

The purpose, then, of those undergarments was partly to protect the skin from the harsh surface of the outer coverings, and equally to protect the latter from the dirt of the body. We may suppose that the social inferiors were content to wear coarse woollen materials next to the skin. (Cotton was not imported in considerable quantities until 1430.)¹

The modern conception of 'fashions' in the costume of both sexes began to appear in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, with symbols of class distinction and sex attraction strongly marked; but this only applied to the visible garments. It did not percolate below the surface, where, being invisible, such symbols would have been wasted. Indeed until the close of the epoch the medieval attitude towards underclothing differed enormously from that of later times. So far from developing the symbolism of social rank or sex appeal, the idea of underclothes was associated with the idea that the body was sinful, a source of evil, which needed constant discipline. The wearing of a hair-shirt, for instance, was not only an act of penance but was also a meritorious habit.

She vowed then a vow to the Father in heaven,
Her smock to unsow and a hair-shirt to wear,
To enfeeble her flesh, that was so fierce to sin.²

Underclothes could also symbolize the discipline of humility. To appear clad only in underclothes was a voluntary form of self-abasement often practised by pilgrims. The Lord of Joinville records that he went on a pilgrimage 'barefoot in my shirt.'³ From humility to humiliation is a short step; to appear compulsorily only in underclothes was a method of punishment. A woman guilty of adultery might have to do penance in church dressed only in her 'shift'; and we read of repentant Lollards abjuring their errors 'in shirt and braies.' The burghers of Calais were ordered by Edward III to surrender (1347) wearing only their shirts—a further humiliation. A supreme example is shown in the account of the Emperor Henry IV who, when seeking absolution from Pope Gregory VII, went to

¹ *The Draper's Dictionary.*

² *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (1377). Cf. the chaste maiden, Cecile, in the 'Second Nonnes Tale,' who

Under her robe of gold that sat so fair
Had next her flesh yclad her in an hair.

³ *Memoirs of the Crusades*, 1309.

Canossa and there in the bitter winter 'three successive days remained in a woollen shirt and with naked feet.'¹

The notion that underclothes might express the spirit of the changing times, in sympathy with the outer clothing, did not enter the medieval mind. Consequently it escaped the critical notice of those contemporary writers who were so alert in detecting the sinful impulses responsible for 'fashion.' The fulminations directed at the extravagant modes of the fifteenth century, for instance, were confined to surface warfare, a fact which the student of costume is bound to lament, as he attempts to explore the *terra incognita*.

It is usually stated that neither sex habitually wore nightclothes in bed; nevertheless there are contemporary illustrations showing the contrary, at least for particular occasions such as 'lying-in' and ceremonial visits. The more usual custom of being naked in bed is suggested in the fourteenth-century romance of Lancelot du Lac; there a man is described as going to bed on one occasion 'and took not off his shirt nor his breeches (drawers)'—as though this was a singular omission. So, too, in the instructions to young women on going to bed; the last one in the room to get undressed is advised to extinguish the candle with her finger and thumb, and not 'by throwing her chemise at it.' For which we conclude that she did not stop to put on anything else. On the other hand, in Chaucer's 'The Marchantes Tale' a man is described as sitting up in bed in his shirt and nightcap. The Lord of Joinville (1309), ill with malaria, slept in his tunic.

MEN

I. THE SHIRT

Of all the undergarments worn by either sex this is the one which, if not the most ancient, has certainly preserved longer than any other not only its original name but also its essential design and masculinity. Until a hundred years ago it was always worn next the skin.

The length of the shirt was less than that of the modern garment, especially after the middle of the fourteenth century, but contemporary illustrations suggest that in earlier times it varied a good

¹ Hallam: *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, 1818.

