

Ulfr's Undies: Lengberg Men's Underwear
Being an Entry for Tzarina Serena's "Green" A&S Competition
by Kjalvqr frau Sæbjornardottir

In 2008, during a modern reconstruction of Lengberg Castle in Austria, a waste heap from the 15th century was discovered under the floorboards in the castle's second story. While most famous for giving us the "Lengberg Bra," this cache also yielded up an almost-intact set of underpants with side ties.¹ (*figure 1*) While there's some debate as to whether these are women's underpants (or even IF women wore underpants,) this underwear shows up on men in Austrian artwork of the time, lending some weight to the hypothesis that even if they weren't a male-specific garment, men wore them as well.

While the string bikini cut of these are somewhat hilarious to our modern eye, it seems likely to me that this style of underwear evolved when men (and fashion) went from split pants (chausses) and a separate upper undergarment (braes) to wearing pants where the legs joined at the crotch.² Much as modern wearers of tight pants have difficulty shoving loose boxers into their skinny jeans, medieval men would have had difficulty shoving their braes into their joined hosen. (*figure 2*) This isn't to say that many men didn't just forgo underthings entirely, or shove their shirts into their hose to be used as some form of undercarriage protection from scratchy wool and seams, but that as far as the evolution of this string-bikini type garment, "my current underwear doesn't fit in my fashionable pants" seems as good a starting point as any to think about where this style might have come from. Beatrix Nutz, the discoverer and interpreter of the Lengberg find, says:

*"The underpants from Lengberg are of a type that developed during the late 15th and early 16th century, when men started to wear joined (full) hose or trousers instead of single legged (split) hose. Then long-legged braies were no longer needed to fill the gap between the two trouser legs. Spread out, the underpants have a slightly hourglass-shaped cut with narrow straps at the corners. They were repaired three times with linen patches, now overlaying one another."*³

However, there's still some question as to what exactly these underwear went under, as a majority of the images don't show any states of undressing. One example appears in Durer's *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, painted in 1508. (*figure 3*) There seem to be a couple of men in the foreground wearing tight hose, and a few of the martyrs in the back (most notably one falling to his death from the cliff) seem to be wearing this style of mankini.⁴ This lends credence to the idea that these undies existed at the same time as the incredibly tight joined pants were popular, and might have been worn together.

While others may argue about whether or not the Lengberg find was men's or women's underwear, there is good artistic evidence that this style was worn by men. In his 1521 "Self Portrait of the Sick Durer" (*figure 4*) Albrecht Durer depicts himself in this style of underwear, pointing to the part of his body that illness has struck.⁵ In his 1498 "The Men's Bathhouse," (*figure 5*) two sets of this underwear can be clearly seen on the main figures, and a side tie suggesting another pair is apparent on the hairy chested drinking man to the right.⁶

In another image of a crucifixion scene dated to Austria in 1496 (*figure 6*) one of the thieves crucified to the left of Jesus is clearly shown in a similar set of underwear in a greenish-blue color⁷, and a lower Austrian depiction of the death of Saint Sebastian in 1490 (*figure 7*) shows the saint wearing

1 Hodgman, Charlotte, *Medieval Underwear History Extra*, July 2012

2 Eustace, Maistre Emrys, "Shirts Trewes & Hose, Chosen Hosen" August 2009

3 Hodgman

4 Durer, Albrecht, *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, 1508, oil painting, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

5 Durer, Albrecht, *Self Portrait*, 1521, Pen. 13x12 cm, Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany

6 Durer, Albrecht, *The Men's Bath*. N.D. Woodcut, 15 ¼ x 11 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

7 Rueland the Younger, *Kreuzigung Christi*, 1496. Tempera painting on wood. 89.5 cm x 69.5 cm, Stiftsmuseum, Austria.

what seems to be a dark set of high cut, tie-on underwear underneath his almost transparent waist wrap.⁸

Saint Lawrence also appears on an altarpiece from Salzberg depicting his martyrdom being held down on a table while wearing nothing but his green undies.⁹ (*figure 8*) The only sculptural piece readily apparent from this era was credited to Michel Ehrhart and is currently in the Kunstkammer in the Kunst Historische Museum, Vienna.¹⁰ This sculpture dates to between 1470 and 1480 and depicts a man and his nude wife standing back to back with an older woman with the man clearly wearing a set of this underwear. (*figure 9*) This theme of man and wife also appears in another piece, Ishrael van Menckenem's 1495ish *The Angry Wife, or the Battle for the Pants*, (*figure 10*) where the man and wife fight and a discarded set of these underthings lie on the floor in front of them. This is also the only artwork that suggests what a man would be wearing over the underwear.

