

Reconstructing The French Hood

Sarah Lorraine

(SCA: Lady Sarah Wydville)

(Originally published on [Your Wardrobe Unlock'd](#), July 2009)

Credits:

The author wishes to thank Marion McNealy for her exhaustive editing skills and attention to detail; Cathy Hay for the impetus to compile such an extensive research project in one paper and for publishing it; and to the people of the Society for Creative Anachronism who attend the workshops, lectures and classes and provide the inspiration for practical application of research. Thank you!

I. Introduction

The widespread use of French Hoods amongst the middle and upper classes of 16th century England is a surprisingly static phenomenon, and even as clothing styles changed with relative fluidity throughout the century, the constant favor that the French Hood had found allows us to examine its progression of style in a much more comprehensive manner. It is worth noting that in my studies, I am becoming more and more convinced that there were regional differences between French Hood styles, as well as idiosyncratic construction and ornamentation, so pointing to one single unifying method of construction is somewhat unrealistic. Further study is merited to better discern these apparent differences in construction.

Living in the digital age, we are fortunate that other primary sources for sixteenth century clothing are now becoming widely available for study. Photography of English funerary effigies is becoming popular, and as high quality digital photographs make their way onto the Internet, researchers from all over the globe can benefit. It is worth the time to sort through images of these statues to glean invaluable information on the structure of the French Hood. In my first attempt to accurately reconstruct a French Hood, I relied solely on portraiture to guide me, in addition to written documentation, both contemporary and historical¹. With access to photographs, such as the ones catalogued by Dr. Jane Malcolm-Davies on TudorEffigies.co.uk, I have been able to refine my theories in addition to positing new ideas as to how French Hoods were likely constructed between the years of 1530 and 1560, as well as how they evolved after their heyday had passed.

¹ Sarah Lorraine, "A Lady's French Hood", Mode Historique, 2002, <<http://modehistorique.com/elizabethan/hood.html>>.

II. Structure of a French Hood

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the reconstruction of the French Hood, terminology appears poorly defined and often contradictory through the course of the 16th century. I have attempted to use standardized terms for the basic components of the French Hood based on the research of Janet Arnold, M. Channing Linthicum and Melanie Schuessler. These terms appear in contemporary wardrobe accounts and correspondence, as in the Lisle Letters, in relationship to French Hoods, though very little description is given as to how these pieces were worn. Through experimentation with construction methods, I have devised a plausible method of wearing the French Hood.

Beginning at the innermost layer, which would lie directly over the wearer's hair, and working outward, I will attempt to define the structure and function of each layer using period terms. Variations in the number of layers is evident in the small sampling of effigies I chose for this study, but it appears that no less than three layers are employed in all subjects.

Layer 1: The Coif and Crespine

The coif was the most ubiquitous base layer, presumably of linen or silk and typically white, though shades of red were popular in the first decades of the sixteenth century, particularly in the Low Countries². The exact shape of the coif is not known for certain; evidence for one particular theory of construction, namely a circular piece of fabric gathered into a shaped band, is minimal, but not unrealistic. Another theory is that it was

² Translation of Ovid's *Epistulae heroidum* Left page image, Cognac, 1496-1498, Manuscripts Department, Western Section, Fr. 875, Parchment <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bnf/images/bnf056a.jpg>>.

shaped in a way similar to extant embroidered coifs³; specifically, a single piece of fabric with no separate bag and band construction. Laura Mellin, in an article on the Elizabethan coif, demonstrates a plausible way to wear a single piece coif that replicates the effect of a gathered bag into a band around the head.⁴ Although extant coifs, like the ones on which Mellin's and Arnold's work are based, date to the very end of the 16th century and early 17th century, it is reasonable to postulate that minor variations in their construction might have allowed for something similar earlier on, though further research is needed to more precisely document the shape and construction of early coifs.