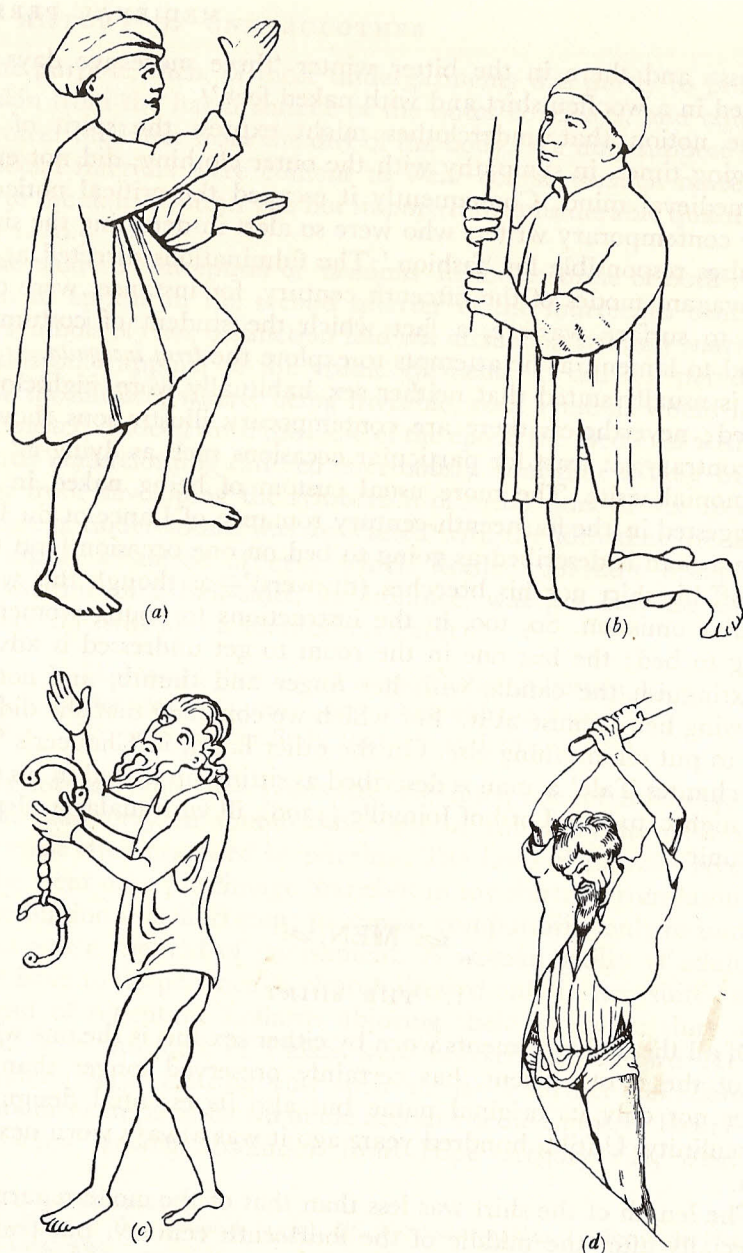


FIG. 1. MEDIEVAL SHIRTS: (a) WITHOUT VENTS, 15TH CENTURY. (b) WITH VENTS, 14TH CENTURY. (c) WITHOUT VENTS, 15TH CENTURY. (d) WITH BRAIES, 15TH CENTURY

deal (figure 1). The width increased from above downwards so that the material hung in folds, the front and back pieces being joined by a straight seam across the shoulders. Occasionally, however, the material was gathered at the neck.

The two side vents, a feature which has been so characteristic of the male shirt from the sixteenth century onwards, was by no means invariably seen in the medieval shirt. When present the front and back panels were of the same length (figure 1(b)). Vents were sometimes not at the side seams but more forward, the front panel being narrower than the back. Sometimes there was also a slit in the centre of the front.

The sleeves were somewhat full, without cuffs, and cut straight. The kimono type of sleeve was also in use.

The Norman shirt of the higher ranks was embroidered round the neck and at the wrists,¹ but the neckband did not appear until the fourteenth century; this, and the band at the wrist, in the following century, were often embroidered in colours. The neck opening was fastened usually by being tied, though there is evidence that from the middle of the fourteenth century a button was sometimes used, as can be seen in *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, by Hugo van der Goes, 1475. The neck opening was generally in front; a few, however, appear to have been fastened behind.

