

Two-Strap (Masculine) Dutch 14th Century Girdle Purse



*Left - an extant purse from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Right and Below - first attempt at a recreation of this general style of girdle purse by Edward
the Stranger*



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OVERVIEW

- Extant girdle purses of this type, and art of the same, were found dating from the 14th to 17th century in the Netherlands¹
- The two-strap style is exclusively seen on men in period artwork
- This purse would be used to hold coinage and other small/handheld items that were not terribly fragile or pointed (as such items would need a special case)
- The purse was in regular use by commoners and nobles alike, though the specific purses would vary in detail and ornateness depending on the class of the owner
- The archaeological record indicates heavier leather² (likely cow or calf) would be used for the outer portions of the flaps, with textile or chamois for the inner part of the front flap (to allow for stretch/bulging) and a more supple skin, like goat, for the optional pouchlets
- The more complex and decorated the purse, the more expensive, with plain purses being more common both in the archaeological record and in the sense of class
- These purses were generally 20-25 cm by 20-25 cm (often with both overall length and width being the same), with the straps, back, and front flap sometimes formed of a single continuous piece of leather, on which was sewn the interior of the front flap, the front of the back compartment, and any pouchlets and/or buckle strap
- The purse was most often constructed inside out, so the seams were on the inside in the final form (this also makes finishing those edges less important)
- Tools used by the leathercrafter in period for a purse of this style would include awls, needles, likely multiple styles of blade, mallets/mauls/hammers, and possibly punches (for larger holes) or stamps (for decoration)
- Materials aside from leather would be: fabric for lining; waxed linen thread or sinew for stitching; adhesive or clamps to hold the pieces together for stitching; water to get the heavier leather supple enough to turn right side out; leather lace for the pouchlets; buckle(s) (and possibly strap hardware); dyes³ if desired (though depending on the time and place, dyeing of leather may have been done by a third party as the dyeing of cloth often was); decorative studs (found on at least one purse, made of tin-plated iron) or other hardware if desired; and possibly some kind of protective coating of oil or wax

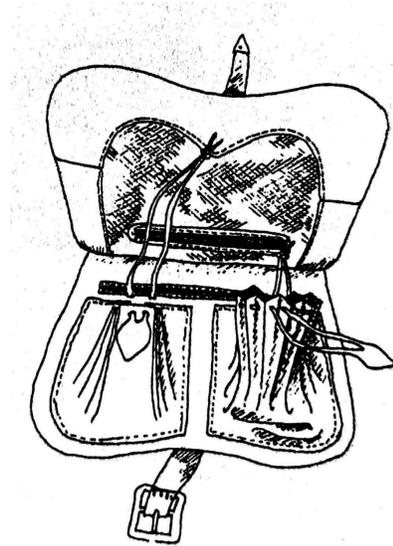
¹ Goubitz, *Purses in Pieces: Archaeological finds of the late medieval and 16th-century leather purses, pouches, bags, and cases in the Netherlands*, p.15.

² The leather composing most of this style of pouch, especially the front, would likely have been vegetable-tanned, since some extants were tooled and/or molded (only possible on veg-tan).

³ Period Leather Dyeing is a masterclass on its own that I personally cannot teach, but I have used vinegar to good effect and am somewhat aware of other period dyes; more on those later.

INTRODUCTION

Between acquiring and reading Olaf Goubitz's book, *Purses in Pieces: Archaeological Finds of Late Medieval and 16th Century Leather Purses, Pouches, Bags and Cases in the Netherlands*, and needing to add something to the Andelcrag Bardic Champion regalia, choosing to make a belt pouch was obvious. I needed a place to put my "songbook"⁴ and anticipated a similar situation for future bardic champions. I made a prototype girdle purse after Pennsic 50 with some materials I had on hand, but decided Golden Awl II was an excellent opportunity to improve on my technique and practice my research and documentation skills.



Left - an example of a girdle purse from *Purses in Pieces*, opened to display the pouchlets and their laces as well as the interior apertures (p.26).

The specific shape was less significant to me than the overall functionality of the purse: pouchlets conveniently keep coins and keys separate from the easily-scratched phone in the main pocket, while the front flap compartment can be used for an event program or other small papers, even a little journal and pen. So I focused on the purses with pouchlets. Nearly all the girdle purses in *Purses in Pieces* were at least 20 cm x 20 cm (roughly 7.8" x 7.8"), more than enough to hold a midsize smartphone in one of the main compartments, so size concerns didn't narrow down my selection much.