It has long been assumed that a pleated edging of gold or white material was stitched to the front edge of the coif, but in some cases, an alternate style is apparent, one that consists of a gathered head covering distinctly different in appearance to the typical coif. Other researchers⁵ have questioned if this distinct covering was joined to the coif, but written documentation dating to the 16th century suggests that it may have been a separate entity known as a "crespine". In Cotgrave's A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues, this term is directly applied to the French Hood, and contains the root word "crespi", which he describes as a "curled or frizzed"⁶. Esoteric though the translation is, it not unreasonable to infer that the pleated or gathered head covering might actually have been a separate part of the French Hood's construction.

Whether worn alone or in addition to a crespine, a chinstrap, presumably attached to the coif, is sometimes visible at the lower jaw line, though some evidence seems to

³ Janet Arnold, Patterns of Fashions 4: The Cut and construction of linen shirts, smocks, neckwear, headwear and accessories for men and woman c. 1540-1660, (London, 2008), 46-47.

⁴ Laura Mellin, "How To Wear The Elizabethan Coif", Extreme Costuming, October 2004, <<http://www.extremecostuming.com/articles/howtowearthecoif.html>>.

⁵ Melanie Schuessler, "French Hoods: Development of a Sixteenth-Century Court Fashion", Medieval Clothing & Textiles, Vol. 5, 154.

⁶ Randle Cotgrave, A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues, (London, 1611), 258.

indicate that chinstraps were not always present. For example, in contemporary portraiture, particularly in portraits of Englishwomen painted by Hans Holbein the Younger, one frequently observes chinstraps, yet they are not always present in other works by other artists. Whether this is simply artistic license, the angle of the sitter (a full front pose versus a three-quarter turned or side profile), or an evolution in which the strap was eventually discarded in favor of a different method of securing the headdress is unclear. Personal experimentation in pinning both layers to the wearer's hair yielded positive results and negated the need for a chinstrap to keep the structure stable⁷, but because all the of effigies examined in this study exhibit them, and given the range of dates from earliest to latest effigies, we will consider the chinstrap an essential element to secure the hood on the head throughout the scope of this examination.

Layers 2-3: The Paste

Costume historians have offered many conflicting theories regarding the definition of the paste, as the term infrequently occurs in wardrobe accounts, yet when it does it is listed along with the other items that make up the entire structure termed a French Hood.⁸ In modern costuming parlance, the paste is often termed a “crescent” owing to its apparent shape when on the head. I believe the paste refers to the piece or pieces worn over the coif and under the topmost layer, usually represented in portraiture as white, black or red (though in some instances, the paste was matched to the gown's fabric, particularly during the first half of the 16th century). This theory is further supported by the portraits presented in this study, each with at least one paste evident over the coif or crespine.

⁷ Sarah Lorraine, “Fabulous French Hoods”, August 2007, Mode Historique.
<http://modehistorique.com/elizabethan/french_hood/french_hoods.html>.

⁸ Schuessler, 151.

In post-1550 examples seen on many effigies, it is apparent that the paste may have a bag attachment at the back of the head. This might seem redundant, assuming the hair has been braided up and concealed by the innermost layer of the coif or crespine, yet a delineation of the bag covering the back of the head and the crescent shaped paste above it, appears clearly beneath the fall of the hood in the back. A similar construction is clearly evident from a medal struck with the profile of Mary I, c. 1555⁹. Another possibility is that the paste is simply a crescent shaped piece of fabric without a bag attachment, and that the bag seen at the back of the head belongs to the coif. Both are plausible, as the available evidence seems to support either possibility.

Layer 4: The Hood.

The Hood is the portion that falls from the crown and normally covers the back of the head (as in some pre-1550 C.E. examples)¹⁰, or falls in a pleated arrangement over the bag covering the hair at the back (as is evident from various examples from 1550-onwards)¹¹. It is typically represented¹¹ in portraits as being black or otherwise dark colored. The hood portion initially began as a draped veil of black velvet or wool, often with a contrasting lining that was turned back at the crown of the head (perhaps the origin of the eventual paste pieces) and likely pinned to the coif beneath.¹² Eventually, this veil began to shorten, the end creeping closer to the back of the head, and was secured to the paste. In post-1550 C.E. examples, the hood appears to be a tube that is pleated to a

⁹ David Williamson, "A medal depicting the profile of Queen Mary I, c. 1555 by Jacopo da Trezzo." The National Portrait Gallery History Kings and Queens of England, (Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 70.

