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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: A Handbook for Men's Clothing of the Late 15th Century by Anna Malmborg & Willhelm Schütz

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Although there is a wide variety of publications about costume history and of single archaeological sites with textile remains of period clothing, the number of books that interdisciplinarily cover the fashion of past eras in the context of different source categories is, frankly, really small. Some attempts to draw a complete image of medieval fashion simply fail just because of the scale of it; others try to approach the topic from the side of art history. In the periphery of living history or reenactment, several illustrated books emerged - some of

which gained vast popularity- including guides for reconstructing, or, at least, re-sewing clothing from several periods, most of them with a very narrow focus. This book takes the same approach as the latter, and aims for the most popular period among reenactors.

“ To whom can we recommend this book? To be completely honest, it leaves one a little bit puzzled...

For everybody interested in historical textiles and their reconstruction, the recent years have been a veritable cornucopia of new knowledge. Excavations like those in Lengberg castle, Tirol, resketched, or at least refined, our image of the fashion of the late middle ages, proving tailoring to be at its summit at the time. The ongoing popularity of costume reconstruction within living history (or “reenactment”, the term more often used in English speaking countries,

although this more precisely names the recreation of one, single event) connected with the broad availability of digitized sources, initiated broad discussions about every aspect of medieval fashion and promoted the spreading of new knowledge about it. Very often in the same breath, kit guides are called for, which can help beginners to deal with the matter. Quite well known and popular for instance, is the kit guide of the „Company of Saynt George”, a Swiss living history group that portrays a Burgundian group of soldiers. Connected with these come criticisms, pointing out that such guides can only cover the very surface, may spread outdated knowledge, and do not help with the use of image or text sources and archaeological findings.

The book discussed here is to be the first of a series named “Historical Clothing From the Inside Out”. It intends to cover a number of eras, and wants to be, with its counterpart “A handbook for Women's Clothing of the Late 15th Century” exactly that- however, without telling us exactly what target group it aims for. Before we really start: unfortunately it does not do justice to the claim it states on the back: „[...] in-depth volume presents men's clothes [...]”, no matter what standard you apply. This, to be fair, is quite impossible on the 48 pages, which come with a nice appearance, lots of well-done drawings and image sources. The structure is, after a short introduction to the period, true to the description „from the braies [...] to the cloak and hat”, and briefly explains materials, stitches and dyes. From the perspective of someone knowing medieval clothing from Hollywood movies this is sufficient, and also for the beginner who would like to create his own clothing, this is an easy entry. But here, if not before, we meet one of the largest problems: where statements such as „most garments were sewn with linen thread” come from is not visible, since at hardly any point does the book quote a source. Image sources are thrown in without context, they are used to illustrate examples of what is described in the text, and are featured in the final illustration listing. However, another problem arises here: the one of the provenance. It is not clear if the authors wanted to cover European, northern European or Scandinavian fashion (as they just mention the latter once) with the excuse that there are few sources for it, and that they had to use the fashions of other areas instead, which they mostly did. Clothing from the

Netherlands, southern or southwest Germany, northern Germany and Italy, which all show completely different fashion styles to the experienced observer, none of which are reflected in the text though. For a reader only wanting to get a glimpse of late medieval fashion this may seem sufficient. But for someone actually wanting to learn about it in detail, with the goal of finally choosing from one style and reconstructing it, this is fatal. This approach also applies to the accessories like girdle pouches or belts, of which there are examples shown, which is laudable in itself. Unfortunately, this also leads us to the largest negative point of the book: the one-sidedness of the sources used. Text sources, like what contemporary writes said about fashion, excerpts from inventories describing material, dyes and details, are not found here. And especially for the shoes, which are probably the one part of medieval clothing we know the most about because of the literally thousands of examples found: there is not a single photo or reference to these. The closing, short bibliography gives mention to a.o. the standard references "Stepping through Time" or "Purses in Pieces". But it seems questionable if someone just taking the book to gain a brief overview on the clothing will go to the next library and obtain one of those, or whether they will close the book with the question in mind of how on earth they knew how shoes were sewn. The beginner, on the other hand, will probably go back to more experienced reenactors or simply search the internet.

Which leads us to the conclusion: to whom can we recommend this book? To be completely honest, it leaves one a little bit puzzled. If you're a reenactor yourself and you just want to show one of your work colleagues what you're doing on the weekends, it may help. For someone doling out the props for an upcoming movie and having to deal with the clothing of that period? Sure. Someone who is new to the topic and really aims for reconstructing clothing in the end? Perhaps. But in that case they could also simply go for the many guides on the Internet, which are, in many cases, even more in-depth. Especially if they are being reviewed frequently.

As for the series it is starting: that's what it is. A starting point. And an interesting attempt. We're left to hope that the next books will leave the superficial, use a broader variety of sources, and quote those sources more directly.

Book information:

Malmborg, A. & Schütz, W. 2018. *Handbook for Men's Clothing of the Late 15th Century. Part of the series Historical Clothing From the Inside Out*. ChronoCopia Publishing, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-981056-4-3

Link(s)

[Book Review: A Handbook for Women's Clothing of the Late 15th Century by Anna M...](#)

Keywords **textile**

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Country **Denmark**

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References

Male kit guide for Burgundian fashion in the late 15th century on the webpage of the "Company of Saynt George" (offline at the time of writing this text, you may need to contact the group directly) https://www.companie-of-st-george.ch/cms/?q=en/Clothing_Guide_Download

Project of the University of Innsbruck about the findings of Lengberg castle
https://www.uibk.ac.at/urgeschichte/projekte_forschung/textilien-lengbe...

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