

**A Brief Examination of Three Pairs of Extant
Pre-Seventeenth Century Silk Knit Hose**

**By Lady Angharad Rhos ferch Rhain
(Allison Sarnoff)**

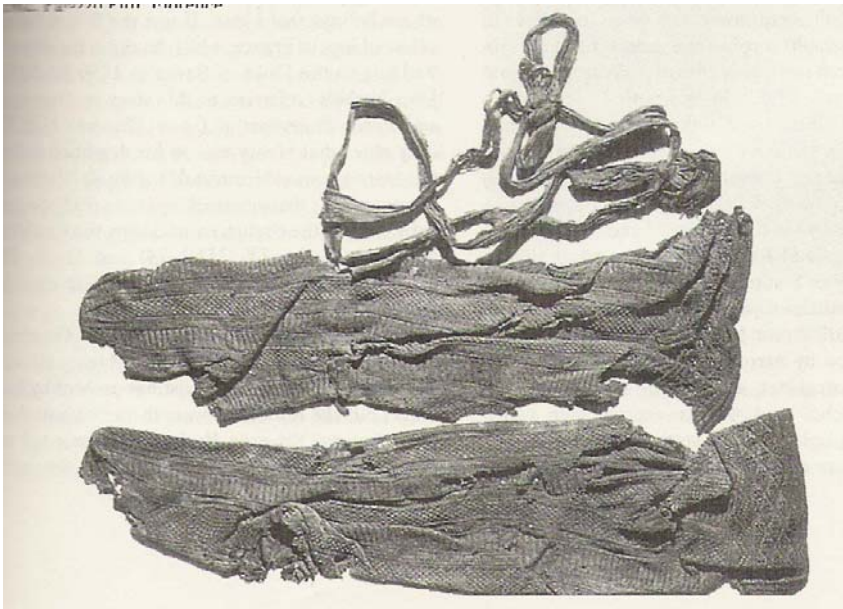
February 5, 2006

Through most of the Middle Ages and earlier, leg coverings were made of woven cloth, which was cut along the bias of the fabric for elasticity, and sewn together. However, by 1387, Parisian documents show that knitted hose had begun to replace cloth leggings (Turnau, p. 21). In England particularly, stocking knitting was a strong industry. By 1576, 94,500 pairs of inexpensive wool stockings had been exported to Europe (Turnau, p. 27).

Documents from the early sixteenth century show that knitted stockings were worn by “country folk and children,” (Turnau, p. 26), however by the end of the century, knitted stockings were worn by all classes. Knitted stockings were commonly given as gifts by Queen Elizabeth I (Arnold, p. 105) and many pairs for the Queen’s own use, particularly made of silk, were also commissioned from the Queen’s hosier (Arnold, p. 206). King Erik XIV of Sweden (1533-1577) owned at least 27 pairs of knitted stockings, the majority in various colors of silk (Ekstrand, p. 165).

Very few of these stockings have survived. According to Irena Turnau, knit stockings dating from the seventh to the twelfth centuries have been recorded in Switzerland (Knitting Before Mass Production, p. 18). However, most extant knitted stockings date from much later.

The Eleanora of Toledo Stockings



Picture of the Eleanora of Toledo stockings from Richard Rutt’s History of Hand Knitting, p. 71

Eleanora of Toledo was the wife of Cosimo di Medici I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany. She died of malaria at the age of 40 in 1562. She was buried in a pair of elaborate knitted silk stockings that are currently held in the Palazzo Pitti.

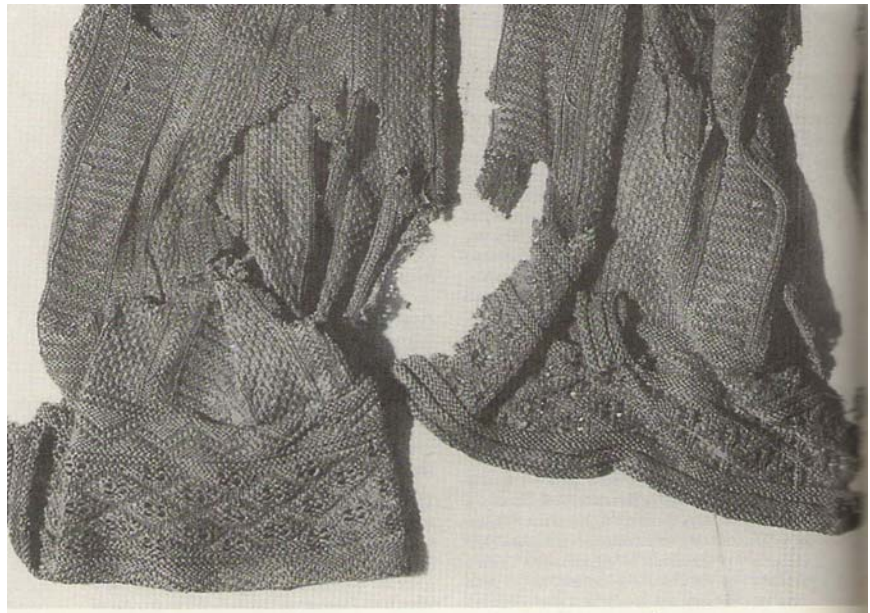
The stockings are in fairly good condition, although the color has deteriorated. Originally, they were probably crimson (Rutt, p. 71). The pieces of fabric shown above the stockings are woven silk, although there is some debate over whether they are the garters

