed. Multiple secondary sources are generally considered a substantial body of evidence in the academic community, if those sources withstand scrutiny.

Tertiary sources are a distillation of information and commentary, like this guide. Fact and trivia books, encyclopedias, beginners' guides--these things are all considered tertiary. They can be very useful but should not be looked upon as authorities. They don't qualify as good documentation. In fact, if you write documentation, that documentation becomes a tertiary source and should be considered an outline of evidence, not the evidence itself.

I'll warn you right now: most of what is presented in this guide is based on secondary sources. We have not found a 9th-century Scottish prince in near-perfect condition buried in the peat. It looks unlikely that we will anytime soon. Textiles don't survive burial well. Then again, a royal poet and his wife could be found tomorrow, the embroidery still shining on their garments. Who knows?

Period Usage

Finally, a quick comment on that most abused of SCA terms, "period". Technically, anything falling between 600 and 1600 A.D. is within the SCA era. However, wearing an Elizabethan doublet with a Saxon *spangenhelm* is not accurate or appropriate. Both are "period", but neither is appropriate to the other's timeframe. I bring this up in hopes that "Celts" stop painting woad on their faces while carrying 16th-century Scottish Claymores on their backs.

Yeah, I know, but I can dream. . .

The Sources

Years ago I made the decision to try to emulate accurate Irish wear to the best of my ability, and thereby to honor the history of Ireland, rather than my preconceived notions of what it should be, or what I wanted it to be. Once I made this decision, I found myself not knowing where to turn. I ran into a number of frustrated Scotsmen as well and empathized with their plight.

The Internet was just starting to take off. I was able to track down a few resources within a year of finally getting online. Still, pickings were slim. What little I could locate has proven invaluable--two works in particular. These two books, along with museum pieces, art, archaeological reports, and poetics from the timeframe, form the core of this guide. I will refer to other sources throughout this guide and include a bibliography for your future endeavors, but these books are so heavily used that I wanted you to be familiar with them from the beginning, so that you have an idea what is being referenced as you read this guide. They should be yours to read at your leisure, as they will lead to your own speculation, experiments, and conclusions (which archaeology may verify for you in the future). They will also provide you with a level of investigation and detail I cannot offer you.

Dress in Ireland: A History, by Mairead Dunlevy, The Collins Press, 1989; ISBN 1-898256-84-5
This is the only book dealing with this subject still in print at the time of this writing. Though it doesn't cover Scotland and Man as separate cultures, it does provide a large amount of detail for the garments and items worn by the Irish through many periods. It is more comprehensive and linear than McClintock's earlier work, covering differences between native dress and foreign fashion. It can be located on Amazon.com as well as through interlibrary loan.

Old Irish and Highland Dress, with Notes on That of the Isle of Man, by H.F. McClintock, Dundalgan Press, 1943
Well, the bad news is that this work has been out of print for quite some time. Even an interlibrary loan has a hard time finding it. It may still haunt some old bookshelf in your area, but good luck finding it. Now, here is the good news. www.Scotpress.com has for sale on CD not only this entire book, but many others as well, most of which deal with Scottish and Irish history. So you may very well be able to get the sweat-drenched work of Old Man McClintock for yourself. It is worth every penny. McClintock is the pioneer in this field, charged with determining historic Irish dress for the Irish government in the 'forties. Before him was P.W. Joyce, author of a text called *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, which was based on the Victorian work of Professor O'Curry, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish,* published in 1873. O'Curry was a sound scholar but he proposed translations that simply didn't pan out when investigated, especially concerning fashion, so McClintock started over. He gives the reader sculpture and shrines, art and literature, sacred texts and even Brehon Law to back his conclusions. Though some of what McClintock wrote is now a little dated, his writing remains the foremost resource for this topic.

Neither of these works is definitive. Discoveries and more detailed understandings of daily life and dress are coming to light every day. However, these books form a strong foundation for any scholar or enthusiast to begin their dabblings and should be sought with haste.

I have also turned to a few sources these authors used, primarily the *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*, which date from between the 7th and 9th centuries. Scans from both can be found online. These artifacts of illuminated wonder have also had numerous books written about them, one of which is The Book of Kells, by Peter Brown, Thames and Hudson, 1980 (ISBN 0-500-27192-5).

I also explored the *Tain bo Cuailnge*, an Irish epic first penned in the 1100's and translated by numerous authors. My favorite translation of this work is The Tain: From the Irish Epic *Tain bo Cuailnge*, by Thomas Kinsella, Oxford University Press, 1969 (ISBN 0-19-280373-5).

The Garments

The Léine (Tunic)

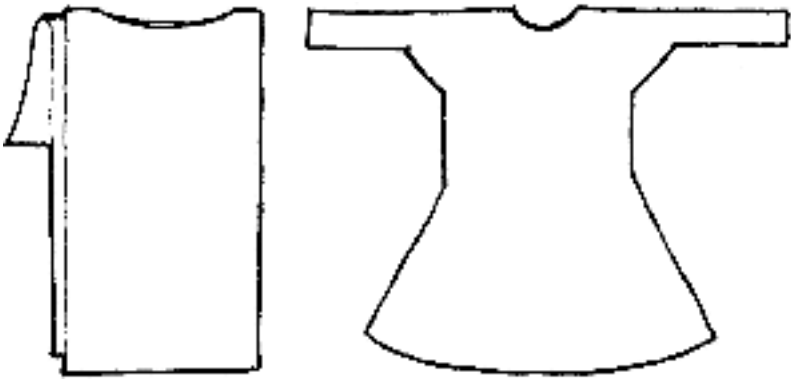
The léine (lay-nah) is the Gaelic tunic, or shirt. The plural form is léinte (layn-tah). This garment, worn against the skin, is the primary wardrobe item. Though perhaps made of wool in the late Bronze Age, it is usually made of linen by the early Christian era, linen being abundant in the island nations. Although the léine was worn throughout the SCA timeframe, it changed drastically in shape as the centuries passed. We can picture and even fabricate the early léine, though we may never know its exact construction or finish since linen almost never survives burial.

detail from the west face of the Cross of Muiredach

McClintock, describing age-worn figures on the Cross of Muiredach in Monasterboice, says:

> The léine as it appears on the cross is a long smock-like garment, not unlike the 'galabeeah' worn by the natives of Modern Egypt, rather narrow in the skirt and decorated round the lower border with a band of embroidery. (p.4)

Dunlevy gives her interpretation of the early léine as a sleeveless, ankle-length garment worn by both sexes (p.17). It should be noted that by the 9th century (800 A.D.), léinte illustrated in the Book of Kells are long-sleeved and tapered to the wrist, not sleeveless. It may be that the léine, once a simple rectangular or tube-woven garment held onto the body by brooches at the shoulders, became a more tailored and form-fitting garment by the beginning of the 6th century.



two possible variants of the léine
The sleeveless is likely disappearing in 600 A.D..

It appears to have been slipped over the head, belted at the waist and worn ankle-length, though McClintock notes that the T*ain Bo Cuailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, or just the *Tain*) sometimes describes it as "girt", or drawn up to the knees, for more physical activities.

The *Book of Kells* shows a variety of necklines used on the léine, including round, oval, triangular and square.

various necklines visible in the *Book of Kells*

possible culpaits

The hood is likely the more common in the SCA timeframe.

It also is sometimes described as having a *culpait* (cul-page), which can mean either a collar or a hood. Dunlevy states, "It often had a culpait, or substantial collar, which later became a hood," (p.17). A hooded léine was called a culpatach, or culpaideach (cul-pay-jeek). We don't know how this "collar" or "hood" was constructed. Dunlevy indicates a possible hood on the Virgin's léine in the *Book of Kells* (p. 21). If this is indeed a hood under her veil, than it may be that the hoods on early léinte were constructed as simple rectangles of fabric that draped down from the neck as one might imagine on a Greek Doric chiton. There is no indication that the culpait was a separate item like a cowl.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: the Virgin's head

This early léine was likely clasped at the shoulders. It seems reasonable to assume that the léine altered in form as tailoring advanced in northern Europe. Though no intact léine has been found, the probability that it was made to comfortably fit the wearer seems evident. Gores in the skirts and gussets under the arms may not have appeared until well into the 8th century, yet sleeves and necklines in the *Book of Kells* indicate a quality garment that was neither skin-tight nor loose.

It wouldn't be proper to think of the léine as an "under-tunic". That implies a garment always covered by another. Think of the léine more as a tunic. It was often worn alone. Anything worn over it was considered outerwear.

Fabric

It can be a little confusing trying to decide what fabrics to use when making a léine. The *Tain*, mentioned above, describes a number of léinte as silk or "glossy" in appearance. It makes reference to a linen léine once (McClintock p.3). Both Dunlevy and McClintock concede that the léine was almost always a linen garment, and that the *Tain* is given to heroic excess in its descriptions. However, it should be noted that the Irish had silks available to them, especially after the appearance of Norse settlements, and that it was likely a status symbol to own as much as possible. Markets in Limerick in the 10th century had silks and silk satins of many colors available, as well as many other rich fabrics. The vast majority of this fabric would have been used for trim and decoration, not entire garments (Dunlevy p.22).

