

On the Open-Fronted Apron-Dress, Pinned Underneath the Bust, and the Evidence from Birka.

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This really is a table, with some notes for context, rather than a fully fleshed-out article. Primarily this has been put together to better explain the evidence (or, more precisely, the *lack* of evidence) for an interpretation of Viking Age dress that has been gaining in popularity over the last few years; an open-fronted 'apron-dress' with a trefoil brooch pinning the sides together underneath the bust. (There are also variations where the trefoil brooch pins the sides together at the top of the dress (Der Internetversand Reenactors.de, 2011), or a tie is added under the bust for the same effect (Hanson, 2002).) Photographs of four variations in this general style are on page 2.

The earliest references I can find to anyone wearing this reconstruction is by Magnunnr Hringdottir, who dubbed it the Unnarwrap (*Viking Wannabe* # 384, 2006), and may have been wearing it since 2003, with subsequent modifications (Artisan's Showcase, 2003).

I am a firm believer in giving people information so they can make their own decisions. The original seed of inspiration, for the open-fronted dress, originated with Flemming Bau (1981). Bau thought that the way that Inga Hägg (1974) had interpreted the archaeological finds at Birka (dated to the 9-10th centuries in Sweden) had not taken into account depictions of women in contemporary artwork. Hägg had concluded the apron-dress was usually a closed garment, and multiple loops found around the brooch pins were indicative of straps for holding tools, or the wearing of multiple apron-dresses at once (1974). Bau, in contrast, proposed that the dress was open in the front, and the multiple loops found around the brooch pins could be explained as tool straps, or for suspending a narrow panel across the opening, or a train worn over the shoulders and back (1981).

In *Kvinnodräkten i Birka*, only 100 of the female graves had enough textile preserved that they could be studied (Hägg 1974; 106), and of those 100 only 48 graves had enough fabric from the dress-loops preserved so that “a strap combination can be determined with reasonable certainty” (Bau, 1981; 17-19). Of those 48 graves, only 24 were interpreted as being an open-fronted dress, without a hanging panel at the front or the back. See page 4 for an excerpt of Bau's data. The lack of a front panel is important, as a large part of the appeal of this dress-style lies with displaying more jewellery, as well as it being form-fitting.

Hägg only could identify 6 graves which included both an apron dress, and evidence for some sort of outer garment (1974; 120), of which only 3 were mentioned by Bau. Two of these graves, Bj 465 and 838, have been interpreted by Bau as having an open dress, and a panel worn over the top (Bau 1981; 17-18). Only one grave appears on Bau's list, without a narrow front panel: Bj 839.

Hägg interprets this grave as containing a smooth linen underdress, an apron dress, a coat, and a possible overtunic (*ibid.*). The trefoil brooch found in this grave was found with linen or hemp loops around its pin (Hägg 1974; 67), which matches the bast-fibre fabric loops found around the pin of the paired brooches (Bau, 1981; 17). The question for the reader, then, is if this is good enough evidence to justify the reconstruction.

My personal inclination is to say no. Only 1% of the graves that could be analysed at Birka had the *perfect* combination of a single pair of loops in the bottom hinge of the brooch, and a trefoil brooch. Meanwhile, “almost 25”, or a quarter of these graves contained wool that is believed to have come from the closed front of an apron dress (Hägg, 2009).



Above: An interpretation of Bau's open-fronted apron dress. (Half-triangular gores were added to the front edge so it hangs better on a human figure.)

Above: One of the ways to deal with the dress sliding around, is to add ties under the waist.

Above: An "Unnarwrap"-style dress, with loops for the trefoil brooch-pin underneath the bust.

Above: An apparent modification of the "Unnarwrap", where the trefoil brooch is worn at the same height as the oval brooches, and is often covered by a narrow apron.