I didn't like the plainness of the squarer shapes, but wasn't looking forward to cutting a truly complex shape out of four layers of leather. I settled on a kidney-shaped pouch for my first attempt, and for Golden Awl II, I plan on a version with more pointed corners and a more elaborate belt loop interspace, based on a pattern I've developed on paper (guided by extant purses) but not attempted yet. I also decided to include reinforcement strips around the pouchlets and compartment openings on my updated purse, as are implied by some of the finds in *Purses in Pieces*.

Goubitz makes the distinction that two-strap girdle purses were exclusively seen on men in 14th to 17th century Dutch artwork, while single-loop purses (of somewhat more varied styles) were occasionally worn by women. Much of the art of men in girdle purses includes a dagger in

⁴ Phone. I mean my phone.

the interspace between the loops, which may be the reason two-loop purses were masculine: women were not frequently armed in this fashion. Goubitz also specifies that the girdle purse was in regular use by commoners and noblemen both, though the class of the owner would impact how ornate the purse might be as well as how practical the shape was.⁵

⁵ Goubitz, p. 15.

METHODS & MATERIALS

LEATHER

The archaeological record, per Goubitz, indicates heavier leathers (likely cow or calfskin) would be used for the outer portions of the flaps, with textile or chamois for the inner part of the front flap (possibly to allow for bulging or stretching), and a more supple skin, like goat, for the optional pouchlets.⁶

Due to the time constraints of this competition and my own limitations of knowledge and ability concerning period dyeing procedures, I elected to use factory-dyed veg-tan leathers (calf and goat) for the main part of the bag and pouchlets, and a factory-dyed chrome-tanned deerskin suede split for the lining of the front flap. This lining was traditionally made with a textile or chamois hide, but lacking easy access to chamois⁷ (a species of European goat-antelope) leather or a desirable and affordable period textile, I selected a (North American) deerskin suede in a similar color as chamois that I hope has similar enough properties (namely, in my case, the ability to stretch a bit under duress, and some toughness to resist this duress). The deerskin suede is soft and pliant, as chamois is described, but would not have all of the properties that makes chamois leather particularly desirable but are not necessary in this use: porous and absorbent and with almost no abrasiveness.

⁶ Goubitz, p. 25.

⁷ A problem compounded by the use of “chamois” to mean a certain type of cotton or microfiber cloth these days, as well as to mean imitation chamois hide made using sheep or lambskin splits (the suede part of the leather) tanned in oil.



Left - *Rupicapra rupicapra*, or *Alpine chamois*, is a species of goat-antelope native to several mountain ranges of Europe. (wikipedia)



Right - male *Odocoileus virginianus* or another subspecies of white tailed deer common in North America. White tailed deer are larger and much more populous than chamois, and are farmed for meat and byproducts including leather in multiple countries. (wikipedia)

I also chose to use precut lace for both the decorative top-lacing of the purse and the closure laces on the pouchlets in my original purse. For the Golden Awl II purse I plan to cut my own lace. Precut lace may be fine for the top lacing, contest rules permitting, but the pouchlets traditionally used a different style of leather thong than the plain, even lace accessible today. From one tip, the leather strip would be cut in half lengthwise to almost the very end, leaving a double length of lace and a small pull-tab in the center. This pull tab conveniently works to open the pouchlets, and the other ends might have a decorative bead tied on, ends together, to make it similarly easy to grab. There's no real need to tie off the pouchlets, since the friction of the leather on leather is more than adequate to the task of keeping the pouchlets closed once pulled taut.

LEATHER DYES

Vegetable-tanned leather is easy enough to turn black without using a true "dye": vinegar is made by dissolving iron in vinegar and it reacts with the tannins in vegetable-tanned leather and blackens it as a result. The light golden yellow color of the deerskin suede would have been more challenging to replicate in period with dyes - but since properly tanned chamois isn't too far off in color, just not as saturated, I think achieving this color might have been possible with period dyes (such as the turmeric-based dye as attempted by Dafydd ap Alan and described in *The Plictho of Gioanventura Rosetti: instructions in the art of the dyers which teaches the dyeing of woolen cloths, linens, cottons, and silk by the great art as well as by the common*) on chamois leather.



Left - Authentic chamois leather, smooth and absorbent, frequently used for cleaning and buffing because it's so non-abrasive.

Right - the yellow dye recipe from

The Plictho. *Curcuma* is another word for turmeric, per ap Alan.