Today the term "linen" refers to fabrics made from flax, but in the Middle Ages linen may also have been made of ramie, hemp or nettle fibers. A léine made of ramie may be even more authentic than one made of flax linen, as flax was not as abundant as nettles in Ireland, England, Man or Scotland, and nettles would have produced a fabric almost indistinguishable from ramie. (Ramie is actually made with a Chinese nettle and is one of the oldest textile plants known.) Hemp has a long and well-dispersed history as a textile plant for making linens; the oldest woven fabric found to date is made from hempen thread. After awhile, all of these fibers are nearly identical, even to experts. They make fine linens and should be seriously considered when fabric shopping.

Though linen may seem an extravagance these days, many medium-weight linens are available on the market, often for less than cotton/poly blends. One of the most popular sources for 100% flax linen among reenactors is this website: www.fabrics-store.com. I highly recommend them and I am not alone in my enthusiasm. Before you head to the local discount fabric outlet, consider this: most "linen" in such locations is not 100% linen (which you will want for any summer outdoor event, trust me!), and the linen that is pure is usually astonishingly expensive. So you'll find yourself settling for muslin that will wear out in a few years or a polyester blend that won't breathe and is likely to melt when accidentally exposed to a campfire. Cotton can be more expensive. You'll love how linen softens and you'll save money being accurate and comfortable. I'm not talking handkerchief linen here, but the simple twill weave linen you will see at the fabrics-store website.

Construction

Despite the lack of patterns for the léine, it is not too difficult to piece together how a léine may have been made, especially if you look at evidence for tunic construction from surrounding countries and the traits those tunics shared. The garment is basically a tunic seamed at the sides with hems and a finished neck opening. It may have been joined at the shoulders with a seam as well. It could be sleeveless or have sleeves attached at the shoulder. It may have once had a center seam running down its front and back to allow for more volume in the body. It may also have had center or side splits for movement, though descriptions of girting-up the léine seem to undermine this idea, in my opinion. As the Viking Age began, this possible center seam would have likely been replaced with gores in the sides of the skirting, with center gores appearing soon after. Gussets may have appeared at the armpits for better fit. In length, it is described as varying from thigh to ankle. A longer léine seems to be a wealthier choice and may have indicated status.

As an author's suggestion: Consider putting in the accurate seams for the léine. It fits more comfortably and looks more accurate. Avoid the "T-tunic" cut; attach sleeves separately, and use gores if appropriate. Even if you have 60-inch-wide material, adding the seams makes a huge difference, visually. Finally, matching the construction thread color with the garment color is not always a given in this timeframe, so creativity with contrasting hues might be an option.

Color

A common term used to describe léinte is *gel,* which means "bright". This could indicate a number of things. Dunlevy notes that léinte are white or *gel*, which may mean "unbleached" or "natural in hue" (p.17). McClintock noted a number of interesting descriptions of the léine in the *Tain*, such as "white", "yellow", "brown-red" (madder?) and "striped" (p.3). General consensus seems to be that white, natural and yellow were probably the most common colors for a léine simply because these hues are easiest to achieve in linen.

Though it is true that linen does not take dye as deeply as other fabrics, it will certainly hold a wide variety of colors, and a well-made léine would have been dyed multiple times as color faded with washing and exposure to sunlight. The *Book of Kells* illustrates how varied the léine could be; angels and saints alike wear blue, green, purple, red and golden léinte. The Virgin Mary wears a pink léine (the color easily achieved with period dyes).

With modern dyes we are able to achieve more brilliant shades in linen than would have been seen in the Dark Ages. Choose more muted and subtle colors. Better yet, look into period dyes and color your linen at home. That is one of the best and simplest ways to get the color you want.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 183r

detail from *Book of Kells*, folio 29r

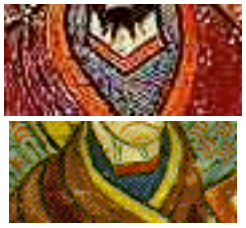
detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: Virgin and Child

Decoration

Sculptures, illustrations and literature all indicate a consistent addition to the léine: trim. Bands of trim can be seen on most every single léine in the *Book of Kells*, at the hem, the cuffs and the neckline. Dunlevy mentions that as the léine became more fitted, so too it became more ornate (p.21) . As noted earlier, McClintock mentioned bands of embroidery while describing the Cross of Muiredach. That is not the only sculpture McClintock studied. In fact, the majority of those he examined, like the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnois and the Shrine of St. Moedoc in the National Museum at Dublin, have visible decoration on the garments.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 114r: soldier's hem

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: Angel's cuffs

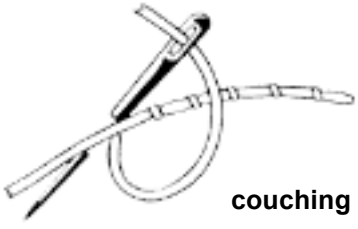


details from the *Book of Kells*, folios 293r and 183r: necklines

detail from the east face of the Cross of Muiredach: Cain's and Abel's skirts

detail from Shrine of St. Moedoc: man's skirts

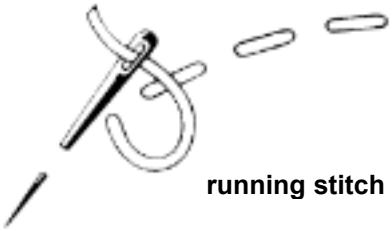
He also notes that the *Tain* seems to focus more on decoration than any other feature, the most common being embroidery of some sort that is gold, red-gold or merely red (p.3). This could have referred to a couple of techniques known to have been used in the early medieval period. One possibility is that gold thread, which was gold flat wire wrapped around a linen or silk thread, was couched down to the fabric using red thread. The other technique would be red tablet woven bands of silk or wool with gold brocade. These two techniques appear to be the most common ways of displaying metallic threads.



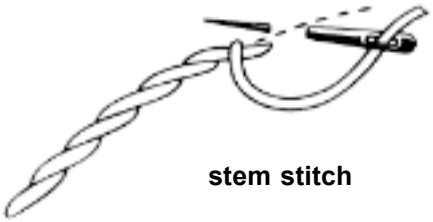
couching

The *Leabhar na h-Uidhre* (the *Book of the Dun Cow*, about 1100 A.D.) mentions the High King Conaire Mor in a poem. In this piece he is wearing a léine with silken trim around his neck so filled with metallic threads it reflects his face like a mirror. The garment also sports embroidery from his chest to his knees! Granted, the Ulaid or Ulster Cycle stories and poems (which include the *Tain*) contain many such vivid descriptions that are likely poetic liberties taken with epic figures engaged in epic deeds. But it does indicate how important such decoration and display was to the early Irish, so decorating the léine seems a foregone conclusion.

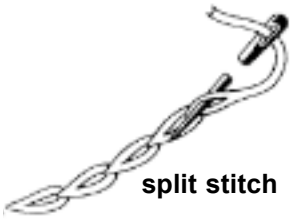
How should you decorate your léine? Well, lacking extant garments, most historians, MClintock and Dunlevy among them, look to the common textile arts of Ireland's neighbors at the time. The most common form of decoration is presumed to have been embroidery. This would include numerous stitches found in the region (such as running, stem, whip, split, and satin stitches) coupled with techniques like appliqué and the previously-mentioned couching. Bands of embroidery might have been done directly on the garment, or done on strips of linen, wool, or silk and applied later. Another option is tablet weaving (also called "card weaving"). This technique was widely used all over northern Europe and is common in the SCA. You can make bands of highly complex trim in numerous and varied patterns. A combination of tablet-woven trim, embroidery, and appliqué may have been used on a single garment, especially among the wealthy.



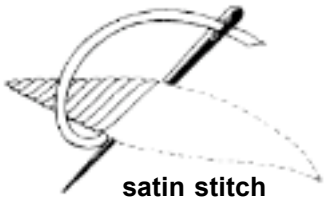
running stitch



stem stitch



split stitch



satin stitch

stitch diagrams courtesy of *STITCH with the Embroiderers' Guild*

As to what motífs to use: most refer to extant manuscripts and metalwork for inspiration. Bands of color, key patterns, Christian-era spirals and Norse-influenced knotted beasts may be appropriate, depending on your chosen timeframe. Some may argue that no interlace, or "knotwork", was used on Gaelic dress. This brings to light a distinct problem in certain SCA circles. Avoid any historic discussion where the terms "always" and "never" are used. That kind of absolute position is not proper in academic circles. Here's an example of why:

The argument against interlace is fairly strong, as supposedly no illustrations or sculptures show it being used with any regularity. Yet, a closer examination of the topic pokes holes in the position of the always/never types. Interlace is visible at the neckline in the image of the Virgin in the *Book of Kells*. It can also be found on the cloak of the Man in the *Book of Durrow*, which dates from the 7th century. Loegaire Buadach, a member of the Ulster forces in the *Tain*, is described as wearing a yellow léine with interlace. (This reference has been used to actually try and show modern-style lace being used by the early Irish. If it was, no other mention of this complex craft has ever been found in the literature of the period, nor has any physical evidence appeared showing actual lace being made during the Early Medieval timeframe in Ireland. The word is "interlace" when translated and is used in a descriptive fashion.)