used to hold up the stockings or if they were used for some other purpose, perhaps body binds from Eleanora's tomb.

The stockings themselves show mastery of knitting and incredible detail work. They are entirely covered in knitted patterning, using both knit and purl stitches. They would have come to the knee and the tops folded over and secured with garters. As can be seen in the picture below, the tops (or welts) of the stockings have an elaborate pattern that is almost like lace. The decorative holes are formed by wrapping the working yarn over the knitting needle and then on the next round, knitting the loops to form a hole in the fabric. (Note that the picture below shows the reverse of the welts. They are intended to be folded down, so the right side of the welt would be on the inside of the stocking.) The patterning is continued down the foot of the stocking and through the shaping of the toes, most likely a round toe, in which decreases are evenly distributed around the piece.

In this close-up, bands of patterning can be seen along the legs of the stockings. Rutt calls these alternating bands double moss stitch and double garter stitch (p. 72), which can be seen in the picture with vertical rows of stitches separating them.

It can also clearly be seen that these stockings were knitted at a very fine gauge, although in his analysis, Rutt is not specific with regard to the number of stitches per inch or the number of rows per inch.

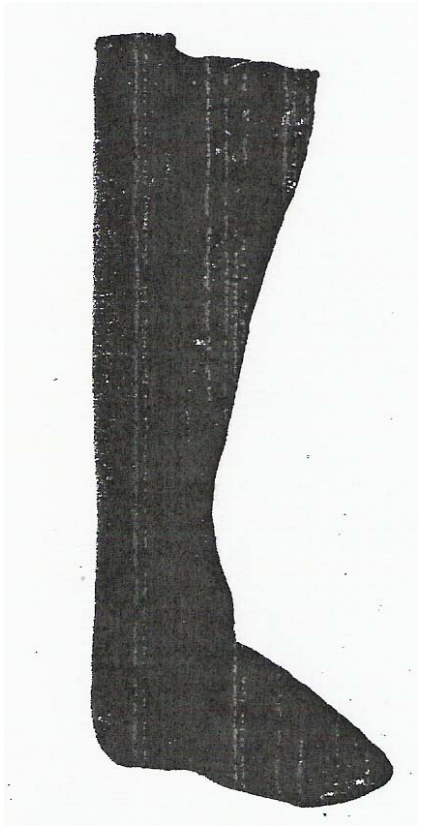


Close up of Eleanora of Toledo stockings from Richard Rutt's [A History of Hand Knitting](#), p. 72

From the example of the stockings of Eleanora of Toledo, it is obvious that by the middle of the sixteenth century, knitted stockings could be produced with elaborate and detailed work. Although these stockings used texture to create patterning, the two pairs of stockings, both worn by men, that will be examined next have almost no design work on them at all.

The Stockings of Johan III of Sweden

Johan III (1537-1592) ruled Sweden at the end of the sixteenth century. Earlier in his life, he had been arrested for disagreeing with his brother, King Erik XIV (Ekstrand, p. 166). Around the time of his arrest in 1563, an inventory of his property was taken. Among his possessions were twenty-two pairs of knitted silk stockings in various colors. One pair of these hose was “reserved for playing ball games” (Ekstrand, p. 166). The only pair of these stockings that has been discovered and studied is the pair he was wearing at the time of his burial in 1594. They are also the earliest example of Swedish knitted stockings (Ekstrand, p. 166).