¹⁰ Janet Backhouse, "A Lover Addressing Three Ladies, Master of the Prayerbooks of c.1500", ", The Illuminated Page: Ten Centuries of Manuscript Painting, (Toronto Press, Inc. 1997), 214.

¹¹ Janet Arnold, "Figs. 291 & 292, Effigy of Dorothy Vernon, 1584", Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, (Great Britain, 1988), 203.

¹² J. Paul Getty Trust, "Hèloise Instructs her Pupil", fol. 137. Master of the Prayer Books of Around 1500", Illuminating the Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe, (USA, 2003), 400.

width of approximately 4-5” across the crown of the head and falls straight down the back. The length of the hood appears to come almost to waist level, but no shorter than the base of the shoulder blades in the effigies examined in this study.

Billiments

Though the subjects considered in this analysis show plainer styles of French Hoods, one cannot fail to mention the most distinguishing feature of this style of headdress, the billiments. Often found in matched sets of upper and lower billiments, these were metal and jewel-work embellishments, possibly attached to a removable band or stitched directly to the hood structure and the front edge of the coif.¹³ Strictly decorative, they do not seem to serve an integral function of the French Hood itself, as evidenced by the fact that they could be worn separately from the hood structure as a type of hair ornament. Wearing the billiments independently in this manner was an especially popular form of hair decoration in France and Italy during this time period, but judging from evidence in portraiture, does not seem to be widely adopted in England during the 16th century.

III. A note about effigies.

Examination of primary source art is invaluable to the study of the French Hood, but to truly understand the construction of the French Hood, funerary effigies are invaluable. Until quite recently, most costume historians have based their conjectures of French Hood construction solely on painted portraits, which skew the perspective of the headdress and cause it to appear to angle much higher off the head. Costumers

¹³ Nancy Cox and Karin Dannehl, Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities, 1550-1820 (2007). URL: <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=58699>>.

attempting to recreate the effect of the French Hood have relied on modern methods of construction that incorporate buckram and millinery wire and result in a heavy and unstable headdress. However, in examining statuary relevant to its construction, it becomes apparent that the entire structure of the French Hood is actually quite low in profile and was likely built up over two braids, crossed over the crown of the head.¹⁴ This arrangement serves two purposes: First, it anchors the layers of the French Hood and prevents it from slipping backwards off the head; second, it creates a slight upward angle from the crown of the head so that the entire headdress appears to have more height.

Two excellent internet resources for finding effigies that demonstrate the French Hood are <http://www.tudoreffigies.co.uk/browse/default.asp> and <http://plainattyre.blogspot.com/>.

The Typical Arrangement: French Hoods from 1540-1590

The hair

¹⁴ Ninya Mikhaila and Jane Malcom-Davies, The Tudor Tailor, London: Batsford Ltd., 2006, 142.

The support structure of the French Hood is not inherent in its construction. There is no evidence to suggest that the French Hood was composed of a single unit, stitched together to form a complete headdress. Apart from wardrobe accounts of paste stiffening and the presence of a wire in the Museum of London¹⁵ that is theorized to be part of a French Hood, there is little support for the most common modern theatrical method of constructing the French Hood as a single headdress (as seen in The Tudor Tailor).

The basis of the French Hood begins with the hair, which is centrally parted and plaited into two braids. These braids are then crossed over the crown of the head and secured by taping.¹⁶ Arranging the hair in this manner not only allows for a supportive under layer for the entire headdress, but it also provides the characteristic backward projection of the French Hood.

A popular fashion in France during the mid-16th century was to wear this style of hair exposed and highly ornamented with pearls, jewels, flowers and upper and lower billiments (see section “Billiments”). This allows us to see how the hair was arranged under the French Hood.

¹⁵ Geoff Egan, Material Culture in London in an age of transition, p. 52

¹⁶ Margo Farnsworth, “Italian Renaissance Hair Taping”, <
<http://www.mfgraffix.com/hird/faolt/hairtape.html>>



François Clouet, "Elizabeth of Austria", 1571



François Clouet, "Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre", 1570.



