

Evolution of the Kilt

From Ancient Times to 1600 — *léine* and *brat*



Modern Depiction of an Ancient Gael

The Highland Scots emigrated from Ireland around 375 ce. They displaced the native Picts and made the Highlands their own. From their native land, they brought Irish dress. This consisted of a *léine* [LAY-na] and a *brat*. *Léine* is the modern Irish word for shirt. In antiquity, the *léine* was similar to a linen undertunic, although silk is occasionally mentioned. It was usually white or unbleached, often decorated with red or gold embroidery at the neck and cuffs, and sometimes hooded as well. A woman wore it long; a man's *léine* ended at his knees. In the earliest times, the *léine* probably had no shape at all. However, in the Norman era, it gained definition in the waist and by the Elizabethan age, it had become a full pleated smock made from at least 7 yards of fabric. It was always made of linen and its color was invariably yellow. The English referred to it as the "saffron shirt" and in 1537 Henry VIII banned its use in Ireland (saffron was, and still is, a very expensive spice; its use as a dye was a luxury reserved for nobility, not the common Irish). By this time, the *léine* had also developed long, training sleeves. It has been pictured as long and flowing, the length hitched up over a belt. Other depictions, particularly in Ulster and the islands nearest Scotland, portray it to

reach only to mid-thigh, with wide sleeves and an elaborately pleated skirt like a short kilt. However, it was never made of wool or plaid material. Sometimes trews were worn underneath and a short jacket on top.

The *brat* is a rectangular piece of cloth thrown around the body and fastened on the breast or shoulder by a brooch. Both men and women wore them. The *brat* could be wrapped around the shoulders or looped under the sword arm for better maneuverability. *Brats* were worn in varying lengths depending upon the occasion and the rank of the wearer. Some tales speak of the Queen's *brat* dragging on the ground behind her chariot.

They were also worn in a good many colors, "variegated" and "many-colored" being mentioned in the ancient tales. Because the number of colors one could wear was restricted by one's rank, a many-colored *brat* was a sure sign of nobility. In the *Táin Bo Cúailgne*, King Conor Mac Nessa of Ulster's costume is described: "He wore a crimson, deep-bordered, five-folding tunic; a gold pin in the tunic over his bosom; and a brilliant



white shirt, interwoven with thread of red gold, next to his white skin.” “Five-folding” has also been rendered as “wrapped five times.” The Irish word used here, “filleadh” is also used in the word for kilt, “filleadh beag.”

At this point, it would help to define a few terms in their original usage. The word “plaid” does not mean in Gaelic what it does in English. *Plaide* in Gaelic means a blanket. In some Middle English quotations, *plaid* is used as a verb, meaning “to pleat.” Therefore, a “plaid” refers to a blanket or something that is pleated, not the striped material associated with the Highland Scots. The Gaelic word for plaid as we know it is *breacán*. This can mean speckled, dappled, striped and spotted as well as “plaid.” The second word we must define is “tartan.” This also does not refer in any way to a color or pattern. *Tartan*, from the French “tiretaine,” indicates a kind of cloth irrespective of its color and it is taken to mean a type of light wool. *Tartan* also referred to a silk/wool blend. To distinguish between the old uses of these words and the modern uses, these words will appear in italics when the old use is intended.

The Léine Changes

Scottish literature does not make much mention of Scottish Highland dress before 1600. The most common statement is that they were “dressed in the Irish style”: probably in a *léine* and *brat*. The lack of any reference to differences between Scottish and Irish dress implies that there were none. H. F. McClintock, in his great source work *Old Irish and Highland Dress*, lists a number of quotes in which Highland clothes are mentioned. The earliest reference is from Magnus Berfaet’s Saga in 1093. This quote mentions that men wore short tunics with an upper garment and went barelegged. This can be taken to be the same shirt and mantle (*léine* and *brat*) combination mentioned above. Later quotes further elucidate this.

However, the *léine* seems to be quite different from the contourless tunic we saw earlier. In the sixteenth century, the *léine* is in variably dyed with saffron and made from no less than 7 yards of linen. For further information, see “Man’s Léine”.

John Major’s *History of Greater Scotland* (1521) describes the “Wild Scots” (Highland Scots) as “from the middle of the thigh to the foot they have no covering for the leg, clothing themselves with a mantle instead of an upper garment and a shirt dyed with saffron.” Sound familiar?