The fact that they seem to show up mostly on saints and religious figures in artwork makes it possible that this is either apocryphal underwear that's painted specifically to indicate something religious about the wearer, or might indicate a desire by an artist not to paint the intricacies of a saint's less religious areas. This seems less likely, however, because Durer definitely portrays his men in the Men's Bath as wearing side-tie undies, as well as putting them on himself, and he doesn't seem to shy away from full frontal male nudity in other images. While painting them on himself may be some sort of in-joke about Durer's own religious proclivities, the fact that he's willing to put them on other non-holy bodies seems to indicate that they were likely actual worn garments.

Interestingly, while the Austrian men seem to have adopted this string bikini, art from other regions suggest that as pants got tighter the braes got shorter and shorter until they were of a similar shape to today's "boyshorts." Although Albrecht Durer seems to have been in the epicenter of man-kini bottoms (as they show up repeatedly in his woodcuts and engravings), even he eventually gave in and depicted people in other styles of underthing as well. In one of his engravings of Saint Sebastian dated alternately to 1511 and 1501, he depicted the oft-suffering saint in a pair of short braes, (*figure 11*) so it seems that although the bikini briefs did have their day in Austria, that day was short lived.¹¹

The modern set were made to fit Baron Ulfr Imason out of green linen, patterned after the find at Lengberg, and altered to fit him. Although he's a Norseman, not a 1490s-ish Austrian, the general consensus among the costumers of the barony was that he would be the most game to model a set of ridiculous underpants. The general consensus of our Baroness Odile De Brienne was a combination of an eye roll and a heavy sigh. (*figure 12*)

My green linen is a fabric-store.com 5.3 weight, and a little bright for the color commonly seen in period artwork; if the period ones weren't white, they seem to be a dark blue-green color. However, it's also "green" in another way-this is an early hangerok of mine that split at the seams in a Pennsic washing machine. Instead of throwing it out, it got saved as a source of obnoxiously colored linen for the next project, and happened to be perfect for this. The thread used is modern Gutermann silk thread, because I didn't have a linen thread at hand that matched bright lime green at all.

The underwear was patterned on paper using Ulfr's measurements and some educated guesses from the existing pair. They were then cut out, the edges rolled in and handsewn to finish. Although the photographs of the existing pair from Lengberg show numerous layers in the crotch, discoverer Beatrix Nutz has been quoted as saying they were repaired with three patches, so I've decided to show them as they would have been initially. I also made the decision to put the side straps on in the style of the existing example. In paintings, the straps often seem to gradually thin from the sides of the body, but in

8 Unknown Artist, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, around 1490, Herzogenberg Abbey, Lower Austria.

9 Master of the Acts of Mercy, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. Oil on fir. 29x18 3/8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

10 Erhart, Michael, *Vanitas*, 1470-1480. Linden wood. Kunst-Historisches Museum, Vienna.

11 Durer, Albrecht, *Saint Sebastian at the Tree*. 501, Engraving. 115x70 cm, private collection.

the Lengberg find, they seem to be simply sewn onto the side corners of the main piece. I suspect that the linen stretched towards the corners while worn (as seen on the Lengberg garment) and this is what's being depicted in the artwork where the sides seem shaped.