The shirt of the fifteenth century had a low neck except for the period 1430 to 1450 when, in fashionable circles, it acquired an upright collar high enough to show, in front, above the edge of the outer garment (figure 1(d)).

The medieval shirt was made of wool, linen ('holland' shirts of linen made in that country are mentioned in the wardrobe of Edward IV), hemp and, for the wealthy, occasionally silk. In the fifteenth century 'cloth shirts' were sometimes worn between the linen shirt and the doublet.

2. DRAWERS

The Saxon name for this garment was 'braies' or 'breches' (breeches). Both words were used synonymously throughout the Middle Ages to denote a masculine garment concealing the sexual region.

¹ Kelly and Schwabe: *History of Costume and Armour*.

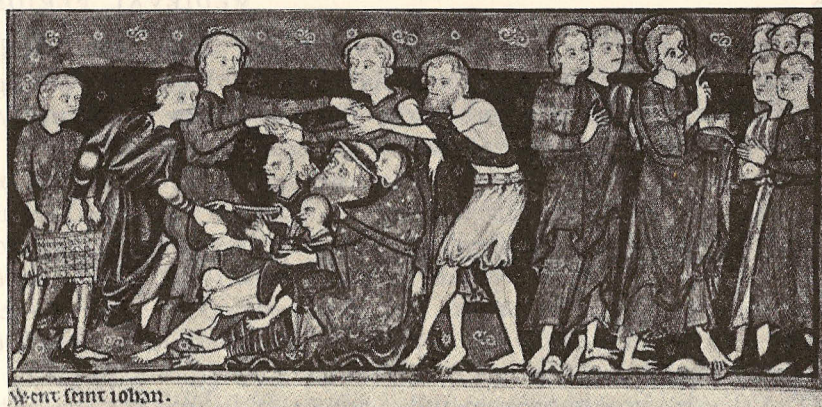


FIG. 2. BRAIES CAUGHT AT THE KNEE WITH RUNNING STRING IN GIRDLE, c. 1250

He didde (put on) next his white lere (skin)
Of cloth of lake (linen) fin and clere
A breche and eke a shirte
And next his shirte an haketon (cassock).¹

Henry Castyde (*temp.* Richard II) mentioned that the rude Irish 'wore no breeches. Wherefore I caused breeches of fine linen cloth to be made for the four kings of Ireland while I was there.'² Again, in a poem of that period, a needy gentleman made the excuse, 'I would have gone to church to-day but I have no hose or shoes, and my breeches and my shirt are not clean.' In a later century we learn from *A Boke of Curtasye* (printed in 1513) that it was the page's duty to prepare for his master's uprising 'a clean shirte and breche.'

Pilgrims, as a mark of poverty, might dispense with the garment. 'In poure cotes for pilgrimage to rome—no breche betwene.'³ This, however, was quite exceptional since breeches as an undergarment were considered more essential than the shirt. The word 'breche' was also used to indicate, not the garment, but the region of the body. A Norman writer (c. 1370) condemned men's short gowns because they 'shewed ther breches, the whiche is ther shame.'⁴

The name 'breeches' finally became applied to an outer garment only; and therefore to avoid confusion we propose to use the word 'braies' throughout, for this medieval undergarment.

Saxon braies, often brightly coloured, were in effect an outer

¹ Chaucer: *The Rime of Sire Tophas*, 1387.

³ *Piers Plowman*, 1362-92.

² Froissart.

⁴ *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*.

garment, only becoming a true undergarment in the middle of the twelfth century, when they were largely concealed by the Norman tunic. Then, too, the colour interest faded, and drawers of white linen, or of drab woollen cloth for the peasant class, became established.

In the twelfth century most breeches, when still a surface garment, had wide baggy legs often slit up behind for a short distance and reaching to mid-calf. Others, chiefly worn by the peasant class, were often drawn in round the ankle very much like pantaloons. Both types were tied round the waist with a string or girdle, and because of the close fit they required a front opening.