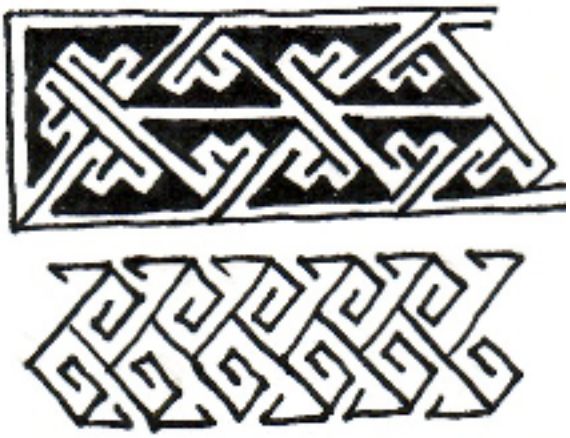
detail from the *Book of Kells,* folio 7v: the Virgin's neckline

detail from the *Book of Durrow,* folio 21v: the Man's brat

So, if you want interlace, I see no reason to completely avoid it. However, it would appear to have been used sparingly. It also would have been less complex before the Viking age, when Norse settlers adopted the native interlace and brought it to new heights with their own contributions.

I would encourage more distinctly Irish motífs such as the Christian-era spirals (**not** Bronze Age *La Téne* spirals) and the key patterns so prevalent in the sacred manuscripts and sculptures of the age. These are beautiful, very Gaelic, and far too rare in the author's opinion.

Christian-era spirals



key patterns

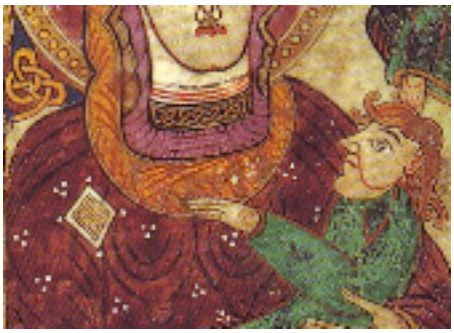
The simplest form of decoration is not only the most expedient but also very striking and attractive. As I mentioned earlier, the *Book of Kells* has simple bands at hems, necklines and cuffs, some of which were very likely strips of colored silk used as we use bias tape. This, in and of itself, is a magnificent finishing touch to richer garments, and appears to have been a standard practice among the wealthy of many early cultures. The trick is using the appropriate silk. The silk used would not have been "raw" or silk *noille* (the nubbly terry-cloth stuff found in today's fabric stores). It would have been a tabby or twill weave with a fine finish to it. This is the classic weave of Byzantine silks, patterned or monochromatic.

The Brat (Cloak)

The most distinctive piece of Gaelic dress may well have been the brat (braught) or the cloak. It showed status, provided protection, gave warmth, and was so important both socially and for practical purposes that most Gaels were never without one. Like the léine, the brat stayed in use throughout the SCA timeframe, changing somewhat in form but never really losing its hallowed place in Gaelic fashion. Dunlevy gives an excellent description of the brat, saying:

> The brat was the most colorful, versatile and warmest garment in the early Irish wardrobe. It was four-cornered, roughly rectangular in shape and being of wool was probably treated or 'fulled', to a dense finish. (p.18)

A large amount of attention is given to the brat in the literature, as noted by McClintock when he studied the *Tain* for reference. They are green, a variety of grays, purple, black, red and yellow, just to name a few. Some are striped, some sport fringes of a different hue than the brat itself, some are described as shaggy or hairy. They are even sometimes described as having many hues or being "speckled". (The Old Irish *breaccan* was used to denote "speckled" or "checkered", so most historians consider this a description of a small, simple plaid. I use the word *plaid* simply for the modern reader. *Plaid* or *plaide* merely means "blanket" or "rug"--a fair approximation for some of the brats described.) The majority of the brats in medieval Irish literature are described as having a single color.



detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: Virgin and Child

The brat was worn around the shoulders and held in place with a brooch or pin. Some argue for men wearing the brat pinned at one shoulder and women wearing it pinned in the center, over the torso. The Virgin in the *Book of Kells* seems to disagree, as her brooch is toward the shoulder, while Christ arrested on the Cross of Muirdoch wears his centered. "To each their own" seems the safest bet. The brat sometimes seems to have been draped over the shoulders and the arms casually, if one looks at the many figures in the *Book of Kells*. It may also have been worn so that the top was thrown back over the shoulders like a small cape, to be used as a hood when the weather turned foul.

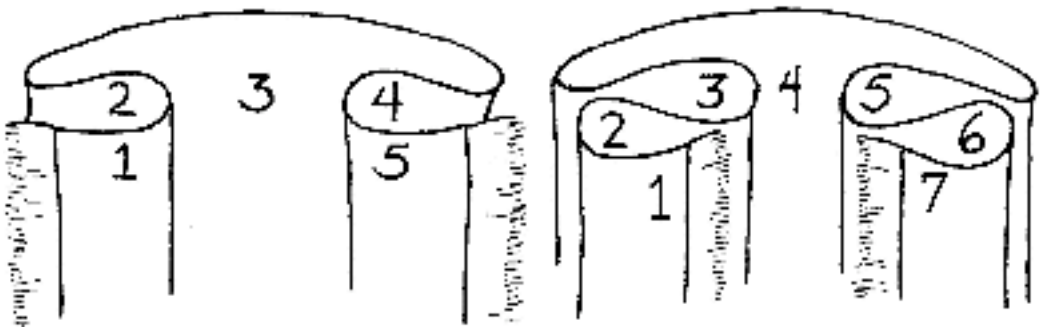
detail from the west face of the Cross of Muirdoch: Christ being arrested

As time progressed, the brat evolved (but not linearly, as the léine appears to have done). Semicircular and shoulder-fitted cloaks may have appeared around the time of the Norman Conquest, yet so popular was the classic Irish brat that it was exported and worn in other countries, such as France and England--especially the shaggy Irish mantle. The brat had such an important place in Gaelic society that it was accorded the same value as livestock and included in inheritance law. It was given plenty of attention by its maker or owner, often described as being heavily embroidered with gold and fine needlework, bands of color and rich fringe. High status in early literature was sometimes indicated by the length and breadth of a brat. Occasional references to a brat being "five-folded" can be found, which confounded me. What did early authors mean by "five-folded'? It is not so simple to say it was folded five times and then pinned on. We don't know how it was folded or even what qualified as a fold. Did it sport folds in its width or length, or was it folded corner to corner, again and again? Was the fold the amount of times it could wrap around the body, as Dunlevy suggests? If those folds were more like pleats, how were they worn or placed? The following is an example of what happens when you spend too much time staring at a wool blanket with a brooch in your hand, and is provided merely for your approval or dismissal.

Author's Speculation

I have a hypothesis concerning five- and even seven-folded brats that may be of use to you. Understand that I in no way claim that this hypothesis is the last word on the subject. In fact, we could find a well-preserved body from the 8th century wearing a cloak in this exact fashion, yet would not know if that is what early authors meant to describe. I include this to show how a sizable piece of wool fabric might be worn without dangling corners while staying true, at least in spirit, to early Irish literature. The first issue anyone has with a rectangular cloak is getting the thing to sit comfortably on the shoulders. Folds can help to create a more snug fit. The trick seems to be treating folds as a primitive pleating and not so much layering. If a fold qualifies as a layer of bent fabric, not the bend itself, then odd numbers such as the aforementioned five and seven are easy to achieve with this method.

First, lay the fabric flat. Next, turn the sides in toward the center. That could be called three folds, the two turned sides and the center. If the two turned sides are then folded outward again, five folds have now appeared. These folds could easily be held in place with a brooch and they provide a simple yet effective pleating for a wide piece of wool. Turning the sides once more achieves seven folds. The width needed to wear seven folds using this method would qualify the brat as a truly rich garment.



the speculative 5-folded and 7-folded brat

Construction

The construction of a brat is fairly simple. It is a rectangle of wool, about two yards or more (much more, if you wish). The wool is your primary concern. Fine weaves were common in the Dark Ages, so don't think you are stuck with heavy blankets or friezes. Light- to medium-weight wool flannel is considered by many to be the best choice medievalists can make for any culture or period. It is certainly appropriate for a brat. Tabby, twill and herringbone weaves were used with regularity. Finishing the edges with a hem is all that is really required before wearing a length of wool as a brat.

Decoration

The brat showed the wearer's rank, status and position in society. With that in mind, it would receive tons of decoration if the wearer was so entitled. I mentioned a few examples of this from Irish literature. To recap, brats were *color* and *richness*. Most are described as a single color, some with a contrasting fringe. That fringe would be added lengths of wool, not the modern fringes you see in most fabric stores. They may have been tied, braided, tasseled or simply left to snarl and thicken at the edge of the brat.

Certain brats may have been piecework. A cloak in the *Tain* is described as being made of choice pieces of a certain color. That pieces of different colors may have been joined to form a brat doesn't strike me as implausible.

Appliqué and embroidery were almost certainly used on brats, along with metallic thread. A cloak of particular interest was the *tugan*, which was reserved for poets of the highest station, the sort of masters that had a hundred poems committed to memory. This brat was covered in duck feathers--the shimmering neck feathers of drakes. Though I doubt any in the Society will ever feel entitled to wear such a garment, the Ulster cycle records a story wherein the women of Emain Macha wished CuChulainn to slay herons at a pool for their feathers, so it may be that feathers were an accepted decoration (perhaps in the fringe or at the neck).