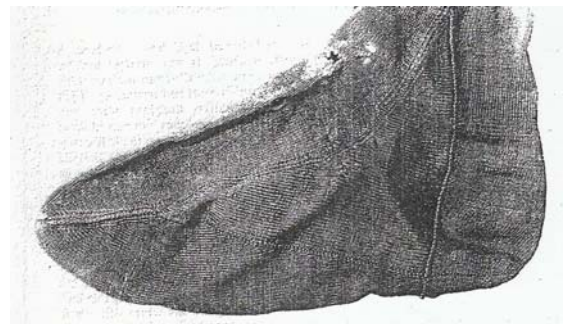
Stocking of Johan III,
from Gudrun Ekstrand's
*Some Early Silk Stockings
in Sweden*, p. 166

III stockings is the shaping of the heel and the sole of the stocking. The gusset and heel shaping can be seen in the picture at right. The heel, as expected, has a seam at the bottom of the foot, indicating that the heel flap was

The stockings are now yellow, but since no analysis of dye stuff has been performed, the original color is not known. The stocking was cast on at the top edge with 254 stitches and is knitted entirely in stockinette stitch with a back seam of purl stitches (Ekstrand, p. 166). In fact, the back seam is the only decoration that appears anywhere on the stocking. There are no clocks or any other knitted in embellishments. Indeed, no decorative elements were mentioned in the 1563 inventory either, where only the colors of the stockings have been recorded. There are reductions in the number of stitches down the length of the leg that appear close to the back seam.

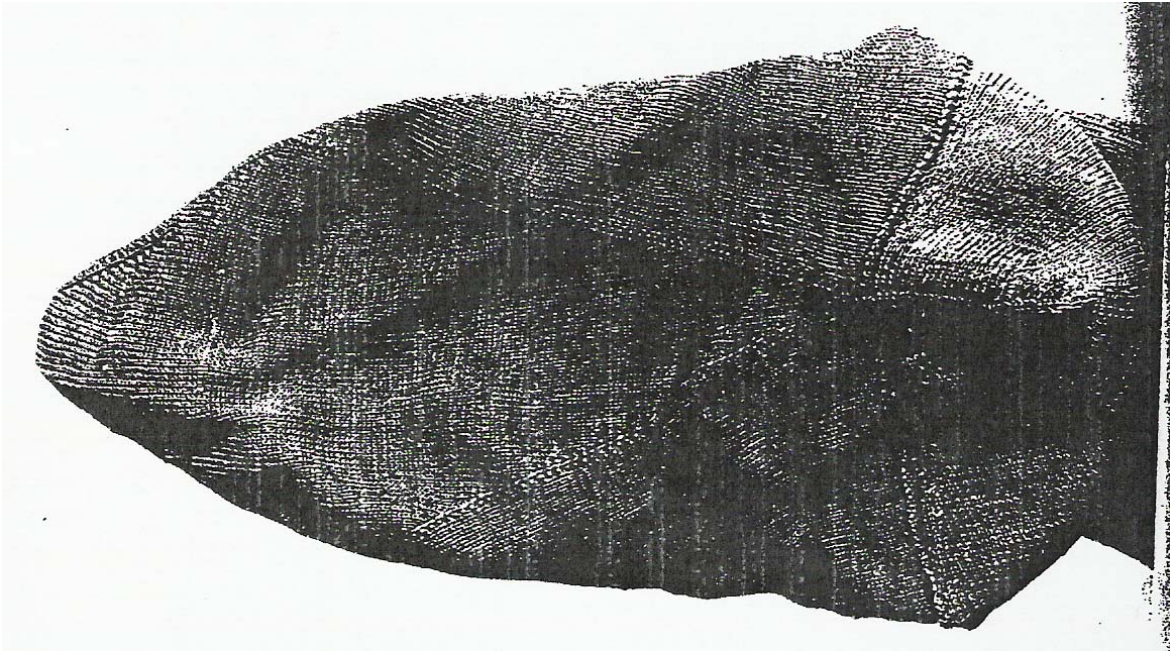
It is not known how the characteristic curling of the top edge in stockinette was stopped, as ribbing (a pattern of knit two, purl two or similar) cannot be documented prior to the seventeenth century. Since these are men's hose, perhaps they were tied with a garter above the knee to prevent them from curling down the leg.

One particularly interesting pattern note about the Johan



Close up of heel, Ekstrand, p. 167

bound off and additional stitches picked up along the opening of the knitted tube to form the foot, as all examined stockings from this period were. However, there is a seam line coming up from the bottom edge of the foot to a point at the toe reductions. Most knitted stockings do not show this seam, rather they simply reduce the number of stitches needed along the instep, forming the seam line at the top edge of the gusset. This unusual foot shaping can be seen even more clearly in the enlarged picture below.



Close up of sole, Ekstrand, p. 168

It's not clear from these pictures if the diamond is an entirely separate piece or if it's a seam produced by reductions in the foot. Because of this, it's impossible to determine how the toe reductions were done. It resembles a wedge toe, in which reductions are paired at the sides of the foot. However, if the diamond is a separate piece, the reductions could have been sewn in after the stocking was complete.

