

# Ode to the Humble Sock

## Or Knitted Elizabethan Stockings

by Lucia de Moranza

For nearly as long as there have been records of what people wore, there has been mention and examples of ways to cover their feet, both for warmth and protection. From felt to naalbinding through woven and sewn hose right up to knitted silk stockings, the humble sock has a long history. The first mention of what we would recognize as a sock comes in the 8th century BC by the Greek poet Hesiod in his poem "Works and Days." (Grass, p74) Hesiod advises that when the cold weather comes, one should "Put on your feet stout shoes, close fitting made of the hide of a slaughtered ox, and let them be thickly lined with piloi." This pilos (pl. piloi) is generally considered to be an inner foot covering, or a kind of sock cushioning the insides of their boots with felt, likely of matted animal hair. (Grass p75) From that point, footwear moved along in fits and starts through leg wrappings (fascia, fasciae, pl) with the Romans, to the Gauls who were wrapping cloth or leather around their breeches in about 50 BC towards the more familiar pull on covering called Udo (udones, pl.) in the first century AD. (Bush pg 11). These cut and sewn udones pop up in a great many places, usually from woolen or silk material, with a collection of names for the next thousand years or so.

Many early fragments originally attributed to knitting were later determined to be naalbinding (Rutt p28). There is no evidence that the socks found in Egypt during the later Roman period (4th or 5th century) were made using any techniques other than naalbinding. (Rutt p32) The earliest true hand knitting currently known to us comes from Islamic Egypt and includes socks dating from the 12th century. (Rutt p35). In Europe, early information about a Parisian knitters' guild dates back to 1268, and knitted gaiters appear in inventories dating to 1320. (Turnau p21) The popularity of knitted hose and stockings continued to rise through the centuries, until hand knit was slowly replaced with machine knit early in the 17th century.

While extant silk stockings are relatively common (in the context of 500 yr old socks at least), there are very few examples of extant woolen ones. Wool stockings are mentioned frequently in inventories and letters, so their existence is well documented, but they are rarely found. (Thirsk p54) Most stockings are found in tombs and burials of nobility and royalty, who are not about to get buried in their warm woolies, but rather their ultra fancy and fashionable silk stockings. Wool also has a tendency towards getting worn out, reused, passed on and even if left to potentially wait 500 years for modern knitters to look at, the moths are not that patient.

There was, however, a find in 1960 in Carnamoyle, Ireland of a woman in a bog who is estimated to have been from the late 16th or early 17th century. Amongst her clothing was a pair of hand knit woolen stockings, albeit footless. (Dunlevy p71 and Figure 1) Lady Angharad Rhos ferch Rhain has made an excellent study of these stockings (see link in bibliography) and I have referred to her close examination often in my choices and decisions about my own stockings. While her examination is of an Irish find, I am willing to make the generalization that feet are not so different between England and Ireland (or Sweden for that matter) and extrapolate that they are a reasonable guess for English stockings as well.

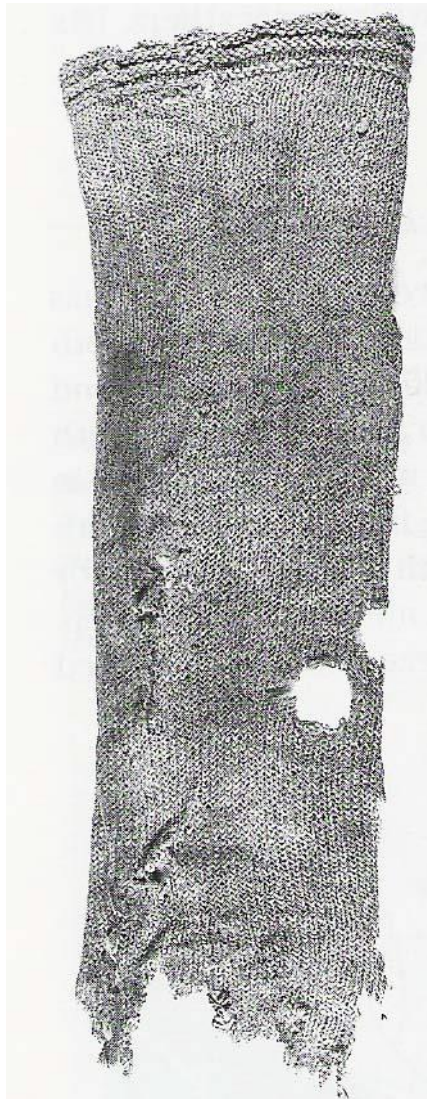


Figure 1 Carnamoyle stocking (Dunlevy fig 60a)

Most silk stockings were knit at what would be considered a very fine gauge to modern knitters. A pair of silk stockings for Gustavus Adolphus in 1617 was detailed to have 10 stitches per cm (25.5 stitches to an inch). (Ekstrand p170) There are, however, very few wool stockings to examine for their gauge. One is a sleeve or stocking leg from the ship the Mary Rose which sank in 1545, knit up in heavy black wool at 12 stitches to 2 inches (6 stitches to an inch). (Rutt p 63) We do have knitted caps, however, and those tend to be in the 24 - 28 stitches to 10 cm (6 - 7 stitches to the inch) range as well, making it a reasonable guess for wool stockings. (Rutt p59).

I decided to knit up a prototype stocking using a typical modern sock gauge (8 stitches per inch) which fits reasonably with other extant woolens to begin to examine Elizabethan woolen stockings. This is not a replica of a specific extant piece, but rather an interpretation of the style that would could have been done at the time that might be consistent with something the middle and lower classes might wear.