Anonymous, "Portrait of Margot de Valois", 2nd half of the 16th century.

The Coif:



Lucas de Heere, “Three Gentlewomen of London and a Countrywoman”, c. 1570, The first and third ladies wear a coif on their heads, similar to the underlying coif of the French Hood.

The coif curves towards the cheekbones, covering the ears, and flares out on either side of the forehead, coming forward into a point at the center; perhaps wired along the edge in order to facilitate the shaping. Based upon contemporary portraiture, this layer might be of white linen or silk, though black is also possible. A chinstrap is occasionally suggested at the jaw line, and is presumably connected to this layer, though not all portraits and effigies show a chin strap. When worn with a French Hood, a pleated frill is typically seen at the very edge of this layer; this could be the vestiges of the

“crespine” or “creppin”¹⁷, a finely pleated head covering of expensive material such as cloth of gold or silver, or similar. The gathers are tightly formed into regular “accordion” pleats around the face, and frame the face to the jawline.



Hans Holbein the Younger, “Portrait of An Unknown Lady”, c. 1540.

The Paste: It is difficult to deduce the exact structure of this layer. It could be a separate band that crosses over the coif, possibly part of another coif-like structure, or may even be part of the hood portion. It is also plausible that it is part of a second coif-like structure that covers the back of the head. If this is so, the presence of a secondary outer coif over an already present coif may seem redundant, but some side profiles of other

¹⁷ Arnold, Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d, p. 361

effigies and sculpture seem to suggest a gathered bag covering the back of the head.¹⁸ If in black, as some portraits suggest, it could easily blend into the hood at the back of the neck, also black, making it difficult to differentiate between the two separate pieces.



Hans Holbein the Younger, "Portrait of an unknown woman" (thought to be Elizabeth Seymour), c. 1540

Another theory can be examined in Holbein's portrait, thought to be of Elizabeth Seymour¹⁹, which also evidences such a layer. In the Holbein example, the layer is barely suggested, and indeed, one needs a very high-resolution image to discern it, as it is white on white. If we are to assume that Layer 2 is white, then it cannot be part of the hood portion, and must be a separate piece that perhaps assists in keeping the entire structure secure on the head. Examples of French Hoods from before and after this

¹⁸ David Williamson, "A medal depicting the profile of Queen Mary I, c. 1555 by Jacopo da Trezzo." The National Portrait Gallery History Kings and Queens of England, (Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 70.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Seymour [Article] Retrieved January 7, 2009 from the World Wide Web:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Seymour>

period often do not include any indication of this layer, meaning that it might have been a variation of sorts or was simply optional.

The Hood:

It is difficult to intuit the actual structure of the hood portion from portraits alone, as it is predominantly depicted as being black, and therefore any details in arrangement are lost. Looking to effigies, or in the Holbein sketch above, gives the researcher a better understanding of how the hood was possibly constructed. Typically, this layer follows the line of the paste, set about 2” back from the edge. In several examples, it appears in conjunction with a flap of fabric at the very back of the head. The hood portion is visible falling from the center top of this piece. Some debate exists as to whether the hood is attached to this layer and falls independently from the top of the head. Earlier examples of French Hoods from the first half of the 16th century seem to support the theory that the hood is an entire structure unto itself, pleated and attached to the crown of the head, and secured at the nape of the neck to conceal the back of the head.²⁰ Other examples from the mid-16th century, such as the profile of Mary I seen on a medal struck c. 1555,²¹ clearly show the back of what is presumably a coif under a flat veil that falls independently from the top of the head. It is possible that both methods were used, again giving consideration to regional differences or personal preference, as both examples can be seen throughout the historical record.

²⁰ Backhouse, “David and Bathsheba”, 227.

²¹ Williamson, 70.

Billiments and no billiments:

Typically, billiments came in paired combinations known as “upper” and “lower” billiments. The upper billiments were often larger and more ornate, and sat along the top ridge of the hood and paste. Lower billiments were generally smaller and framed the edge of the coif, placed about 2cm from the pleated frill, as can be seen in the portrait below.



Hans Holbein the Younger, “Elizabeth, Lady Audley”. This portrait shows an example of upper and lower billiments.