A further issue, unaddressed by Bau, is one of modesty. 52 of the graves from Birka contained fragments of linen that are believed to have come from an underdress (Hägg 1974; 12) and a small number of these women in the 10th century wore a small brooch – often round or penannular- that is believed to have fastened a long keyhole neckline (Hägg, 1974;19). As the 19th century archaeologists had recorded the position of metal in the graves, we know that this brooch could be found at two locations: if an apron-dress was worn, the shift brooch was found at the throat. If an apron-dress was not worn, then the brooch closed the slit was worn lower on the chest (Hägg, 1974;19). If an open-fronted dress was the norm, then why only close the neck at the top of the slit, when there is a chance that your shift may gape open and let the cold air in? The logical conclusion seems to be that the apron dress was closed in front, and so the remainder of the keyhole slit would be covered by fabric. However, this is not to say that all women dressed identically, and all women had long keyhole necklines.

References:

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(Please Note: I have not included information on tool straps, which is why some of the numbers don't match.)

Grave number Bj.	Preserved dress-straps and tool-straps				Re-interpretation and fitting of the evidence.				Grave contained an outer garment (Hägg, 1974)	
	Oval brooch I		Oval brooch II		Strap combination	Loops added to Brooch I	Loops added to Brooch II	Costume -form		
	Upper loop	Lower loop	Upper loop	Lower loop						
485	1 FH?	-	1 FH	2 FH	1:1 or 1:2	0:1 or 0:2	0:0 or 0:0	A or B	-	
550	1 FH	1 FH, 1 S	1 FH	1 FH, 1 S	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
573	1-2 FH	2 FH	1 FH	1 FH	1:1 or 2:1	0:0 or 0:0	0:0 or 1:0	A or D	-	
619	-	2 FH	1 FH	2 FH	1:1	1:0	0:0	A	-	
645	1 FH	1 FH	1 FH?	2 FH	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
660	1-2 FH	1 FH	1 FH	2-3 FH	1:1 or 2:1	0:0 or 0:0	0:0 or 1:0	A or D	-	
703 B	1 FH	1 FH	1 FH	1 FH	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
711 B	1 FH?	-	1 FH	1 FH	1:1	0:1	0:0	A	-	
739	1 FH	1 FH, 1 S	1 FH	1 FH, 1 S	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
757	1 FH?	1FH, 1S	-	1 FH, 1 S	1:1	0:0	1:0	A	-	
791	1-2 FH	1 FH?	1 FH	2 FH	1:1 or 2:1	0:0 or 0:0	0:0 or 1:0	A or D	-	
823 B	1 FH	1 FH?	1 FH	1 FH	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
839	1 FH?	1 FH?	1 FH?	2 FH, 1S	1:1 or 1:2	0:0 or 0:1	0:0 or 0:0	A or B ▶	"Unpleated shift... apron dress... tunic(?) and coat" p. 120 Trefoil brooch had linen loops preserved around it's pin. p. 67	
849	--	2 FH 1 S	1 FH?	1 FH, 1 S	1:1 or 1:2	1:0 or 1:0	0:0 or 0:0	A or B		
857	--	2 FH?	1 FH	1-2 FH	1:1	1:0	0:0	A		
865	1 FH	1 FH	1 FH	1 FH	1:1	0:0	0:0	A		
963	1 FH	1 FH	--	--	1:1	0:0	1:1	A	-	
964	1 FH	1-2 FH		1 FH	1:1	0:0	0:0	A	-	
966	1 FH	1 FH	?	1 FH				A	-	
973	1 W	1 W, 1 FH		1 --				A	-	
1062								A	-	
1084								A	-	
1090								A	-	
1888 N								A	-	
Total:	24 graves interpreted as 1:1 loops									
	1 grave with 1:1 loops and a 'mantle' brooch									

Above: The graves listed in Bau (1981; 17-18) which were reconstructed as having only single pairs of loops preserved around the brooch-pin. Of these 24 graves, only one appears to have included a trefoil brooch, which is a distinctive feature of the "Unnarwrap" interpretation.