Many people picture the brat as checked; and rightly so, as it was the forefather of the kilt. The trick is to avoid overly modern "tartans" but look instead for simple bold checks of two to three colors. Stripes are also mentioned.

Care

Some people are fairly concerned about washing wool and the effects this may have on the fabric. This is understandable, due to what happens to wool when it subjected to certain conditions. When agitated, wool fibers lift from the thread while the overall fabric compresses. This is called "fulling". The fabric becomes softer and fluffier. The coating of fuzzy fibers lifting up and forming the soft surface is called "the nap". Be aware that the wool usually shrinks somewhat as it fulls up.

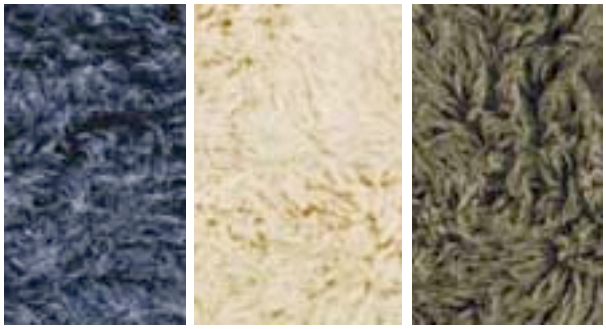
Sometimes this fulling a desired effect, as a fulled woolen garment is warmer and more water-resistant. The best method for fulling wool that I have found is to simply wash it in warm water in the washer and give it a tumble in the dryer. This is usually enough heat, friction, and moisture to do the trick. I do this only after considering shrinkage and I don't advise doing this to a finished garment. Full your wool before cutting your patterns.

If you wish to avoid fulling, gently wash your wool with cool water and let it air dry. This cleans the wool with a minimum of stress. I recommend using gentle cleaners no matter what method you use. Wool is hair, after all, so use light shampoo or Ivory flakes.

The Shaggy Mantle

Though also considered a brat, the shaggy cloak that the Irish made became so famous a garment that it deserves special attention. Most early brats are not described as shaggy or hairy, but a few appear in the literature. It seems to have become more common at the end of the Viking Age. Dunlevy notes that the famous Mantle of St. Brighid was probably not a 6th-century garment but was actually acquired by the brothers of Princess Gunhild of England around 1051. This is the best surviving example of an Irish shaggy mantle, though only a fragment remains. Shaggy mantles were prized due to their ability to keep moisture well away from the wearer, allowing rain to be literally shaken off. It held more heat than a simple cloak and was presumably a very soft garment to wear. They appear to have been made using two methods, though both might have occasionally been used in the making of a single cloak, as you will see.

The first technique may have been introduced to the Irish by Norse settlers, and so would have been well known to the scribes who first penned such epic tales as the *Tain*. A cloak called a *roggr* was developed by the Norse and was made by weaving wool on an upright loom while inserting lengths of combed wool into the shed of the fabric. This produced a wool fabric that was thick, with soft and shaggy tufts of hair. This technique may have been the origin of the shaggy mantle, and such fabric is still available for purchase today (which is a relief for those of us who lack a loom of any size). You simply have to turn to the Greeks for this treasure. The *flokati* rug is hand woven with pure wool. The rug is made by inserting strands of wool into the weft during weaving, which gives the rug a thick, soft pile. Observers say the Mantle of St. Brighid looks almost exactly like a *flokati* rug, with just a little more curl in the nap. Many reenactors use *flokati* rugs for brats. They often buy undyed rugs that can be given any color the wearer desires.



close-up views of *flokati* in natural shades

The other method began with the choice of a long wool hair fabric, such as mohair. Once the nap was combed out even longer with teasels, the garment would be drizzled with honey or coated in a mixture of sugar and vinegar. The surface would then be rubbed in a tight circular motion with a pad or a bag of small round pebbles or beads. This created layers of tangles and curls that, once fulled just a little from washing, became a mass of shaggy hair similar to the coat of a poorly-groomed wolfhound. ("Fulling" is the locking of individual wool fibers due to friction, which strengthens wool material.) This method would be applicable not only on longhair fabrics but on a woven shaggy fabric as well.

I intend to attempt this latter method on mohair, though I will probably use a moisturizing hair gel or corn syrup instead of honey simply to keep my expenses down. (Honey isn't cheap, I have no idea what the sugar/vinegar ratio would be, and I prefer to use only those products on wool that I would feel safe using on my own hair.) I'll want to raise the nap before I apply any viscous products to it. When raising the nap on wool, you can use a handful of teasels if you wish, but a short wire-hair brush or a pad of Velcro will work just as well. Avoid trying to raise the nap on wet wool, as the fibers are more prone to pull away from the wool completely. Dunlevy states that scholar A.T. Lucas first stated that this method was used at least as far back as the eleventh century and continued into the early twentieth century. Though the technique is quite possibly earlier in origin, this cannot be completely verified. It may be that the hard curls on the surface of the the Mantle of St. Brighid were achieved using another unknown method.

A few final notes on the Shaggy Mantle: My attempts with honey, hair gel and a sugar/vinegar mixture were not overly successful. The hair gel and the honey gave me a good hard finish but didn't survive washing. The sugar and vinegar, which I mixed until I had a sticky concoction, proved too thin to be of much use, though I doubt I had the proportions correct. Be aware that this was attempted on mohair and not pure wool. Wool might take this treatment with much better results. Experiment and let your fellow Gaels know how you fared.

Making Use of the Brat

Few kingdoms in the SCA have the climate of the Isles, so people are not inclined to have wool draped over their shoulders all the time, especially in the summer months. That is understandable. But remember that your brat is your calling card and your identity. Try to keep it handy, draped over one arm or in your chair.

The Ionar (Jacket)

There was until recently a commonly-accepted view that there were two distinct styles of dress in early Gaelic culture. The first was that of the upper classes--the léine and the brat. The second was the lower class wardrobe, consisting of two garments called the *ionar* (eye-nar) and *trius* (trews) or *osain* (au-shin).

The ionar, sometimes spelled "inar", was a jacket--a short coat or tunic. It was likely made of wool, though it may occasionally have been fashioned from leather for martial reasons. Very little is known of this garment and much speculation abounds,

such as that it was associated with the working folk and the military. McClintock is generally credited with this hypothesis, and his reasoning is sound.

A study of sculptures and painted figures reveals a fairly consistent image of the soldier in shorter garments than his nobler companions. Knees are visible below the hemline and sometimes arms are bare or show a distinctive cuff at the elbow. McClintock concluded that the status-concious Irish reserved long garments and rich cloaks for the wealthy while the military and laborers made do with short tunics and trews. This is a good guideline but should not be considered sacrosanct.

Close examination of the Virgin in the *Book of Kells* shows that the pink léine has a garment over it, yet under the brat. (The Virgin's cuffs are not pink and her neckline shows what may be numerous layers.) Dunlevy concluded that this image does indeed show the nobly-painted Virgin wearing an ionar.

details from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: the Virgin's neckline and cuffs

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 291v: St. John

Other images in the *Book of Kells* may indicate the presence of ionars. St. John appears seated in a blue chair, a book in his left hand a quill in his right. His léine skirts are dark, his brat burgundy, but his sleeves are covered by a garment with an almost lavender hue. The *Book of Kells* portrait of St. Matthew shows him dressed in a pink léine over which he wears an open purple coat or robe, a knee length garment that may be an ionar. If so, the ionar was probably accepted by all classes as a basic item of dress, or came to be by the time the *Book of Kells* appeared. Dunlevy gives this definition:

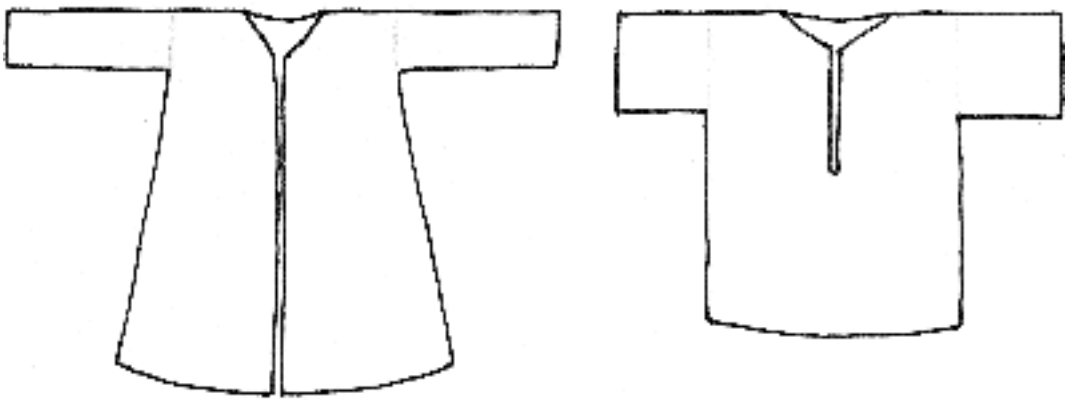
> It was a tunic which was worn by both men and women over the léine but at such a length that both garments were visible. (p.21)

So, in the modern mind, a short "over-tunic". Care must be taken with descriptives like that, as ionar means jacket, which implies occasional outerwear. "Over-tunic" would reduce the léine to an under garment, which it certainly was not. However, thinking of the ionar as a coat or jacket leads people to believe the garment would open in the front.

