



Medieval Textiles

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Camelin

by Nancy M Michael

Camelin is widely understood to be a medium quality wool fabric. The actual animal's wool is where opinion differs. Due to its name, it is sometimes said to be the hair of the camel. The camel is a double coated creature with an extremely fine, downy undercoat and a rough outercoat. The outercoat is commonly spun into rope and used for the girths for the camel packs¹ or used to make an extremely coarse cloth used for tents. During the winter months, the camel develops a thick coat which is shed by the handful in the spring. The coarse outer coat is removed from the fine undercoat (dehairing: a labor intensive process) and the undercoat is spun into a fine yarn used to weave a fine, buttery soft cloth. In my experience the down hair of the camel is second in fineness only to cashmere. Camel down is inelastic and warmer than sheep wool. Although these facts do not necessarily rule out camel down cloth being cameline, in light of the fine quality of camel wool cloth, it does not support it either. The coarse hair of the camel would be unsuitable for clothing, and the fine undercoat, like cashmere, would be used to make cloth far too fine for outerwear nor would it be prescribed for the mendicant orders (such as the Franciscans).

The other option is that the wool is that of the 'little camel' or angora goat. According to the Dictionary of Phrase and Fable by E. Cobham Brewer, "it is a fine cloth made of goats' hair, called Turkish yarn, and is from the Arabic word camlat, which Littré says is so called from seil el camel (the Angora goat)" Mohair is ideally suited for medium weight cloth, especially when used as outerwear. More coarse than many sheep's wools yet more beautiful, it's drape, sheen and iridescence belie its strength and abrasion resistance. There is a range of qualities possible with this fiber as well, since young mohair can be very fine in grist while maintaining its beauty; the hair of the elderly goat can be coarse. Even when full to the point of felting, it retains its

sheen. In this condition, it sheds water and dirt easily. Rodier seconds this opinion, "But I doubt if the word camelin came from camel. It came, doubtless, from khaml, which meant shaggy, and was used for shaggy cloth in wool, silk or any other textile fibre... and the nap of camelin, like that of the draps of Charlemagne's time, had the soft nap which gave it warmth and yet was not, like freze, rough to the touch."² It may also be noted that Crowfoot et al, in describing the London finds, mention that the non-sheep animal hair garments found were from goats and a mustelid (weasel or stoat) not camel.³

Camelin is usually found referring to outerwear or medium quality cloth, not finery. The will of Elena Clerk (an Englishwoman living in Rome) in 1390 mentions, "...to Agnes Sparcha, an English woman, one woollen gown (juppolantem) a hood, a cloak of camelin cloth and one ducat..."⁴. There is also the "peasant's promise on taking over his aged parents' land to provide them with food and a new camelin gown each year"⁵. Yet, probably the best known reference to camelin is from the biography of St. Louis IX of France.

"The King gave me leave to go; and bade me, in full council, buy him a hundred pieces of camelin of divers colours to give to the Franciscans when we should come to France...I sent four of the pieces of stuff at once to the Queen. The knight who took them, carried them wrapped in a white cloth. When the Queen saw him enter the chamber where she was, she knelt down before him, and the knight on his side knelt down before her; and the Queen said to him: "Rise, Sir knight, you who carry relics ought not to kneel." –But the knight said: "Lady, these are not relics; - they are some pieces of camelin that my lord sends you." – when the queen and her ladies heard this, they burst out laughing, and the Queen said to my knight: "Tell your lord, that the woe betide him the

day he made me kneel to his camelin.” Elsewhere in the same volume the story is told wherein the King and his lords ride out on hunt in the rain. Upon returning, the king points out the fact that his simple camelin cloak is far superior to their raiment, the former need only be shaken and hung near the warmth of the fire to be good as new whereas the fur robes will be ruined and become stiff with drying. Unfortunately, this brings us to the words of les Etoffes Dictionnaire historique, “the manufacture of this so popular wool fabric is not known in detail.” Is it a plain weave? A twill? How many threads per inch? However, Crowfoot describes medium quality cloth as that being between 10 and 18 threads per cm (24 and 45 epi/ppi). In the London finds, the tabby woven fabrics noted in the scatter diagrams have thread densities between approx 10 and 17 threads/cm (25 and 43 epi/ppi) for the early 14th C⁶. The range in twills is generally finer in grist than the tabby.

For sample weaving, I look again at St. Louis of France. It is after his crusade that he leaves the fine cloth in favor of camelin. At this point in his life he becomes a Franciscan Third Order member. Although king of France, he feels called to follow St. Francis who is most often shown wearing bure. Bure is a naturally colored (grey or brown) woolen cloth. The actual cloth of St. Francis’ cowl has 8 ends/cm in the warp and 10 ends/cm in the weft (after fulling).

These numbers would put it in the range of a coarse cloth rather than a medium cloth. A slightly finer cloth and one with the halo and glow of mohair would be simple enough for the Franciscan spirit, yet be of a quality that may appeal to Louis. It also appears that Louis did not wear the finest grade of camelin as de Joinville notes that Robert of Sorbonne wore finer camelin than the king. Thus, my samples may very well be of a cloth ‘fit for a king’ although the absolute description of such fabric is unknown.

Endnotes:

- 1 Per 10th-century Aramaic lexicographer, East-Syrian (Nestorian) bishop Bar-Bahlul from Baghdad, this rope is called ‘Gamla’
- 2 Rodier, Paul. The Romance of French Weaving, p.65
- 3 Crowfoot, et al. Textiles and Clothing 1150-1450 p. 18
- 4 Harvey, Margaret. The English in Rome: 1362-1420: Portrait of an Expatriate Community.
- 5 Piponnier, Françoise & Mane, Perrine. Dress in the Middle Ages p. 34
- 6 Crowfoot, et al. P.45.

Sources:

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