

Bags, Packs, and Purses: An Overview of the Pouch in Period

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Purses, pouches and the like are a wonderful way to put a finishing touch on your persona, and one that many times gets overlooked. They can tell a story about your persona; where you come from, where you've been, your status, and even what profession you may have for yourself. So how do you go about finding what fits your persona, especially if existing information is hard to find? In this class we'll cover a number of different sources you can use to help you find your perfectly period pouch.

So where should we begin? I'll present this overview into three parts; early, middle, and late periods. While these dates aren't set in stone, I've split them up in this fashion to illustrate the change in mediums at different points in time. While some mediums will continue through these different periods, it's interesting to note how some will fade into the background while others become more prominent, just as any change in fashion occurs.

Early Period (1st Century A.D. - 9th) Medium: Leather / Shapes: Rectangular variants

In *Purse in Pieces*, Olaf Goubitz cites that all recovered leather items from Roman times up to the 18th century were tanned by vegetable products and unless otherwise stated were made from cowhide. This does not rule out the possibility of other types of leather being used. A reproduction of the Comacchio bag from the 1st century does not state exactly what type of leather was used, only its thickness of 1mm. Other possible leather types could include sheep as well as goat depending on the culture and region. Many of these finds are fairly plain with a few minor decorative details such as dyeing, contrasting colored stitching, and simple tooling. Drawstrings and ties are common throughout this timeframe. Towards the latter end of this period, styles and decorations become more varied and elaborate with finds containing metallic inlays or fittings, and enameling as well as combinations of organic materials found in the grave goods of rich and powerful people. Though these finds are rare, it does show the beginning of a shift into finer craftsmanship, as well as a range of materials incorporated.



From left to right: A reproduction of the Comacchio bag found off the coast of Italy dated to the 1st C. A.D., A Frankish leather bag with silver fittings, dated 5th C., the purse lid found in the Sutton Hoo burial, 7th C., a partially reconstructed purse of bronze and squirrel fur, Viking age.

Middle Ages (8th C.- 13th C.) Medium: Textiles; Silk, Wool

While leather pouches and purses are still being made during this time frame, some of the more famous examples being the Birka wallet and their tarsoly counterparts, for instance, there appears to be a shift towards textile bags, as well as an increase in embroidery as decoration. Reliquary bags begin making their appearance, as well as the emergence of the distinct trapezoidal shaped purse. This embroidery can be either decorative, heraldic, or entire scenes. Evidence for knitted bags as well as textile bags incorporating metallic accents are also found within this period. A find from China yielded an intact felted wool purse, and a fully intact purse made of fish leather was found in central Asia. Towards the end of the 12th century "Pilgrim bags" begin to appear in manuscripts and other artwork in various forms.



From left to right: A felted wool purse from the Tang Dynasty dated 8th-9th C., a fish skin purse found in Central Asia dated between 7th-14th C., a fragment of a relic bag of linen gauze embroidered with silk from Germany, 13th C., and a seal-bag with English heraldry dated to about 1280.

Later Period (13th -17th) Medium: Leather, Textile, Metal

During this period you will find a re-emergence of leather purses, as well as hardened leather cases for different personal items such as the penner made by the process of cuir bouilli technique or “water-hardening” of leather. There is an increase in tooled and decorated leather with intricate designs and sometimes metal mounts and accents. Textile purses with metal frames are also found in this period as well as separate “pockets” are introduced. Reliquary bags and embroidered ones such as the German “brick-stitch” purses can be traced to the 14th C. A waisted bag often referred to as a shepherd’s budget appears in various artwork as early as the 13th C. in the Maciejowski bible and throughout the period until the late 16th C. The pilgrim bag can still be found well into the early to mid 16th C. An extant of a knitted pocket can be found dated from the 16th Spain. Another interesting feature found during this time frame is purses and pouches begin to have additional pockets and compartments, some crafting for specific purposes. This goes to show that during this later period there are a variety of styles and types to choose from, even more so depending on the origin and experiences that helped shape your persona.



From left to right: A metal frame dated 14th-15th C on display in London, a dog dressed as a pilgrim from the Smithfield Decretals; late 13th-1st quarter 14th C, A girdle purse dated 1425-1525 from the Netherlands, and a handled bag or “money-changer’s” bag, 16th C. Germany.

Sources for Inspiration

Pinterest

Pinterest is amazing for so many things, and period research is but one of them. The SCA has their own series of boards and is a great place to get started on your search. Keep in mind that some pins may lead to dead ends, or more ‘historical fantasy’ interpretations, but also back to their original sources at museums or exhibits. I’ve found that once a pin has led me back to a museum, I’m able to explore similar listings much easier within their database.

Museums

Museums contain a wealth of information that can be found alongside extants in different collections. Whether you can visit them in person or online, you'll be able to explore a variety of time periods, cultures and mediums to help narrow down the search for your persona. Museums like the Met in New York, the Victoria-Albert in London are some of the more well-known museums out there, but don't forget to check your local museums too! There are amazing exhibits that travel the country and to have a chance to see them in person before their return to their rightful origin is well worth it. Even if it's not your particular field of interest, I highly encourage you to take pictures (when allowed) and use the power of social media to share it. You never know who you could help out with their research by doing so!

Paintings and Illuminations

Paintings are a critical source for research when it comes to garb, so why not for purses or pouches? They capture much of day to day life and show it in an amazing amount of detail centuries later. Illustrated collections like the Book of Hours or even woodcuts can also provide you with additional sources from which to draw inspiration from. Be mindful to double check any illustrations that may have been done after the fact (Victorian artists are responsible for the horned viking helmets, after all!)

Trade Routes

Merchants returning from abroad could very well have brought such items with them. Grave finds among Vikings have placed special items such as coins, exotic beads, etc to places of origin previously not known to have been visited by them. Nothing's to say they couldn't have found a handy pouch or purse and brought it back with them.

Fashion Influences

Just like today, different cultures can influence fashion and style. France of course, is just one of these many instances, but don't forget that many times royalty and nobility can also have a hand in what's popular and what falls out of fashion for a time.

Travel

Has your persona made a pilgrimage to a place of significance? There have been finds of pilgrim badges in the shapes of purses! This one is a badge of Henry VI's purse. Depending on where your persona has been or where they've traveled (be it willingly or not) can give you a variety of additional options.



Helpful Links

<https://www.pinterest.com/>

Pinterest is a great starting point for a lot of SCA research. Be sure to follow the SCA on Pinterest to help you in your search!

<http://www.larsdatter.com/sitemap.htm>

This site has a wealth of information on many other interesting subjects; not just pouches and bags! It's a great site to explore if you're looking for details to help flesh out a persona such as tradeskills, entertainment, or ideas for finishing touches on your encampment.

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections>

The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has an amazing database where you can view extants, paintings, textiles and more!

<http://metmuseum.org/>

Another great museum site to explore.

<http://tassenmuseum.nl/en/collection-exhibitions/collection/>

An entire museum devoted to bags and purses!

Sources

Purses in Pieces by Olaf Goubitz

Dress Accessories 1150-1450 by Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard

<https://sutor.jimdo.com/>

<https://katafalk.wordpress.com/tutorials/>

<http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/32356.html>

<http://www.muenzenwoche.de/de/Archiv/8?&id=301&type=a#>

<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/fragment-of-a-relic-bag-46966>

<https://tinyurl.com/yb8f6n9n>