McClintock thought so, and concluded that the brooches he spotted on soldiers' chests were closures for a jacket.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 28v: St. Matthew

Considering the garment St. Matthew wears in the *Book of Kells*, this seems plausible. So does a simpler, more tunic-like garment that simply slipped over the head like many tunics of the age. The brooches may be closing large neck openings. If it did open in the front, it may have been both belted and brooched closed, or allowed simply to hang open at the neck, like a jerkin. We don't know yet, and may not for some time.



possible ionar

detail from the west face of the Cross of Muiredach: soldier to Christ's left

McClintock went so far as to suggest that this garment may sometimes have been constructed like a small bathrobe or smoking jacket. The only source for this that I can find is a jacket of Norse origin, which was trimmed in faux fur and crossed over the wearer's front like a double-breasted coat. McClintock may have been looking for anything similar in history to describe what could be worn by the soldiers arresting Christ on the Cross of Muiredach. No artwork remains that shows the ionar in that kind of detail. One thing we *can* determine is that ionars had both long sleeves, as on the Virgin, and short sleeves, as on numerous soldiers.

We lack any real hard evidence concerning the ionar, but it appears to have sometimes been a colorful garment. The Virgin's is blue with trim at the cuffs, while a soldier sporting a javelin in the *Book of Kells* wears a green ionar with sleeves that reach to just below the elbow.

Both McClintock and Dunlevy believe it likely the ionar was made of wool and dyed. It probably received decoration befitting the status of the wearer. This is a garment that could be worn alone if the wool is soft, or over a short léine for casual wear. For more formal occasions, it could be heavily decorated and cut with more length, though it would appear to be consistently shorter in length than the léine. The reenactor has lots of room for personal expression with this enigmatic garment, and it provides for experimentation using the decoration techniques described earlier. One suggestion I make is to remember how effective layers can be in keeping warm. Better to have a lightweight wool ionar with a brat over the shoulders even in chilly weather so that you can control your comfort level more easily. Avoid thick wool and friezes for a close-fitting ionar, as they can have you sweating even when snow covers the ground.

details from the *Book of Kells*, folios 7v and 200r: Virgin's cuffs and soldier's jacket

Some try to differentiate between the ionar and the inar, claiming that the ionar was the coat worn over the léine while the inar was a short working jacket worn against the skin. I have found nothing to support this thus far. It appears to me that "ionar" is simply a variant spelling for "inar", and that both words translate as "jacket" (a rather nonspecific word).

As mysterious as the early Irish jacket remains, we know that wearing a jacket was an accepted fashion statement in Ireland and Scotland for centuries. By the time the Tudor Era arrived, the jacket had become the familiar pleat-waisted coat with it's hanging sleeves, its Dark Age forebears forgotten and lost to time.

Trius (Trousers)

Before discussing leg wear in detail, I should first give some justification for the wearing of anything on the legs. It was common for the people of the Gaelic nations to go about barelegged. This was an accepted fashion from the beginning of the SCA timeframe to well after 1600 A.D.--even longer among Highland Scots, as the kilt appeared at the turn of the seventeenth century and has enjoyed lasting popularity. Bare legs appear throughout the Irish *Book of Kells* and the fashion was still common throughout the Gaelic nations four centuries later. The grandson of Harald Hardrata, King Magnus (1073-1103 A.D.), was nicknamed "Barelegs" when he began to go without leg wear after visiting the Hebrides, letting only his tunic cover his nethers. The French historian Guibert of Nogent described Scotsmen traveling France on their way to Jerusalem sometime around 1110 A.D.. In his autobiographical account he wrote, "You may see the Scots. . .barelegged with their shaggy cloaks, a scrip [pouch] hanging down 'Ex Humeris', coming from their marshy homelands." When Mac Roth is charged to describe the forces of Ulster in detail to Fergus (a section of the *Tain bo Cuailnge* that every gaelophile should read) he describes hair, brats, léinte, weapons, footwear and even the shapes of brooches, yet not a single mention of hose, leggings, stockings or trews is uttered by the scout.

Leg wear was certainly used, make no mistake. *Trius* (Irish) or *triubhas* (Scot) are anglicized into "trews", a word that springs from the old French "*trebus*". This makes the word *trius* no older than about 1200 A.D.. The term in use before that was *broc*, meaning "breeches" or " trousers". It is similar enough to *brog* (shoes) that many wonder if it sprang from the need to describe those trousers that reach "to the foot", for some only reached to about the knees. Both "*broc*" and "*brog*" come from the Old Norse "*brok*". Another term found is "*osain*" which seems to be the oldest. Today some reenactors use "*osain*" to refer specifically to trews with stirrup straps under the foot, though Dunlevy makes no real distinction (treating it as just another word for trews). Modern Gaelic speakers generally use "*osain*" to describe stockings.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 200r: soldier's trius

Despite this multilayered linguistic mess, trousers were certainly seen in a variety of forms. Blue knee-length trius appear in the *Book of Kells* on our ionar-wearing soldier with the javelin, while beard-tugging men can be seen in the panels from the canons, also dressed in these short trousers. The *Book of Kells* begins the Gospel of St. Mark with a detailed color plate that depicts a man being devoured by a monster in the upper right hand corner--a man McClintock spotted and highlighted, for he wears long trousers with straps under the feet to keep the legs from riding up.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 130r: trius of man being devoured

It is apparent that the vast majority of those depicted in leg wear aren't noble. Most have no brat, and those that do wear a fairly short one. Many are engaged in the work of underlings or the military. It is easy to say that there is no evidence that the highborn wore trius, but a closer look reveals again the danger of using the terms "always" and "never".

The *Book of Durrow*, written about 650 A.D. at Durrow Abbey near the town of Tullamore, has a carpet page (a page of pure artwork) depicting the Man (the symbol of St. Matthew) in a heavily-detailed and rich brat that reaches below his knees and is covered in intricate weaving and embroidery; a wealthy garment indeed. Yet below the brat the figure wears checkered trius, undermining the hypothesis that only servants wore leg coverings.

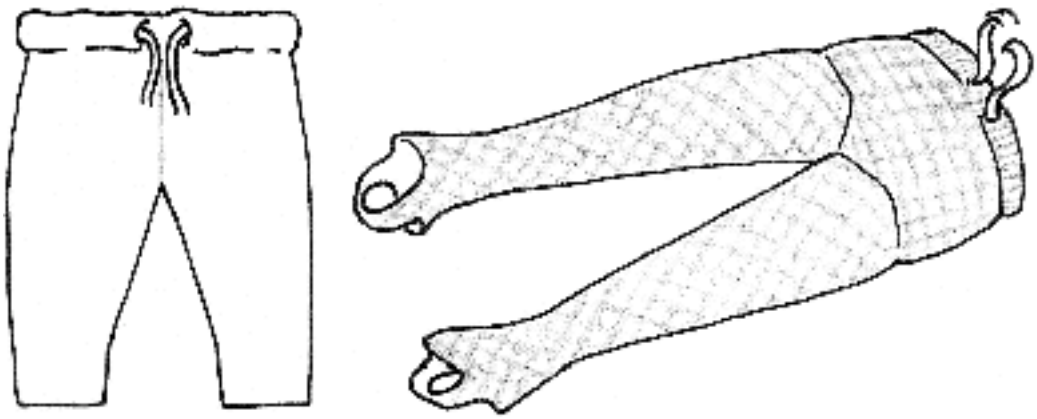
It may very well be that lower classes of men wore trius more often, as they simply had no wish to wear the few longer garments they possessed for fear they might be stained or damaged during their labors. It's possible that all classes wore them for protective reasons on occasion.

detail from *Book of Durrow*, folio 21v: the Man's trius

There is no indication whether women of any station wore leg wear, as even servant girls wore ankle length léinte. If the women of the age did wear trius (say, underneath their léinte), they cannot be seen, they are not referenced, and no evidence has ever been uncovered.

Construction

How these trius, long or short, were constructed is a matter of conjecture. The only trius ever found that date to the medieval timeframe were made in the 1500's. These trius can be used to provide us with an idea of how they may have been constructed centuries earlier. Both pairs were ankle-length. One pair, found in Kilcommon, Ireland, had coverings for the top of the feet like spats and may have sported stirrup straps like those on the aforementioned man being devoured from the Book of Kells. They may have covered the wearer's feet entirely (this is speculation, as the edges of the foot-shaped leg bottoms are frayed), making these trius like a pair of modern hose. The other pair, found near Dungiven, Ireland, definitely had stirrup straps. Both pairs had waistbands that accommodated drawstrings of twisted yarn or leather. This is a feature recorded in 1200 A.D. by Welsh/Norman chronicler Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Topographia Hiberniae*. Trius were almost always made of wool and the legs were cut on the bias to give the legs better stretch and fit (a common technique throughout the Middle Ages).



trius, both short and long with stirrup straps

The longer pair are "shepherd's plaid", and are similar to the truibhas worn by the Man being devoured in the Book of Kells.

