

## **Baroness Helena's gown**

Baroness Uta Boucht / Ulla-Mari Uusitalo

The gown was made for baroness Helena when she stepped down as the baroness of Aarnimetsä, AS XXXVI (September 2001). It is based on the Golden gown of Queen Margareta. (Pic. 1)

### **Queen Margareta's Golden gown**

Queen Margareta Valdemarsdotter (1353 - 1412) was the queen of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (and Finland, which was then part of Sweden), aka the so-called Kalmar Union. She was buried in Roskilde Cathedral, Denmark, where also the Golden gown was displayed by her tomb until 1658-59. The Swedish troops ravaging Denmark, then took the valuable relic, and by order of the King Charles X, the gown was deposited in Uppsala Cathedral. (Needless to say, the gown was damaged during this relocation process.)

According to the tradition, the Golden gown was Margareta's wedding gown, when she got married at the age of 10. Research has proved this to be nothing more than a tradition, although the style of the dress does resemble the fashion of the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The current theory is that the gown may have belonged to the English princess Philippa (1394-1430), who was married to Erik of Pommerania.

The gown is made of red silk brocade, with pomegranate pattern woven in gold. The cloth is of north Italian origin, where the silk industry was at the height of its achievement during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Radiocarbon dating dates the silk, as well as the linen used for lining, to be from the first four decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The gown seems to have been made for a young girl, or to have been altered from a grown up woman's gown – the shaping of the side, front, and back seams around the hip area suggests that the dress may have originally been bigger, but that it has rather heavily been taken in from the hips and up. There is no lacing or other fastening methods, so the dress was pulled on over the head. The neckline is quite small, and has a keyhole opening – an old-fashioned feature already on the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The wide armholes bear resemblance to the grande assiette cut of the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, a perfect example of which is the Charles de Blois pourpoint (pre-1364, Pic. 2). Because of the wide armholes, the width of the back and front pieces of the Golden gown is only 20 cm, and the shoulder seams are only 3 cm wide. The dress also has small gussets inserted to the sleeve: the right arm has 5, and the left arm has 6 gussets. (This may hint that the wearer, to whom the dress was made to fit, was somehow deformed.) Unlike the Charles de Blois' pourpoint, the gussets of the Golden gown go under the arm, not to the back or over the shoulder plates.

Very little is left of the actual sleeves, so there is no sure way of knowing how tight and long they were. The researchers have made an educated guess that the sleeves would have been fairly tight and long, reaching over the wrist. They base their guess on the remaining pieces and the fashion of the period. My theory is also that if the seamstress went through the trouble of constructing the intricate sleeve with 5 or 6 gussets, and used the grande assiette type cut – which allows free movement even though the sleeve and torso were tight – she would have aimed for the tight fit.

Contrary to the upper part of the gown, the skirt is very ample and starts to broaden already from above the waist. The whole skirt has not survived, but enough of it has to help to come to the conclusion that the gown has a bell shaped appearance and a train. The gown was cut from 60 cm wide fabric, and the wideness of the skirt was created by using several gores.

The upper part of the gown had been lined with linen, so that the lining reached the hips. There was actually a double lining, since there are traces of both finer blue and coarser white linen – maybe to give more support to the dress. There is no knowledge whether the sleeves were lined.

### **Baroness Helena's Green Gown**

The investiture of Emelyne and Godwin, where baroness Helena stepped down, was arranged in September near the Arctic Circle. Therefore the natural choice of fabric for Helena's gown was warm wool, not silk. Wool

was also the most common fabric in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, used by people of all levels of society. The rank and wealth of the person could be seen from the quality of the wool they wore – coarse, unfinished cloths for the poor, the finer ones for those who could afford them. Helena's wool is felted, which is – and was - one of the popular finishing methods for wool.

The fabric was first cut into strips of 60 cm, to allow me to imitate the asymmetrical gores of the skirt. The dress needed a fair bit of fitting, so I started out with mock up patterns. Especially the sleeves were a challenge: the gussets were not where I would expect them to be, so a good fit was discovered through trial and error. Once the fit was right, though, we were once again proven how clever the people had been: Helena was able to move her arms freely, without the dress stopping her in any way, and without the fabric bulging or straining.

The upper part of the gown was fitted quite tightly. In my opinion, having the wide armholes and the grande assiette cut indicates a tight fit. The fashion of the time (early 15<sup>th</sup> century) was for tight cotes - or for very voluminous houppelandes, but the Golden gown doesn't fit in the houppelande category. The tight fit was also Helena's wish, and the body shape of a grown up woman creates different needs and a different look than would a gown made for a young girl.

The gown was lined with linen from shoulders to the hips. The purpose of the lining was just to make the woollen dress more comfortable to wear, since the wool didn't need the support like the original silk probably did. We used grey linen, which is what Helena had available.

All the seam allowances have been opened and hand stitched with wool yarn. That was also the regular type of seam used in the Golden gown. In the original, though, parts of the side and back seams have additional stitches, which may indicate that excessive width has been taken in, or that the seams have needed reinforcement. If I was to do this project again, I would sew the whole dress by hand, and one of the reasons would be to see why and how those special seams worked.

The appliqué and embroidery was made by lady Isabella d'Hiver and baroness Emelyne of Twynham.

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