The Lord High Treasurer’s account of materials for a Highland dress made for King James V in 1538 lists a vari-colored velvet short jacket with green lining, a pair of tartan trews, two or more long shirts sewn with silk and ornamented with ribbons to the wrists. There is no mention made of any kind of plaid as we know it.

Jean de Beagué (1556) in *L’histoire de la Guerre d’Écosse (The History of the Scottish War)* says of certain Highlanders present at the French siege of Haddington in 1549: “They wear no clothes except their dyed shirts and a sort of light woolen rug of several colors.”

Lindsay of Pitscottie in 1573 wrote: “They be clothed with ane mantle, with ane schirt saffroned after the Irish manner, going barelegged to the knee.”

An illustration by Lucas de Heere, circa 1577, raises some curious questions about pre-17th century Highland Dress. The original watercolor print has been lost, but a reprint of it resides in the Library of Ghent University and in the British Museum. Unfortunately, the reprint is in black and white and the original color information is not known.

In this picture, we see the Highlander wearing his brat in the usual manner. However, his *léine* appears to be missing. On his upper body, he wears a checked or cross-hatched jacket, not unlike the woolen or leather *ionar* we have seen on *léine* wearers. The most puzzling part is a horizontal line that appears to cross the Highlander's thighs. This has often been interpreted as "short trews" or "a covering for the thighs of the simplest kind" (see Bishop Lesley's writing, below). Lucas de Heere is known for the descriptive quality of his pictures. Yet these "shorts" seem to be one simple line rather than the detailed illustrations we have come to expect.

I contend that this horizontal line is exactly that, and nothing more. From the black and white photo we can discern the texture of the back of the legs. That above the "line" greatly resembles that below. Therefore, the line was drawn in later. The shading on the back of the thighs more closely resembles the back of bare thighs than the back of woolen shorts. Shorts would have been baggy, not skin-tight. De Heere, with his attention to detail, would have certainly included wrinkles had the figure been wearing "short trews."

Why would someone tamper with a historical drawing? The Victorians, in particular, had no problem with amending archeological evidence to suit their purposes. In many cases, "shirts" have been drawn on pictures of topless aboriginal women and "skirts" have been placed over the loins of naked men. In this case, it is the latter.

In Rome, Bishop Lesley published a treatise on things Scottish in 1578. He says: "All, both nobles and common people, wore mantles of one sort (except that the nobles preferred those of several colors). These were long and flowing, but capable of being neatly gathered up at pleasure into folds. I am inclined to believe that they were the same as those to which the ancients gave the name of *bracchæ*. Wrapped up in these for their only covering, they would sleep comfortably. They had also shaggy rugs, such as the Irish use at the present day, some fitted for a journey, others to be placed on a bed. The rest of their garments consisted of a short woolen jacket, with the sleeves open below for the convenience of throwing their darts, and a covering for the thighs of the simplest kind, more for decency than for show or defense against cold. They made also of linen very large shirts, with numerous folds and wide sleeves, which flowed abroad loosely to their knees. These the rich colored with saffron and others smeared with some grease to preserve them longer clean among the toils and exercises of a camp, which they held it of the highest consequence to practice continually. In the manufacture of these, ornament and a certain attention to taste were not altogether neglected, and they joined the different parts of their shirts very neatly with silk thread, chiefly or a red or green color."





Early Scots hunting in the Mountains of Scotland. From *Holinshed's Chronicle*, 1577.

In James Aikman's 1827 translation of George Buchanan's 1581 *History of Scotland*: "They delight in variegated garments, especially stripes, and their favorite colors are purple and blue. Their ancestors wore *plaid*s of many colors, and numbers still retain this custom but the majority now in their dress prefer a dark brown, imitating nearly the leaves of the heather, that when lying upon the heath in the day, they may not be discovered by the appearance of their clothes; in these wrapped rather than covered, they brave the severest storms in the open air, and sometimes lay themselves down to sleep even in the midst of snow."

Nicolay D'Arfeville, the cosmographer to the King of France, published a volume in 1583 called *The Islands and Kingdom of Scotland*. "[The 'wild' (Scots)] wear like the Irish a large and full shirt, colored with saffron, and over this a garment hanging to the knee, of coarse wool, after the fashion of a cassock, they go bareheaded, and let their hair grow very long, and wear neither hose nor shoes, except some who have boots made in an old-fashioned way, which come as high as their knees."

Therefore, Irish and Scottish dress would be nearly indistinguishable before 1600. Regional differences may have existed, but no documentation attests to what they were. In fact, many writers and painters mistakenly labeled their subjects "Irish" when they were really Highland Scots, and vice versa.

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