During the second half of the twelfth century, when braies became definitely an undergarment, the seat was made very much fuller, and the front opening was discarded. The legs were shortened and the stockings, made long and wide above, were pulled up over them and attached by cords in front to the braie girdle. This was a running string which emerged at intervals from the hem at the waist for this purpose. A man's purse or keys were sometimes slung from the girdle, since in this position they were safely hidden from view.

This custom continued through the following century.

During the thirteenth century the length of braies varied, reaching to the ankle, to mid-calf or the knee, the tendency being to become progressively shorter. The general pattern had wide legs, a full seat, and no waistband, the top being turned over into a deep tubular hem or (French) 'coulisse,' through which was threaded the girdle or (French) 'braier.' This was pulled in over the hips, puckering the hem and giving it a puffed out appearance. The 'in and out' threading was also used. Two straps or cords, some six inches long, were attached to the girdle on either side, and escaped from the coulisse through eyelet holes. Their function was to hitch up the

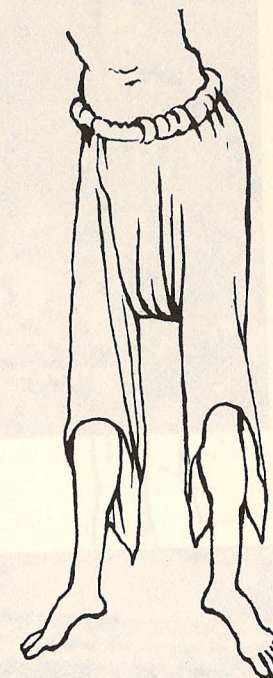


FIG. 3. BRAIES WITH UPWARD CURVE IN FRONT. 13TH CENTURY