I chose a lightly spun 2 ply fingering weight 100% wool yarn. The upper classes and nobility delighted in silk stockings, but there was a fine trade in woolen stockings as well, no doubt for warmth as well as cost and availability. While the yarn I

chose is something I am capable of spinning myself, in the interest of time, I purchased commercially available yarn. More often, it would have been dyed in the fleece, or at least in the yarn, but a light colour of yarn is easier to see the stitches in, and so I chose to leave it the natural cream colour for the ease of judging and because I could not decide what colour I wanted. To get my desired gauge, I used wooden 2.5 mm double pointed needles.

I decided that I wished to have a stocking that came just to my knee, as women's stockings tended not to go over the knee, as is illustrated in both the Carnamoyle stocking and Eleanora of Toledo's stockings. It would need a small tab to fold over a garter and then shaped down to the ankle but otherwise plain leg. My own legs are quite solid, and I decided that I did not need a second taper above the calf muscle to my knee. Extant stockings begin with a section of garter stitch and stockingette stitch welts or stripes, to keep the sock from rolling, as plain stockingette tends to. On the Carnamoyle stocking this band was three rounds of purl, two of knit, two of purl, one of knit and finally one round of purl. I fully intended to replicate that, and utterly forgot when I was knitting and made mine 10 rows of garter stitch (knit and purl alternate

rows in the round). After the tab, I moved to stockingette (knit every round) for the plain section that extends 6 ¾ inches, about to the base of my calf muscle. From that point there are paired decreases around a centre stitch along the back of the leg down to the ankle. The style of paired decreases around a back 'seam' is quite common in silk stockings and shows up in the Carnamoyle stocking as well (Figure 2). While many extant examples include a patterned section at the ankle, I chose to leave mine plain with the thought of making a lower class stocking rather than something fancier.

There are few stockings with good foot and heel sections, the woolen Carnamoyle stockings do not include them, nor does the woolen piece from the Mary Rose. There are, however, plenty of silk stockings with ankles and heels to give us an idea on what style might have been used. There is also the first written knitting pattern, which while slightly out of our period (1655) gives 'The order how to knit a hose'. While it is a terrible pattern by modern standards, containing errors, random punctuation and terminology and missing the toe entirely, it does show a few things. There is a heel flap (about half the stitches worked back and forth on two needles). The heel flap is decreased to give it a bit of shaping around the heel, and then it is bound off using a three needle bind off, which produces a seam at the bottom of the heel. (Rutt p 241) This is, to my reading, fairly well identical to the shaped common heel in Bush's Folk socks (p 59.) I used that in my socks, with one change. I have extremely sensitive feet and chose to graft my

stitches closed to remove the seam. This is entirely a personal choice to make my socks better able to be worn by me, seams are everywhere in period sock knitting. (Figure 3) The pattern goes on to explain that one should pick up stitches and knit in the round again, decreasing at either side down to what is the original number of stitches again, just like a modern pattern.

The foot is knit plain down to where the toe shaping needs to start, generally a couple of inches



Figure 2 Close up of back seam of Carnamoyle stocking



Figure 3 Sole of Johan III's stocking (Ekstrand fig 4)

from the end of the sock. We have no woolen examples of the toe shaping, but a fair number of examples of silk socks. The socks of Johan III of Sweden are quite clearly a wedge shaped toe where the stitches on either side of the foot are decreased down in a triangular shape until there's few enough to call it done and





then they are sewn shut. (Figure 3) The stockings of Eleanora of Toledo in 1562, however, appear to have a round toe. (Figure 4) The Eleanora stockings are delightfully and deliciously patterned and sit upon my eventual to-do list, but for this project where I aimed for a plain sock, I did not draw upon them too heavily. However, in a token nod to a beautiful sock, I chose to use a round toe for my sock (Bush p 67)

**Figure 4 Eleanora of Toledo's stockings, 1562**

All in all, I have achieved a perfectly wearable stocking. It is nothing fancy, it is not overly exciting, it is warm and functional, which was precisely my intent. In my next pair, however,

there are a few things I would do differently. I'd remember to use the more period stripes of garter stitch at the top, however, I might go so far as to add a few more to give a bit more of a fold over, a personal preference I dare say. I also plan for my next pair to be out of silk, or at least a silk blend as these will be quite warm and not well suited to summer, or overly warm indoor events. I did start another wool pair at something that starts to approximate the gauge from silk, but after getting a short way into them, I decided that if I was trying to replicate silk, I should just use silk. Now I just need to finish the second sock.

## Bibliography

### Books and Articles:

- Bush, Nancy. *Folk Socks*. Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2011.
- Dunlevy, Mairead. *Dress in Ireland*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1989.
- Ekstrand, Gudren. "Some Early Silk Stockings in Sweden." *Textile History*, 13(2) p 165-182, 1982.
- Grass, Milton N. *History of Hosiery*. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1955.
- Rutt, Richard. *History of Hand Knitting*. Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1987.
- Thirsk, Joan. "The Fantastical Folly of Fashion: the English Stocking Knitting Industry, 1500 – 1700" *Textile History and Economic History*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1973.
- Turnau, Irena. *History of Knitting before Mass Production*. Warszawa: Instytut Historii Kultury Materialnej, 1991.

### SCA articles:

- The Carnamoyle Stockings: A Late 16th Century Textile Mystery by Lady Angharad Rhos ferch Rhian (Allison Sarnoff)
- [http://scanorthernlights.org/results/2006/RP-Carnamoyle\\_Sockings-LadyAngharad.pdf](http://scanorthernlights.org/results/2006/RP-Carnamoyle_Sockings-LadyAngharad.pdf)