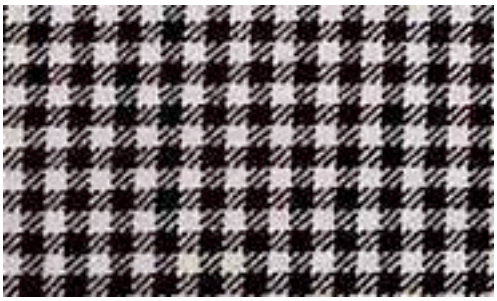
Fabric

Also of note is a description of trius that can be found throughout the centuries. The word "*breacan*" was used to describe anything parti-colored, checkered, speckled or variegated. It was also one of the most common terms used to describe trius. Giraldus described many of the trius he saw as parti-colored. "*Breacan*" or "*bracan*" is still used to describe what we commonly call plaid or tartan. The trius found with the Kilcommon and Dungiven clothes were checkered, as were later trius from Killary, Ireland. Recall that Man, in the *Book of Durrow* from 650 A.D., wears checkered trius. "Plaid" is actually a term for a blanket or rug, something you wrap up in, which is an apt description for some brats, as I mentioned earlier. "Tartan" is French in origin. The original word was "*tiretaine*", referring to a type of cloth (usually a wool/silk blend).

Solid-color trius are seen in the *Book of Kells* and were described by Cambrensis, but should you wish to have the traditional checkered trius, keep a few things in mind. First of all, modern "tartans" are often far too complex and not representative of the checkered wool seen in the medieval timeframe. Even so-called "ancient tartans" can only be dated to the late seventeenth century, well after the SCA period ended. Looking at both the *Book of Durrow* and the Tudor-era trius we have found, simple checks and stripes seem to be the standard. Worn on the bias, they form a distinctive series of subtle diamonds running down each leg.

reproduction of the original Falkirk plaid

Examples of simple checks like this date all the way back to what may be the very first "tartan" in Gael country, the Falkirk plaid. Dating from 325 A.D., this simple brown and tan checked cloth was found as a stopper in a bottle filled with Roman silver coins. The modern Falkirk pattern is nothing like the original, which now sits in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh with the coins it guarded. It is almost exactly what we now call "shepherd's plaid" (what my mother called "kitchen plaid").



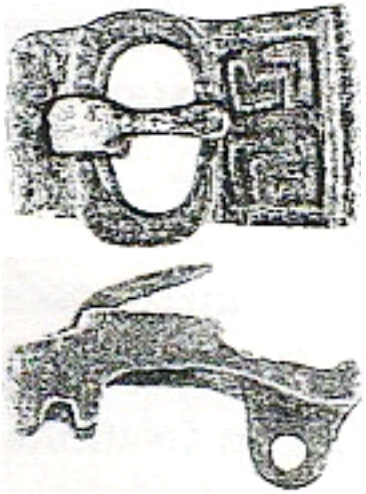
Modern Shepherd Tartan

If you find such a material, chances are it will be black/white, red/white or red/black. Overdying these patterns can help provide you with more options. (You can turn a red/white into a purple/blue, for example.)

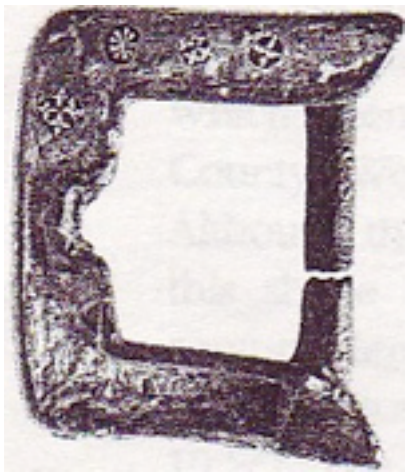
When looking for an appropriate wool for trius, consider the same weaves and weights you would for an ionar or brat. Wool flannels and simple twills of medium weights or lighter are the best. Washing suit wool to remove its modern sheen is also an option.

Crois (Belt)

The girdles and belts of the Gaels were called *crois* (kris), which is still the term used in the Aran Islands. Both leather straps and woven fiber belts were worn. Numerous buckles have been found with leather remnants still clinging to their clasps and rivets. These buckles may also have been used on woven belts, which were likely made--as they are today for the tourist trade in Ireland--by card weaving, though braiding was possible. Certainly naalbinding and sprang were known once the Norse arrived and settled.

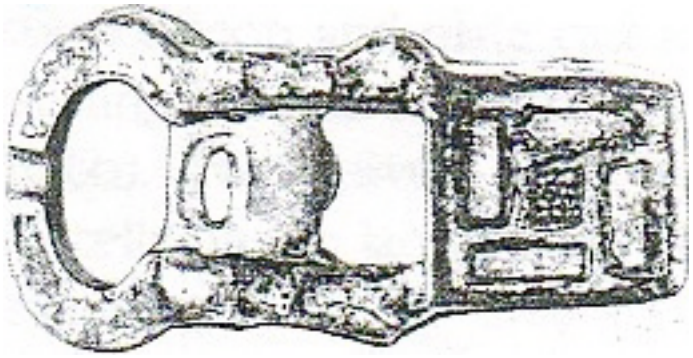


buckle from Co. Roscommon (face and side views)

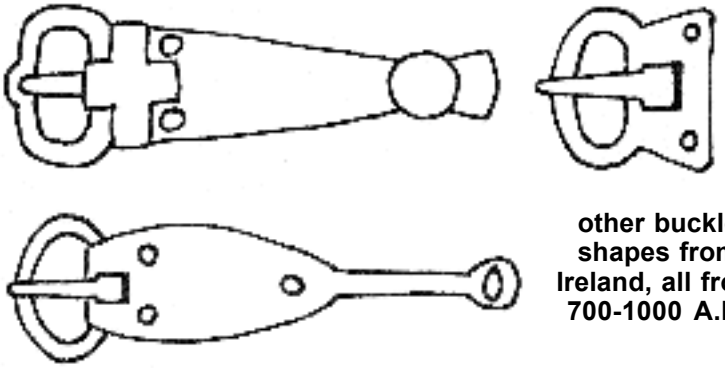


buckle from County Derry

buckle from County Tyrone



buckle from County Westmeath



other buckle shapes from Ireland, all from 700-1000 A.D.

The woven belts today are springy, thick and strong, often colorful and tied with fringed tips left dangling. In the *Tain bo Cuailnge* Mac Roth describes Senchas the orator as wearing a silver belt. This could either be a leather strap belt set with silver facings or, more likely, a silver brocade woven belt. In the same piece Ferdiad is bribed by Queen Maeve with armor and a purple belt, which Cuchulainn later describes as "leaf-like". This would accurately describe the texture, pattern and possible hues of a woven belt.

Brooches

An entire book could be written concerning brooches and still not cover every detail possible, so I will simply discuss the basics to give you a starting point in your studies. There may be nothing more symbolic of Gaelic culture than the brooch. It was accorded special mention in the literature of the time and sometimes treated as the embodiment of the wearer's wealth and station, much like the brat in which it nestled.

straight bone pin, ring pin

Originally the brooch was probably little more than a straight pin made of bone. Examples of this style persisted into the SCA timeframe, often with carved heads and holes through which a securing cord or leather lacing might be threaded.

This eventually developed into the Irish ring brooch or ring pin, a brooch the Norse quickly claimed and made their own. It became quite popular throughout the Isles, showing up even in Jorvik (Norse-occupied York, in northern England). This brooch was usually a long bronze pin with a swiveling ring set in its head that would allow a cord or small chain to be attached. This cord would be pulled to the pin's tip and under it once it was protruding from the fabric, then secured back to the ring, making a loop that kept the cloak from pulling free of the brooch pin (which was likely worn horizontally). In the *Tain bo Cuailnge* Mac Roth describes a warrior called Celtcar mac Uthecar who wears an iron pin in his cloak so immense it reaches from one shoulder to the other.

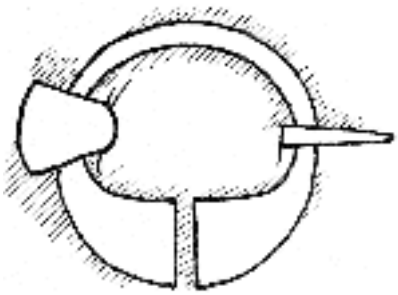
kite brooch

This brooch style and the technique it used inspired a wide variety of brooches. The kite brooch used this technique. Kite brooches were made like ring brooches but had a flat diamond-shaped flap with a usually-decorated face that pivoted on the pin's head. These diamond flaps tended to sport small metal loops on their tips or just behind their tips to accommodate a securing cord. A brooch of this sort is in the oft-mentioned illustration of the Virgin Mary in the *Book of Kells*. The Waterford kite brooch is an extraordinary example of this classic and sadly ignored brooch.

detail from *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: Mary's brooch

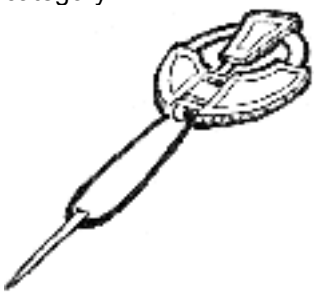
More familiar to fans of medieval jewelry is the penannular brooch. Shaped like the letter "C', a penannular brooch sported a pin that could slide all about the interior of the brooch head and so allow it to be locked into place. This practical style persisted until the Norman Invasion, and numerous examples sit on display in museums. A few examples include the Ballyspellan brooch and the Ballinderry Crannog brooch.

