

Bodies, Stays & Corsets – A Look At The Female Body In Sixteenth Century Western
Europe – A Very Preliminary Report

Sarah Wydville, West Kingdom, A.S. XLV

Sixteenth century England holds an intense fascination for modern Westerners, and as such, the clothing of the people of Queen Elizabeth I's time has been heavily studied and recreated. One of the most lavish courts in Europe, with wide ranging trends encompassing inspiration from all over the known world, the fashion of upper class England remains alive and well in the modern consciousness.; one has only to consider the recent miniseries "The Tudors", or examine romance and historical fiction genres in literature to observe the Elizabethan court's impact on modern society. But, contrasting historically "inspired" clothing conveyed through the filter of modern aestheticss with extant historical garments and iconography, one discovers huge gaps between the two. The "Renaissance" may hold caché in our culture as a fantasy wonderland (thanks to the prevalence of a Renaissance Faire in almost every major metropolitan area) where ladies swan about in rich brocades and velvet, but modern interpretation of the fashions of this time do not necessarily capture period aesthetics favored by the authentic sixteenth century noble personage.

In this paper, I wish to address the topic of upper class female clothing in 16th century England, with a special emphasis on the corset, or "pair of bodies" as it was referred to at that time. I also plan to offer for examination my own experiments, based on my research thus far, in re-created boned (internally supported, typically

with whalebone or some similar material) and unboned undergarments appropriate for this era.

To this end, I will begin in Florence, which is home to some of the most complete and well preserved extant 16th century supportive garments known to date; the clothing of the Medici graves gives clothing and textile historians a wealth of information on an otherwise sparse archeological record. After Florence, I examine an extant pair of bodies in Munich, housed at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. And finally, I arrive back in England to discuss the pair of bodies produced in 1603 C.E. for the effigy of Queen Elizabeth I.

Though the focus of this paper is geared towards examining women's body shaping garments specifically in England during the 16th century, because of the lack of extant examples coupled with the evidence that some form of corsetry was used from the mid century on, we must consider all extant pieces from Western Europe during this time in order to gain better insight into what was likely worn. When used in conjunction with primary source material, such as wardrobe accounts and other forms of correspondence, a more accurate picture of female supportive undergarments begins to evolve.

The earliest extant example of such an undergarment has no discernable stiffening. The burial gown of Eleanor di Toledo, buried in 1562 C.E., was accompanied by what is widely regarded as a "pair of bodies". It is a close fitting bodice, lacking sleeves, made of velvet and lined in linen. It has a hook and eye fastening up the center front, and small gores are set into the side seams to facilitate the fit of the garment over the waist and hips.

Between 1562 and 1590, no further extant pairs of bodies in Europe are known of, however the development of the bodies can be traced through wardrobe accounts and, in later years, portraits of ladies en déshabillé. Arnold references an inventory listing of Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe in 1583 of a "payre of bodyes of blake vellat lined with canvas styffenid with buckeram drawn oute with white sipers." (Arnold, Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlocked (QEWU), p. 146) Buckram seems to be the preferred stiffening method in these early corsets, but no reference as to how the buckram was sewn to the fabric exists. It could have been sewn to the bodice in places, or inserted as an complete interlining.

Other stiffening agents that begin to show up in inventories from 1580-1600 are whalebone and reed. One of the earliest references to whalebone used in corsetry is from 1577, in an account by Jerome Lippomano documenting the "inconceivably narrow waists" of French women. He goes on:

"They swell out their gowns from the waist downwards by whaleboned stuffs and vertugadins, which increases the elegance of their figures." (Arnold, QEWU, p. 147)

However, it is worth noting that Lippomano distinguishes between "whaleboned stuffs", categorizing it alongside "vertugadins" (farthingales) as something worn below the waist, and then moves on to describe the following:

"Over the chemise they wear a corset of bodice, that they call a 'corps pique', which makes their shape more delicate and slender. It is fastened behind which helps to show off the form of the bust." (Arnold, QEWU, p. 147)

It is therefore probable that the “whalebone stuffs” is not referring to the “corps pique”, or corset, but instead to skirt supports. It is worth noting that the ‘corps pique’ is described as fastening in the back; extant pairs of bodies show both front and back lacing as well as hook and eyes, perhaps due to regional variations in fashion.

Twenty years after Lippomano’s account, the famous “mad girl” whose rant was recorded for posterity in 1597, screams out to the demon who has possessed her that her:

“French bodie, not of whale bone, for that is not stiff enough, but of horne for that will hold it out, it shall come, to keepe in my belly... My lad I will have a busk of Whalebone, it shall be tyed with two silke Points, and I will have a drawn wrought stomacher imbroidered with golde, finer than thine.” (QEWU, p. 146-7)

Here, we find references to both whalebone and horn as stiffening agents in a pair of bodies, and a busk of whalebone to further control the figure.

Reed, or bents, are also evidenced as stiffening agents in supportive garments. An extant example of a linen pair of bodies, dated to the early 17th century, still shows bundles of thin reed inserted into boning channels.¹ [Use either footnotes or insertions in the text, but not both. This should be (Arnold, QEWU, p.147).] Arnold also cites a warrant in 1582 for the use of reeds as stiffening in a pair of bodies.²(147)

The final two extant pairs of bodies from the late 16th and early 17th centuries are known as the “Munich Bodies”, which is dated to 1598, and the “Effigy Bodies”

¹ Arnold, fig. 233, p. 147

² Arnold, p. 147.

(also known as “the effigy corset”), dated to 1603. These two pairs of bodies are distinctly different in style and construction, though they are contemporary to each other.

The Munich example was salvaged from the burial clothing of Pfalzgräfin Dorothea Sabina von Neuberg. It features a back lacing closure, integral shoulder straps, and a unique boning configuration that leaves the “cups” of the breast area unboned. It also has a busk channel sewn down the center front. Neither the busk, the original stiffening (said to be whalebone), nor the lining survive.

The Effigy example was found dressed on an effigy of Queen Elizabeth I, and initially was supposed to have been of 18th century origin owing to the silhouette and construction of the garment, which closely resembled 18th century corsetry. Janet Arnold analyzed the garment and was able to verify that it was, in fact, made specifically for the effigy in 1603, and could very well have been based off of dimensions of pairs of bodies worn by Elizabeth prior to her death.³

The Effigy bodies is made from fustian, and fully boned with whalebone. It has shoulder straps that are integral to the back piece of the corset and fasten over the shoulder to the front of the corset, allowing for some adjustment in fit. It also laces up the front, and does not feature a busk.

In general, Women’s supportive garments in 16th century England do not include stiffening agents such as whalebone, reed, or horn until after about 1577. Prior to this time, the evidence indicates that the construction of supportive

³ Arnold, The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey.

undergarments were more in line with that of the Eleanora di Toledo bodice, i.e. an unstiffened, close-fitting upper body garment without any internal boning.

It is my theory that the iconic Tudor and Elizabethan silhouette of a “cone shaped” torso can, in fact, be achieved without resorting to the use of conventional corsetry to flatten the breasts. In my next phase of research, I intend to re-create both boned and unboned undergarments to test the supportive qualities and the success in achieving the correct 16th century English silhouette.

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