Many portraits and effigies depict examples of a less ornate style of French Hood, lacking upper and lower billiments. This leads us to assume that the billiments were not integral to the overall structure of the French Hood and may have been purely decorative. They could be added or removed as needed. Many of Holbein’s more informal sketches

of women in the court of Henry VIII show the omission of billiments, as do a number of portraits and effigies from later in the 16th century.



Unknown Artist, "Portrait of a lady, aged 24", 1560.

Bongrace

An additional component to the French Hood is the bongrace. This is alternately described and depicted as the veil portion of the French Hood flipped up over the top of the head and pinned²², or as a separate piece, later termed "a shadow", that attaches to the front of the French Hood to act as a sun visor of sorts.²³

²² Malcom-Davies, The Tudor Tailor: Reconstructing sixteenth century dress, p. 29

²³ Arnold, Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, pp. 205, 361



Hans Holbein the Younger, "Margaret Wyatt, Lady Lee", 1540. Showing an additional "shadow" piece pinned over the top of the hood.



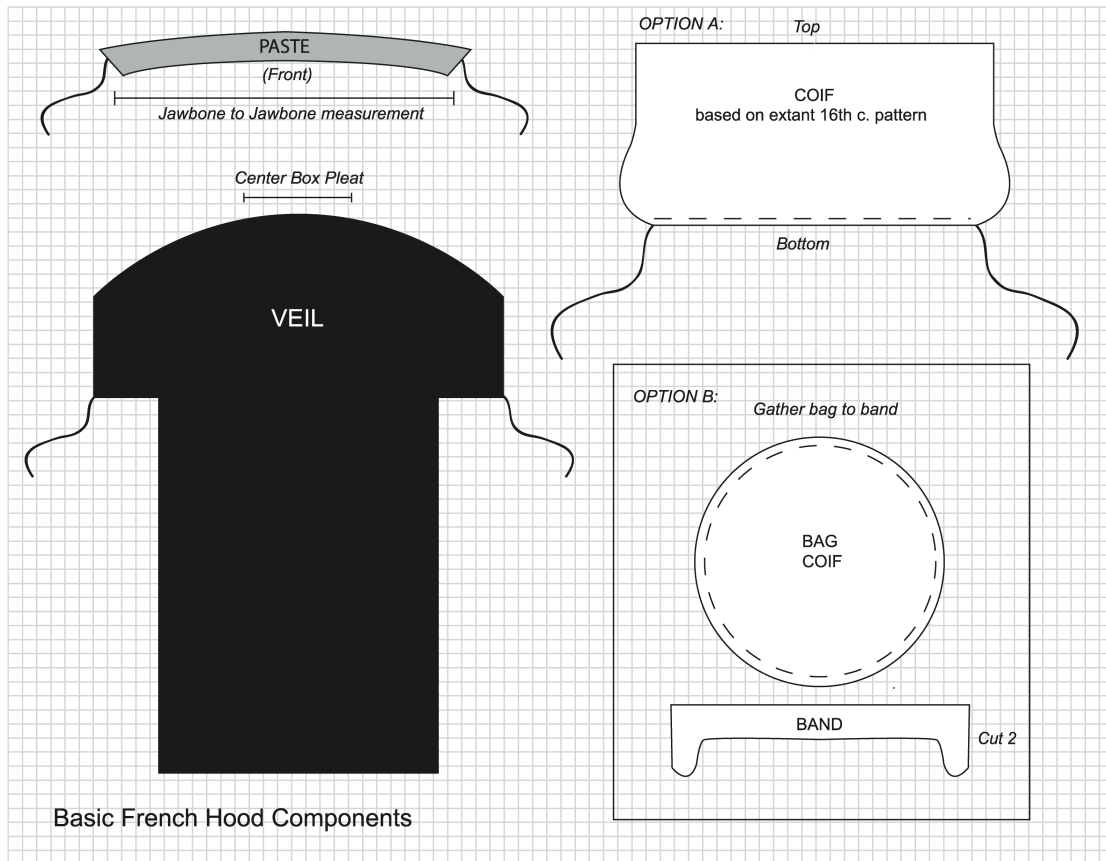
Hans Holbein the Younger, "Portrait of Lady Hoby", 1536-40. This sketch is a good example of both the bonnet and the variety of methods used to construct the French Hood.