Stockings from the Tomb of Duke Barnim XII

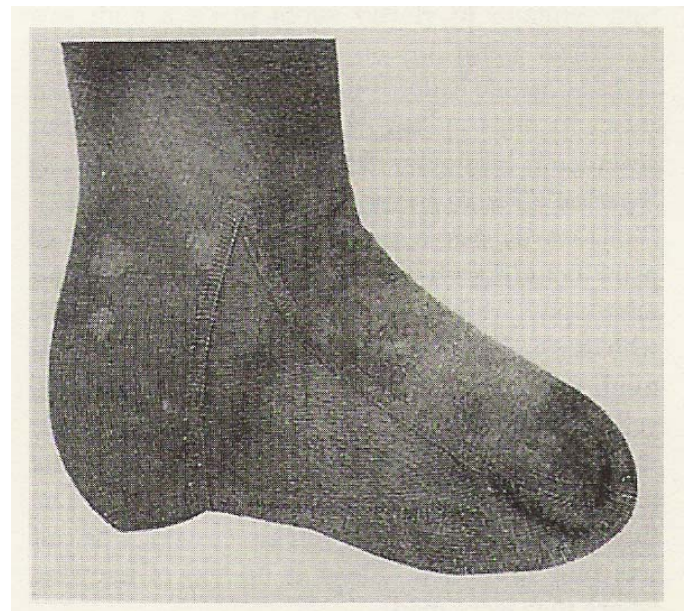
In 1946, the coffin of Duke Barnim XII of Pomerania (buried 1603) in Eastern Germany was examined and found to hold a pair of knitted silk stockings (Rutt, p. 73). The coffins were found in the castle of Szczecin and the stockings are now held in the National Museum of that city (Rutt, p. 73). The stockings are dark brown, although according to Rutt, they may have originally been black (p. 73). They are entirely without decoration. Not even a back seam is mentioned.



Stockings of Barnim XII of Pomerania from Richard Rutt's A History of Hand Knitting, p. 73

As can be seen in the picture at left, the stockings were clearly intended to go over the knee. There is no indication in Rutt's analysis concerning where the reductions were located, nor does he give the gauge of the knitting, although the pictures indicate that the gauge is extremely fine.

The same distinctive foot shaping that is present in the Johan III stockings may again be observed in those of Barnim XII. A seam line can be seen leading from the bottom of the foot to the point where the toe reductions begin.



Close up of foot, Rutt, p. 73

Unfortunately, the pictures of these stockings in Rutt are not clear enough to give any indication about the type of reduction used at the toe and this resource is the only one available concerning these stockings. A faint line can be seen in the picture at right, which may indicate the use of a wedge toe, but the silhouette is more like that of a round toe. Until more analysis is done, it is impossible to determine.

Conclusions

So little information is available about the three pairs of stockings examined, that few generalizations may be made about them. All three stockings show excellent and detailed workmanship and are knit at a fine gauge. Knitting as an art form had clearly been known for some time before these stockings were created.

However, while the stockings of Eleanora of Toledo are highly decorated, those of Johan III and Barnim XII have no decoration. Was this difference the result of

gender? Did fancy stockings go out of fashion after Eleanora's death in 1562? Were Italian stockings uniformly decorated, while those of Sweden and Germany were not? We do know from the inventory of Johan III's goods in 1563 and the assumption that Eleanora's stockings were crimson, that brightly colored silk stockings were common, though likely expensive, in diverse parts of Europe.

These three pairs of stockings were selected for examination because they are the ones about which the most is known and, as can be seen from this discussion, that is a sad state of affairs when investigating other pairs of silk stockings from this era. Clearly, more research is desperately needed before a detailed and exact pattern for these garments can be created. Hopefully, future finds, like the recently uncovered Medieval and Renaissance Era cemetery in England, will reveal more examples of this common sixteenth century attire.

Bibliography

- Arnold, Janet. Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600 edited from Stowe MS 557 in the British Library, MS LR 2/121 in the Public Record Office, London, and MS V.b.72 in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC. W.S. Maney and Son, Ltd., 1988.
- Bush, Nancy. Folk Socks: The History & Techniques of Handknitted Footwear. Interweave Press, 1994.
- Ekstrand, Gudrun. "Some Early Silk Stockings in Sweden." Textile History Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 165-182, 1982.
- Grass, Milton and Anna Grass. Stockings for a Queen: The life of the Rev. William Lee, the Elizabethan inventor. William Heineman, Ltd., 1967.
- Rutt, Richard. A History of Hand Knitting. Interweave Press, 1987.
- Turnau, Irena. Knitting Before Mass Production. Trans. Agnieszka Szonert. Institute of the History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1991.