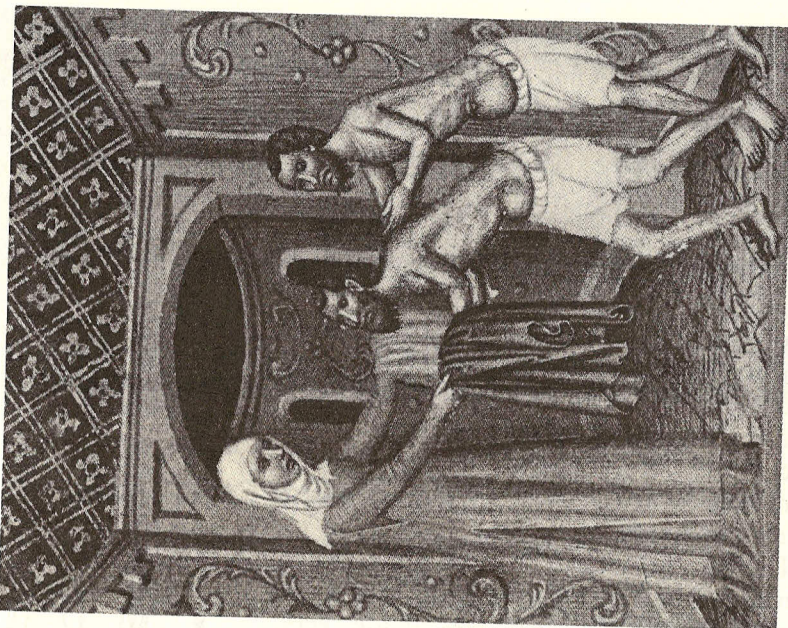


FIG. 5. LOOSE BRAIES. EARLY 14TH CENTURY

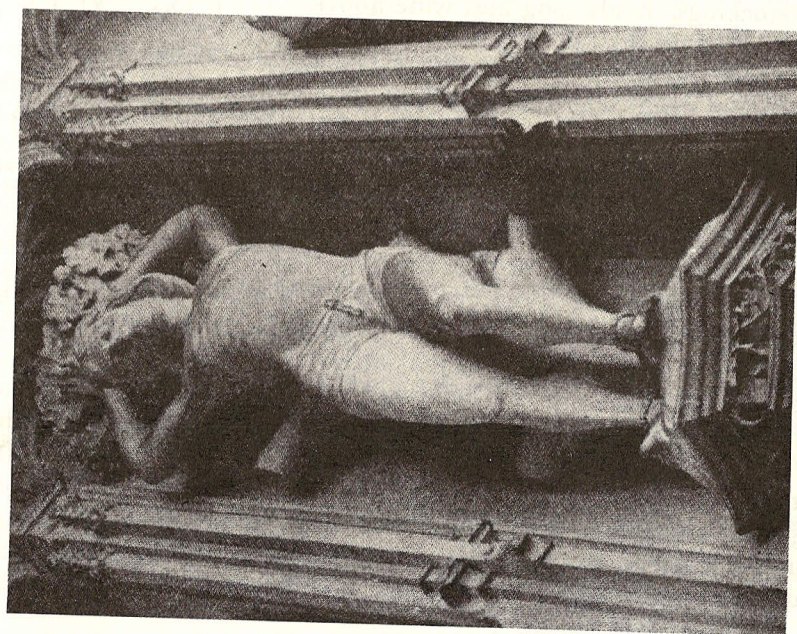


FIG. 4. SHORT BRAIES. LATE 15TH CENTURY

legs of the longer braies and keep them out of the way. This was done in two different ways. Either the braie leg was turned straight up and attached to the cord direct (*figure 8*); or it was given an outward half-twist before being tied up to the cord (*figure 7*). The latter

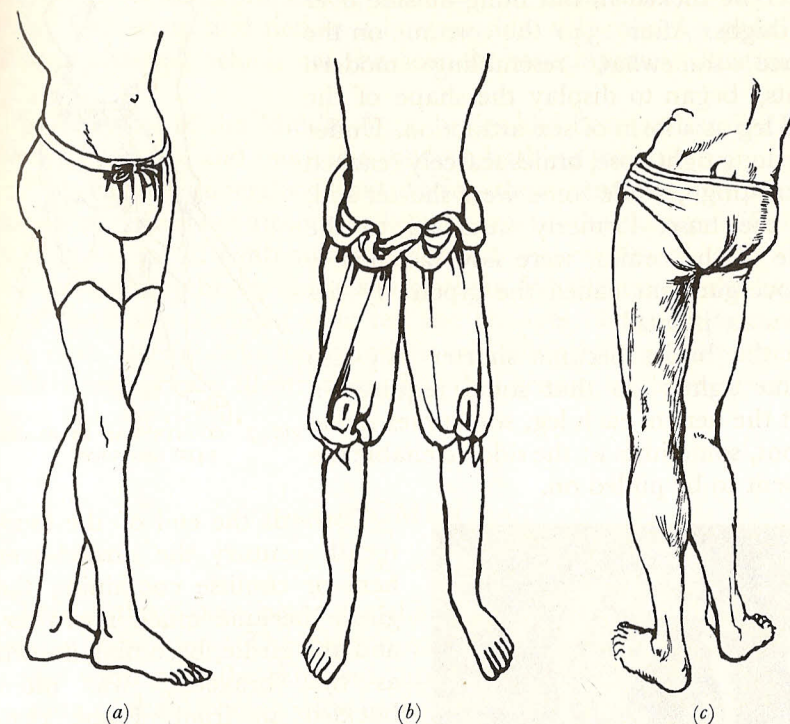


FIG. 6. BRAIES: (a) POUCHED BRAIES TIED WITH A BOW. FIRST HALF 15TH CENTURY. (b) BRAIES TIED AT THE KNEE. (c) SHORT BRAIES. LATE 15TH CENTURY

method effectively closed the gap when, as was sometimes the case, the leg was slit up behind.

These devices implied that the long braies were in fact cumbersome, and so by a natural development a knee-length garment became general about the middle of the thirteenth century. Some were tied at the knees with strings (*figure 6b*); an example of this style can be seen in the *St. Christopher* of Matthew Paris. Other braies hung loose (*figure 3*), the lower borders of the legs generally unevenly cut, dipping in front or behind, the latter being the more

usual. Braies at this period did not reach to the waist, but were pulled in by the girdle just above hip level.