Of particular interest is the coil of wire found on the Ballinderry brooch. Dr. Niamh Whitfield, in her lectures and essays concerning Irish brooches, has proposed that this wire coil may have been pushed though the fabric to further secure the brooch, or that it was perhaps sewn to the garment. You can find her theories concerning the wear of Irish brooches in Irish Art Historical Studies in Honour of Peter Harbison, Colum Hourihane, editor, Four Courts Press, 2004; ISBN 1-85182-847-8.



penannular brooch

Most beautiful and debated of all the brooches is that style generally referred to as “pseudo-penannular brooches”. These are the royal brooches known for their amazing detail and impressive size. The legendary Tara brooch falls into this category.



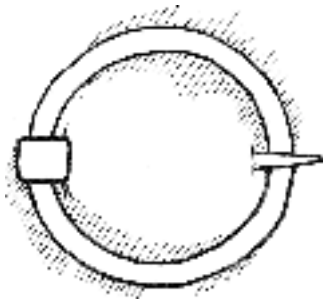
pseudo-penannular brooch

As the ring brooch and the penannular brooch evolved side by side, they eventually began to merge. Ring brooches began to take on the shape of penannulars, including pronounced terminals, the tips of the letter “C” on penannulars, yet they were joined by small panels, many of which were gilt or enameled. This stopped the pin from being passed through the mouth of the head and turned to lock it into place. Pseudo-penannulars began to be designed like ring brooches, to allow small chains or cord to be added. These cords were not haphazardly lashed or tied to the head of the pseudo-penannular, but were instead joined with small hoops cast into the head in the manner of kite brooches. A small hoop can be found at the bottom of the Roscrea brooch behind the lower central panel, as it can on the Ardagh hoard brooch.

The Tara has a hinged joint for its broken braided chain that appears to have been added later. Dr. Whitfield proposes that this chain sported a smaller pin at its end. This pin-tipped chain would have been wrapped several times about the brooch pin and then pushed through the fabric like an embroider’s needle left unattended. Dr. Whitfield also proposes that the twin hoops on the lower edge of the Tara brooch head were intended to provide thread anchors for sewing the brooch directly to the garment. Despite Dr. Niamh Whitfield’s years of experience, I remain undecided concerning this theory and I hope to read more from her in the future. My primary concern is that no evidence is given to support a small pin on the tip of the now-broken chain. (No such feature was found on the brooch chain, and the hoops on the lower edge of the head are evenly spaced and would take a chain or silk cord in the manner of other pseudo-penannulars.) Whitfield’s reasoning is understandable in that the Tara was worn horizontally with the terminals facing down, the pin laying the same direction as the placement of the chain hinge. The Tara brooch is one of the earliest pseudo-penannulars and is considered a transitional piece, gorgeous but experimental when it was first crafted.

Another early experimental brooch is the Hunterston Brooch. Like the Tara, it is a pseudo-penannular brooch. It approaches the problem of its joined terminals using a different method. Instead of requiring chain or cord to secure the pin to the garment, the Hunterston has a removable pin. Once it was removed, fabric would be pulled through the head of the brooch. Then the pin would be pushed through the fabric bulging up through the ring and locked back into place. The Hunterston was also a transitional piece.

Once the Normans had established communities and strongholds in Ireland, the annular brooch was well on its way to becoming the only standard brooch throughout Northern Europe, the Gaelic nations included. Annulars were complete and unbroken (“penannular” meaning “almost a circle”). Annulars came in a variety of shapes and sizes, though none were ever as large as the pseudo-penannulars. Annulars could be circular, of course, but also four-, five-, six- or eight-sided. Some were shaped like flowers or long diamonds. All were essentially open rings or geometric shapes that sported swiveling attached pins. Fabric was pulled through and pushed down on the pin, like in the Hunterston Brooch (though annular-brooch pins were generally not removable). It would be fairly uncommon to see annulars in the timeframe this guide covers. Annular brooches would be the standard afterwards.



annular brooch

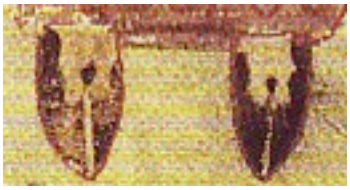
Brog (Shoes)

Brogs--later called “brogues”--are sometimes overlooked or considered secondary to a Gaelic wardrobe due to the widespread belief that Scots, Manx and Irish folk went about barefoot all the time. Though it is true Gaels had a recurrent habit of going about barefoot, brogs were worn with pride and a sense of decorum. Dunlevy paraphrases a quote from the *Rule of Ailbe* of Emly when she writes; “. . .no matter how ascetic a respected person became he should never go barefoot.” (p.20) That being the case, styles of shoes and their construction need to be considered.

In 1956, A.T. Lucas wrote an in-depth article called “Footwear in Ireland”, detailing many styles and patterns of shoes, for the *Journal of the Archaeological Society of County Louth*, Volume 13, No. 4. This work is available through Interlibrary Loan from the Boston College O’Neill Library (appropriately enough). It is a vital resource for any with a serious commitment to period shoemaking for Gaelic cultures, but I defer to the more capable I. Marc Carlson, known in the SCA as Diarmaid O’Dunn, OL. Master Dairmaid’s website is considered by many to be one of the most vital in the SCA. It details his research into various hands-on trades but its best-known section is titled “Footwear of the Middle Ages”.

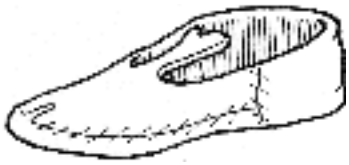
www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM

At the above URL you will find every shoe I will mention, discussed in better detail with patterns included. . .not to mention the immense amount of knowledge Master Diarmaid has amassed in leatherwork and shoemaking. He is, in my humble opinion, a true cordwainer. Each shoe mentioned is well within the timeframe of this guide, yet many were still made and worn well into the latter Middle Ages--a few even to the 20th century. These shoes are distinctive in that they were all made from a single piece of hide or leather, either gathered about the foot for form or cut into more specific shapes to fold over the foot.



Detail from *Book of Kells*, folio 29r: scribe's shoes

The first shoe not only is shown in Dunlevy's Dress in Ireland (p.19) but also appears on the feet of an unnamed blonde scribe wearing a purple, gold-trimmed brat and holding a red book in the *Book of Kells*, folio 29r, *Liber generationis*. This is an elegant slipper, no doubt worn by someone of wealth or importance. It has almost a loafer look, due to the horizontal seam around the front and its decorative tongue. Lucas refers to it in his work as Type 1.



Lucas Type 1

Lucas Type 2

What Lucas called Type 2 is also a slipper, one of many similar shoes found. It has a center seam and a wider, more utilitarian tongue than Type 1. Both Type 1 and 2 are dated to roughly 700-900 A.D. and were just as likely worn by women as men.

Lucas Type 3

The Drumacoon Bog Shoe, Lucas' Type 3, is a shoe that is gathered up with gut, lace, or cord, like many of the shoes found. These "gathered" or "cinched" shoes tended to be made of scraped and air-cured hide, often with the hair left on the exterior. This particular shoe has a single lace that crosses over the top of the foot many times and is then cinched tight to form a solid covering the top of the shoe. Its heel is cinched in the same way. It's worth noting that this particular style shoe has been found in Scotland and the outer isles.

Lucas Type 4

The Ballyhagan Shoe, which Lucas called "Type 4", is made almost exactly as the Drumacoon Bog Shoe, but instead of the lace crossing over the foot to pull the edges of the leather up, the lace in the Ballyhagan runs along the edge of the leather and cinches the shoe into a more open pucker.

A more popular shoe to reenactors is the *cuaran*, which were called "rivelins" in Scotland and are still called "pampooties" today in the Aran Isles in western Ireland. The pattern at Master Diarmaid's website will show how this simple shoe is laced, but for now: this shoe cinches at the toe and leaves lace for tying the shoe to the foot.

cuaran

"ghillies"

Also worth mentioning are "ghillies", the inspiration for today's Irish and Scottish dancing shoes. These may not have been a Gaelic invention but a Roman one, brought into England and up to Alba when Hadrian went north. These shoes are a common sight at SCA events and medieval fairs. They have a sometimes stiff sole from which spread 8-10 strips of leather, all of which have lace holes at their tips. When cinched up, these strips of leather come over the foot like fingers, tip to tip. Roman versions sported hobnails in the sole for better protection from rough ground. I remain uncertain as to whether or not this shoe saw widespread use in the Early Middle Ages.

One final option for the reenactor is the Norse influence in the Islands. Once the Northmen began to settle in Eastern Scotland, the coasts of Ireland and the entire Isle of Man, they traded with and married the locals and claimed many native styles for themselves, while giving the natives inspiration for new things. Norse footwear shouldn't be discarded as an option for anyone looking into the Viking Age, especially shoes like the Coppergate, which has been found in variation throughout the digs in York, England.

the Coppergate shoe

For the Ladies

At first glance, Gaelic dress doesn't appear to be very gender specific, but a closer examination reveals that women did have a few differences in their wardrobe. It would seem that women wore almost every garment men did. (The one exception is the trius.) They wore léinte, yet they seem to have consistently worn them to the ankles and not higher. They belted their clothes and wore brats. Occasionally their clothes are described as more form-fitting, or "tight", which may be an indication of an unknown form of cinching in the léine or simply quality tailoring. It may be that the ionar, if worn, was also longer on women.