William Segar (attr.) "Portrait of an unknown lady", c. 1595. Shows a much later version of French Hood, with the veil pulled over the top of the head.

Pattern Layout

Please note: The patterns are approximate and do not reflect actual measurements. You must measure yourself and experiment to get the correct fit.



III. The Author's Recreation Using Three Construction Layers

Step 1: Braiding the hair



Step 2: Crossing the braids over the crown of the head



Step 3 & 4: Securing the coif & paste



Step 5: Adding the veil & billiments and pinning the hood to the coif and braids.



Final Result:



Bibliography

Arnold, Janet. Patterns of Fashions 4: The Cut and construction of linen shirts, smocks, neckwear, headwear and accessories for men and women c. 1540-1660. London: Macmillan, 2008.

Arnold, Janet. Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd. Leeds: Maney & Sons, 1988.

Backhouse, Janet. The Illuminated Page: Ten Centuries of Manuscript Painting, Toronto: Toronto Press, Inc., 1997

Cotgrave, Randle. A dictionarie of the French and English tongues, 1611, London. University of South Carolina Press, 1950.

Cox, Nancy and Karin Dannehl. "Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities, 1550-1820" (2007). <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=58699>>

Kren, Thomas and Scot McKendrick (Editors). Illuminating the Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe. J. Paul Getty Trust: Getty Publications, 2003.

Lorraine, Sarah. "A Lady's French Hood", Mode Historique, June 2002
<<http://modehistorique.com/elizabethan/hood.html>>.

Lorraine, Sarah. "Fabulous French Hoods" Mode Historique, August 2007
<http://modehistorique.com/elizabethan/french_hood/french_hoods.html>.

Mellin, Laura. "How To Wear The Elizabethan Coif", Extreme Costuming, October 2004, <<http://www.extremecostuming.com/articles/howtowearthecoif.html>>.

Mikhaila, Ninya and Jane Malcom-Davies. The Tudor Tailor. London: Batsford Ltd., 2006.

Pass, Louise. "The French Hood: The evolution and construction of the French Hood 1500-1600". November 2008. <<http://woodsholme.com/hoods/FrenchHood-LouisePass.pdf>>

Richardson, Douglas and Kimball G. Everingham. Magna Carta Ancestry: A Study in Colonial and Medieval Families. Genealogical Publishing Company, 2005.

Schuessler, Melanie. "French Hoods: Development of a Sixteenth-Century Court Fashion", Medieval Clothing & Textiles, Vol. 5. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2009.

Small, Kimiko. "A Gentlewoman's Tudor Research: French Hood Images". 2003-2008.
<<http://www.kimiko1.com/research-16th/FrenchHood/index.html>>

St. Clair Byrne, Muriel. The Lisle Letters. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Williamson, David. The National Portrait Gallery History Kings and Queens of England,
Barnes & Noble Books, 2003

On The Web:

A Perfectly Plausible French Hood by Sarah Lorraine

<http://www.modehistorique.com/elizabethan/coif.html>

(The author's first attempt at recreating a period French Hood)

Plain Attyre Blog by Jane of Stockton

<http://plainattyre.blogspot.com/>

(Images of 16th century effigies culled from various Flickr accounts. Invaluable!)

French Hood Images by Kimiko Small

<http://www.kimiko1.com/research-16th/FrenchHood/index.html>

(A visual tour of French Hoods throughout the 16th century)

French Hood – Ninya Mikhaila

<http://www.ninyamikhaila.com/frenchhood.html>

(Instructions on reproducing the French Hood featured in The Tudor Tailor)

French Hood – Drea Leed

<http://www.elizabethancostume.net/headwear/frenchhood.html>

(A brief essay on the history of the French Hood)

Tudor Effigies – Maintained by Dr. Jane Malcolm-Davies

<http://www.tudoreffigies.co.uk/default.asp>

(A database of images documenting Tudor & Elizabethan clothing through effigies)