In the first fitting, Ulfr had commented that it seemed like they were trying to ride straight up his butt, as well as holding everything in "very securely" in front. While significantly different from the fit he might have been expecting, this seems to make a lot of sense if we believe that these were worn under early joined hose. In artwork as well as in literature of the "hose era", the hose are clearly quite tight, and Chaucer even comments in the Parson's Tale,

"Upon
That oother side, to speken of the horrible disordiant
scantnesse of clothyng, as been thise
Kuttid sloppes, or haynselyns, that thurgh hire
Shortnesse ne covere nat the shameful membres
of man, to wikked entente./ Allas! somme
Of hem shewen the boce or hir shap, and the
Horrible swollen membres, that semeth lik the
Maladie of hirnia, in the wrappyng of hir
Hoses;/ and eek the buttokes of hem faren as
It were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle
Of the moone."

*(And on the other hand, one may speak of the horrible, inordinate scantiness of some clothes, like the short jackets that are so short that they leave a man's cock exposed to view beneath his hose, with wicked intention. Alas! Some of them clearly reveal a man's horrible swollen balls and his cock like some malignant hernia visible through his hose! His buttocks are displayed like those of a she-ape at the time of the full moon!)*¹²

Obviously, if the goal of fashion is to show off your manly bits but you're not quite ready to go without underwear, you're going to want undies that show everything off to it's best advantage, whether that involves lifting and cupping or just removing any excess bunching of fabric.

There was also a somewhat prolonged discussion of how this underwear would function when nature called, with one side arguing that they were clearly women's underwear, because men's pants all opened in the front during this era, making the solid front and side tie of the underwear difficult to use. However, the counterargument to that was made that juggling two or more layers of long skirts with one hand while dealing with tie-on underwear that wasn't being held on by a pair of tight joined hose could be just as complex. Ulfr also commented that although they were supportive, he was pretty sure with the right codpiece arrangement he could functionally relieve himself without fussing too much with the side tie.

Like any good A&S project, the research answered some questions and posed quite a few more. In the future, I'd be interested in putting a set of this underwear on a female model to see if they make more or less sense on a lady body. I'd also be interested in having a male model and a female model wear underwear from the same cut for a period of time that might wear the linen out enough to need patching, and then compare the worn areas of the modern reproductions to the Lengberg finds, possibly indicating whether they were women's or men's. Because I was limited on time, I also didn't get to do nearly as much digging through artwork of the period as I'd like to have, and I think that continuing to watch for underlayers of this shape might help explain what they were worn under, and how they were worn.

12 Chaucer, Geoffrey *The Canterbury Tales: The Parson's Tale*, lines 422-425. Found in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1957. accessed at the Oxford Text Archive

Works Cited

- Albrecht Durer, *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, 1508, oil painting. Kunishistoriches Museum, Vienna, Austria.
- Albrecht Durer, *Saint Sebastian at the Tree*. 1501, Engraving. 115x70 cm, private collection.
<http://www.artrenewal.org/pages/artwork.php?artworkid=16936&size=large>
- Albrecht Durer, *Self Portrait*, 1521, Pen. 13x12 cm, Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany
- Albrecht Durer, *The Men's Bath*. N.D. Woodcut, 15 ¼ x 11 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/387563>
- Albrecht Durer, *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, 1508, oil painting. Kunishistoriches Museum, Vienna, Austria.
- Charlotte Hodgman "Medieval Underwear" History Extra, July 2012.
<http://www.historyextra.com/lingerie>
- Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales: The Parson's Tale*, lines 422-425. Found in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1957. accessed at the Oxford Text Archive
<http://www.hti.umich.edu/c/cme/>
- Master of the Acts of Mercy, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. Oil on fir. 29x18 3/8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/436990>
- Maistre Emrys Eustace, "Sherts Trewes & Hose, Chosen Hosen" August 2009.
<http://www.greydragon.org/library/underwear3.html>
- Michael Erhart, *Vanitas*, 1470-1480. Linden wood. Kunst-Historiches Museum, Vienna.
Images from the Saint Thomasguild <http://thomasguild.blogspot.com/search/label/dress>
- Rueland the Younger. *Kreuzigung Christi*, 1496. Tempera painting on wood. 89.5 cm x69.5 cm, Stiftsmuseum, Austria. <http://tethys.imareal.sbg.ac.at/realonline/> Dieses Bild: 000037