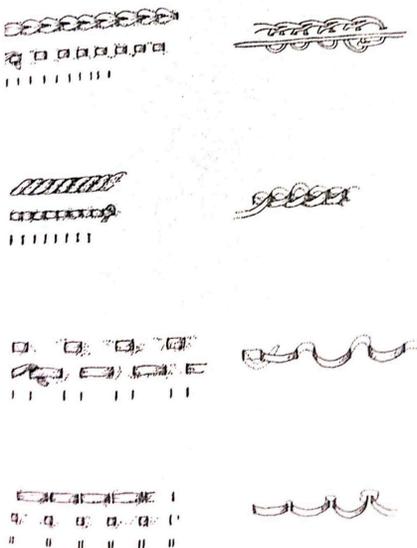
To make skins yellow.
 207. You will take a skin that is dressed by the leaf. For each skin take one and a quarter ounces of curcuma that is pestled and two ounces of roche alum. Set to cook in two half mezzette of clear water and make it boil so much that it drops by one third. After having done this, spread out your skins and give them of this color, one hand. Set it to cool and then to dry. When it is dried,
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give it one more hand and do thus until it gets the color that you like. Having done this, give it the atrop, the pole, the button of glass and you will have a fine color.

White is not a color documented in *The Plictho* in a leather dye recipe, however it does make mention of four "gray" dye recipes. Possibly one of these would have been light enough to be called white by our standards, especially if the leather was prepared with alum.

CONSTRUCTION

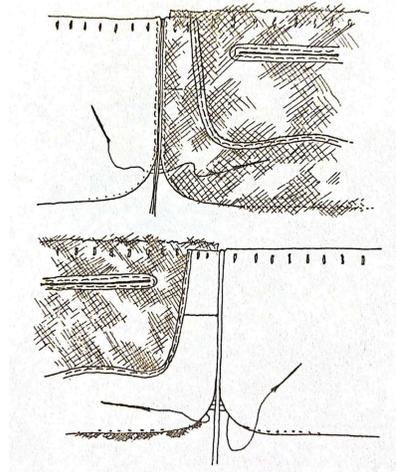
A quick survey of the extant examples in *Purses in Pieces* showed they were generally 20-25 cm by 20-25 cm (often with both overall length and width being the same), with the straps, back, and front flap sometimes formed of a single continuous piece of leather, on which was sewn the interior of the front flap, the front of the back compartment, and any pouchlets and/or buckle



strap. The purse was most often constructed with the right sides together, so the seams were on the inside in the final form (this also made finishing those edges less important). The pouchlets, chamois/textile interior of the front compartment, and all reinforcement strips would be sewn into place first, then the purse assembled inside out. The toplacing would go on last, securing the buckle strap into place and compressing the top of the purse to make the main straps into belt loops.

Left - from *Purses in Pieces*, "Four methods for joining the purse parts by means of a strip of leather. For each of the methods, the appearance of both sides of the purse is shown, as well as the pattern of perforations."

Right - drawing from *Purses in Pieces*, showing how the lining extends to the very edge of the front compartment. Also shows the reinforcement strip on the aperture of the lining.



TOOLS & MATERIALS

Many leathercrafting tools have changed very little in the past several hundred years. Tools used by the leathercrafter in the 14th to 16th century for a purse of this style would include awls, handmade needles (though not necessarily metal ones from a smithy), likely multiple styles of blade for different cuts and skiving, mallets/mauls/hammers, and possibly punches (for larger holes) or stamps (for decoration).

The tools I have used to make the prototype, and will use to make the new purse include...awls, needles, multiple styles of blade, a mallet or maul, and punches for larger holes. I have also brought commercially available tooling stamps in case I decide to/have time to do a little extra decoration. The stitching pony is one of the notable exceptions to the "leatherworking tools haven't changed much" statement: my cursory research had trouble finding a definitive first use, but the extant stitching horses⁸ I saw all seem to date no earlier than the early 19th century. Stitching clams seem to be a bit older, maybe late 17th/mid-18th century,⁹ but not as far back as the 16th century that I can tell. I intend to use a commercial, modern stitching pony to assist with assembling my purse at a higher speed than is possible when cramming it between my knees, which I'm supposing is how it was done before the stitching horses and clams were invented.

Materials aside from leather would be: fabric for lining; waxed linen thread or sinew for stitching; adhesive or clamps to hold the pieces together for stitching; water to get the heavier leather supple enough to turn right side out; leather lace for the pouchlets; metal buckle(s) (and possibly strap hardware); dyes if desired (though depending on the time and place, dyeing of leather may have been done by a third party as the dyeing of cloth often was); decorative studs (found on at least one purse, made of tin-plated iron) or other hardware if desired; and possibly some kind of protective coating of oil or wax.

⁸ A stitching horse is a full bench with an attached clamp, a stitching pony is a clamp on a stand, designed to be held under your feet or thighs while you sit. Stitching clams are hinged staves held closed by laying one thigh over them.

⁹ Ed Crews, "Working in Harness."

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APPENDICES

EXTANTS, several of which are referenced in *Purses in Pieces*.



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