One description of a woman--a rather extraordinary woman at that--appears in the *Tain bo Cuailnge*. The king Eochaid Feidlech was wandering and met her in a glen. . .

> A beautiful purple cloak she had, and silver fringe to it, and a gold brooch, and she had on her a léine of green silk with a long hood [remember that this may be more like a draping collar and not a true hood] embroidered with red gold, and wonderful clasps of gold and silver on her breasts and shoulders. The sunlight was falling on her so that the gold and green silk were shining out. Two plaits of hair she had, four locks in each plait, and a bead at the point of every lock, and the color of her hair was like yellow flags of satin. . .

Of note in this description is that, despite the otherworldly nature of this lady, her hair is uncovered, indicating she was unmarried. Married women wore their hair covered by a *caille* (caul) which was usually made of linen or silk. Its early shape is debated, though likely it was a long rectangle of material that lay over the head. It would have probably reached from above the eyebrows down to below the shoulders. Its tail end may have been draped under the chin and over the opposite shoulder. It may also have been held in place with a thin circlet. It was probably dyed and given decoration with embroidery, though some may have been plain linen.

Also, unbound hair is rarely mentioned in early Irish literature. Hair is described either merely by its color, or by describing the plaits and braids as well as its hue. (This applied to men as well as women.)

Hair was groomed with dedication and was a source of pride. To this end most women had on their persons a comb, usually kept in a purse or pouch intended just for its transport. These were called *ciorbholg* (keer-wolg), based on "*cior*" for comb and "*bolg*" for bag. We have no idea how these were made. They may have been small drawstring leather and cloth pouches or flat purses with a flap. Either way, ladies, make sure your man has one, for this item was considered essential for both men and women (though women are mentioned with them more often). Another item of interest is a *scathan* (ska-han)--a mirror. From the Bronze Age to the early Middle Ages these were usually made of highly polished silver or bronze, small oval affairs with short handles. Darkened glass mirrors in lead tin cases of about 4 inches in diameter were to be seen in northern Europe but wouldn't be common until well after the middle of the thirteenth century and not valid for the timeframe of this guide.

We do know that cheeks and lips were likely blushed with elderberry juices. Nails were "crimsoned", as Deidru describes in her lament from the *Tain*, probably with the elderberry as well (though animal blood and alder extract may have been used). Eye lining may not have been accepted or well known. (The Culdee monks of Ireland darkened their eyelids in the old Coptic fashion, and the Irish apparently found this very odd.) Yet women did darken their eyebrows and various dark berries grow in the region to accommodate the fashion. Perfumes were known to these cultures. Steeping flowers and spices in oil or wine provides a wide range of scents, which might have not only been applied to skin but combed into hair, dabbed onto clothing, and even added to food, as it was edible.

Jewelry of every sort was worn by both sexes. Brooches certainly received comment, no matter the wearer's gender. Rings and necklaces are mentioned most often after brooches when women are described, with bracelets, bells and beads receiving some comment as well. Though men wore the same accessories, they are not given the same amount of attention in the literature. Pagan extravagance may have toned down with the arrival of Christianity but it certainly remained a part of Gaelic fashion. Jet, amber, glass, gold, silver, bronze and enamels were still very popular as personal adornment when the Normans arrived.

Women in these cultures retained far more rights and privileges in society than their neighbors. Brehon Law, the ancient legal system that was embraced by the Gaelic church despite its pagan origins, protected women for centuries and was still honored despite the rise of English rule in Ireland and Scotland. They were given status and were allowed broad property and marriage rights. A clue to their position in society can be found in what is commonly called "the Grave of the Pagan Lady" in Peel, St. Patrick's Isle, in Man. This woman was buried with a pagan husband of presumably Scandinavian ancestry but with a cooking spit--a symbol of domestic authority not encountered in Norse culture. The woman may not have been pagan at all, but merely married to a pagan man. Though her burial style honors him, she appears to have been wearing native dress and not Norse fashions. This shows the unusual independence of women in Gaelic culture. It also makes a strong argument for the retention of Gaelic dress despite outside influences and foreign settlements.

Final Notes

There is a large amount of debate and disagreement on the subject of Gaelic dress, reinforced by strong emotional attachment or misinformation from those claiming authority. Certain misconceptions have become accepted simply because they have been repeated by others for so long that the idea of questioning them seems fruitless. Others seem plausible until examined closely, so that what was considered confirmed is reduced to only one of several possibilities. Dunlevy, McClintock and those that follow in their footsteps are collectors of fragmentary information trying to construct a complete picture for our benefit. I am not an authority in any sense of the word. I am a student eternal. The information I have presented should be taken with caution and with the understanding that more information awaits those who wish to continue researching this frustrating but fascinating topic.

The Gallery

By Brehon Law, the number of colors these people wore were determined by their station and status. This a difficult issue for the SCA, for sources disagree as to what colors they wore and who in the SCA is entitled to wear what. This is a personal decision you have to make for yourself. As for myself, I felt that as we are all gentry in the Society we are allowed at least four. Once you have shown yourself a champion, artist, administrator or anything else in the eyes of others, I see no issue with wearing five. I reserve six for the peerage in my own mind, and seven only for landed nobility and the royals.

The Soldiers

Here on the left you see my attempt at the javelin-and-buckler-bearing soldier from the *Book of Kells*. He wears a soft wool ionar with baggy sleeves to just below the elbow. It has a deep neckline that he has closed with a ring brooch. I have shown him barefoot. His trius are a solid color and reach to just below the knees.

His companion (on the right, with the spear and long moustache) wears a long-sleeved ionar over a short, simple léine. His trius are checkered and have stirrup straps. His shoes are cuarans. Both men wear simple thin leather belts that are as likely to be tied as buckled.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 200r: soldier with javelin

The Fey Maiden and the Virgin

The woman on the left is an image inspired by the other-wordly woman mentioned from the *Tain*. Her léine is clasped at the shoulders with small penannular brooches and the long shawl-like collar is visible hanging down her back. Her heavily fringed brat is draped over her arm so that her garments are visible. I have given her a thick woven belt that might have sported metal threads, considering her nature. Her clothes represent a style that was probably fading away, if the *Book of Kells* is a guide, though it may have survived another century or two as summer wear for both men and women. It shows a certain amount of Mediterranean influence. It is presumably gone when the Normans arrive, for no such clothing is described by Giraldus.

detail from the *Book of Kells*, folio 7v: Virgin and Child

Mary, if allowed to stand and let Joseph hold the baby awhile, may look like the woman on the right. As pictured in the *Book of Kells*, she wears a long-sleeved léine under a brat that is closed with a kite brooch. A hood, most likely from her léine, covers her head and over that she wears a caille, its tail tucked under her chin and over her shoulder. Based on Dunlevy's conclusions, I have put a long-sleeved ionar on her, a long one with an open front similar to the garment St. Matthew wears in the *Book of Kells*. Her belt, or *crios*, is simple and cardwoven. Though she is pictured barefoot in the original, I have given her footwear, the Lucas Type 2 slippers. Mary's outfit is most likely the accepted women's wear of the timeframe for this guide, whether or not an ionar is included.

The Noblemen

Here is a son and his father, wearing clothing just as likely seen on women.

The younger man wears a short-sleeved léine, with silk trim, to his knees. He wears no trius but does wear the Lucas Type 1 shoes. His striped brat is over his shoulder, also decorated with embroidered edges. His belt is fine leather with a bronze buckle.

His bearded father, on the right, is more likely to take a chill. He wears a long-sleeved léine, with the skirt below his knees, which is also decorated. He wears trius of a solid hue and has an old pair of Lucas Type 4 shoes on his feet. His brat is heavily fringed and held at his chest by a pseudo-penannular. His belt is a multicolored woven crios.

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Corpus of Electronic Texts: ***Lebor na hUidre* (in original Irish)**	www.ucc.ie/celt/online/G301900/
I. Marc Carlson's "Footwear of the Middle Ages"	www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM
Wikipedia: Gallery of Images from the Book of Kells	en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallery_of_Book_of_Kells_pages

Additional Information

Historical Needlework Resources — medieval.webcon.net.au/index.html
information on which stitches were used in which centuries and cultures, and how the mentioned stitches are done

STITCH with the Embroiderer's Guild site — www.embroiderersguild.com
embroidery "how to's"

"The Ancient Craft of Tablet Weaving: Getting Started" — www.shelaghlewins.com
introduction to tablet weaving for the absolute beginner (using tools you can make out of a cereal box)

The West Kingdom Needleworkers' Guild: Articles — www.bayrose.org/wkneedle/articles.html
information on period embroidery stitches and appliqué techniques

Weavershand — weavershand.com
galleries showing tabletwoven bands, links to instructions for tablet weaving, and other related materials

Supplies

Dharma Trading Company — www.dharmatrading.com
good quality dye, other dyeing supplies, and information on fabric and garment dyeing, 100% silk yardage

Fabrics-Store.Com — fabrics-store.com
100% linen yardage

Unicorn Limited — www.scotpress.com
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