In the fourteenth century braies became shorter and shorter and the shirt could no longer be tucked in but hung outside over the thighs. After 1340 the costume on the surface somewhat resembling modern 'tights,' began to display the shape of the male leg as a form of sex attraction. Under these long tight hose, braies scarcely reached to mid-thigh, while some were shorter still, and the hose, formerly attached to the girdle of the braies, were now fastened to the overgarment called the gipon by ties known as 'points.'

As the braies became shorter they also became tighter, so that some required a slit at the hem of each leg, sometimes made in front, sometimes at the side, to enable the garment to be pulled on.



FIG. 7. COUNTRYMAN IN BRAIES.
14TH CENTURY

Towards the end of the fourteenth century the turned-over hem or coulisse containing the girdle became much narrower, and the girdle, becoming known as the 'brayette,' was often buckled in front. From 1340 onwards it not only ceased to function as an attachment for the hose, but also for purse and keys.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, braies had been so shortened both above and below that they had become little more than a loin-cloth. The buckled girdle was discarded and replaced by a narrow running thread 'en coulisse.' The two ends emerged in front

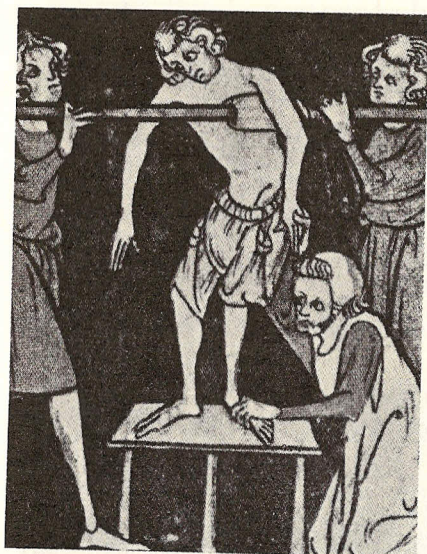


FIG. 8. BRAIES TURNED UP STRAIGHT AND
HITCHED TO BRAIE GIRDLE, c. 1250

through two eyelet holes placed some six inches apart. These threads, however, running side by side in the intervening space between these holes, crossed each other so that the right-hand end of the cord emerged from the left-hand eyelet hole, and the left-hand end of the cord emerged from the right-hand eyelet hole. When pulled up and tied in a bow outside, this caused a pouching of the material, which can be seen in contemporary illustrations (figure 6a).

By the close of the Middle Ages, braies had become less like loin-cloths (figure 6c), and more like modern bathing trunks.

It should be understood that during these centuries the peasant and labourer did not attempt to keep pace with the changes of fashion but, as we see in contemporary illustrations, continued, as a rule, to wear the long braies of their forefathers. We see among the higher ranks how this garment reflected the changes of the outer modes, and close attention to its variations will often help an observer to date contemporary illustrations. For that reason we have described them in some detail.

WOMEN

1. THE SMOCK

This is the Saxon name for the only known undergarment belonging to women.¹ The Normans introduced the name 'chemise.' It was worn next the skin and slipped on over the head, the neck opening probably being wide enough for this purpose, though later, about 1400, there is evidence that some chemises were slit down the front for a short distance. It was flowing, ankle length, and during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries had long straight sleeves and a small round neck.²

Smocks were often pleated and embroidered, particularly round the neck and hem. In Chaucer's time even a carpenter's wife had a smock

... brouded all before
And eke behind on her colere about
Of cole-blak silke, within and eke without.³

¹ *Eric and Enid* (c. 1164). '... her daughter who was clothed in a full-skirted chemise, white and pleated. Over it she had put on a white robe; she had no other garment.'

² E. R. Lunquist.

³ 'The Miller's Tale' (*The Canterbury Tales*).

THE HISTORY OF UNDERCLOTHES



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