

'*í litklæðum*' – Coloured Clothes in Medieval Scandinavian Literature and Archaeology

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What do we mean by 'coloured clothes'? Or rather, what did the saga writers mean by their term *litklæði*? Today, when coloured clothes abound and modern dyes can achieve every conceivable hue, our understanding of cloth colour is concerned with the actual shade of the finished cloth. Thus, while we might distinguish between white and coloured cloth, we are more likely to perceive a contrast between brightly coloured or 'colourful' clothes and more muted colours. But to the medieval Icelander, the term *litklæðr* probably had a much more clearly defined field of reference, indicating the process of production as well as the colour of the end product. The important distinction would almost certainly have been between dyed and undyed cloth. Undyed cloth would then have been fairly common, and would have included natural wool shades such as 'grey' (*grár*) and 'black' (*svartr*).

Saga accounts will sometimes mention that a character is dressed *i litklæðum*, 'in coloured clothing' ¹. At other times they are described as wearing clothing of a particular colour. Without such a specific description, we should probably assume that saga characters are typically dressed in undyed clothes. Thus, in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch.20, Thorarin and Arnkell have been going back and forth to Katla's house all day, when they are joined by Geirriðr who was wearing a blue cloak; the word goes back to Katla that the men are back and one is wearing coloured clothing. Here, it is apparent that despite their status, Thorarin and Arnkell are wearing undyed clothes, that they must habitually wear undyed clothes, and that the intended readership or audience could be expected to make the same assumptions in this respect as the author.

A similar picture of medieval clothing in the Norse Atlantic settlements can be seen in archaeological evidence from Greenland, especially from Herjolfsnes in the Eastern Settlement. When the cemetery here was excavated in the early twentieth century, it was found that a large collection of woollen clothes had been preserved in the permafrost (Nörlund 1924, Østergård 2004). Many of these clothes, which date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were so well preserved that they still look ready to wear. Like the clothes of the sagas, these clothes were undyed; instead, the cloth was typically woven from two contrasting shades of naturally pigmented wool. The weave is generally twill of the kind categorised as 2/2 twill; plain weave is also sometimes used.

Textile archaeologists Penelope Walton Rogers and Else Østergård have shown that the weaves used for clothes at Herjolfsnes and at other sites in Greenland are comparable with legal specifications for undyed homespun or 'wadmal' (*vaðmál*) in the medieval Icelandic *Búalög* (Østergård 2004, Walton Rogers 2004). During the medieval period, wadmal seems to have been the commonest material for clothes in Iceland, and wadmal clothing is mentioned from time to time in the sagas². Garments coloured with any form of dye would have been more expensive and seem to have been unusual in Iceland, but might have been worn more widely in mainland Scandinavia³.

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Of clothing colours mentioned in the sagas, red and especially blue stand out above all

others. In her unpublished study of clothing in the sagas, Jane Christine Roscoe notes that blue and red are 'the colours most consistently used by the saga writers with others being mentioned now and again, often quite infrequently' (Roscoe 1992, 25). Both blue (*blár*) and red (*rauðr*) represent dyed cloth.

Some writers have contended that the colour word *blár* does not in fact represent blue-dyed cloth but naturally-pigmented black cloth. Kirsten Wolf will address this question in another paper in this session, but let me simply say here that the sagas make a clear and consistent contrast between high status *blár* or 'blue' clothes worn only by high-ranking characters, and lower status *svartr* or 'black' clothes which are often worn by slaves or as a low status style of garment such as the *kúfl*. That *blár* clothing was perceived as coloured clothing is apparent from the passage in *Eyrbyggja saga* mentioned earlier, or from *Njáls saga* ch.92; in these passages, both Geirriðr's blue *skikkja* and Skarpheðinn's blue *stakkr* are described as *litklæði*.

In her analysis of coloured clothing in the sagas of Icelanders, Roscoe finds that 'blue' (*blár*) was unquestionably the commonest colour term used for clothing. Blue textiles are comparatively rare in poetry; poets prefer to concentrate on real splendour, so blue which simply denotes moderate wealth is unremarkable to them.

The second most common colour term in the sagas is 'red' (*rauðr*), but Roscoe observes that the contexts in which red clothing is worn suggest that it held particular associations. Red appears to be used by the saga writers to evoke finery, as if it is a particularly rich and luxuriant colour. Red clothes are often mentioned in the same breath as another coloured or ornate item; of twenty seven red garments noted by Roscoe in the Icelandic sagas, four are worn in combination with blue garments, four with silver belts, nine with armour or weapons, and a further four with another mentioned garment (Roscoe 1992, 52, 53). Red clothing also seems to be a status marker in poetry, as in *Guðrúnarkviða II* st.19 or *Haraldskvæði* st.19, for example, where red cloaks combine with other luxury items to indicate wealth and status.

Modern archaeology has been able to shed some light on the issue of coloured clothing in medieval Scandinavia. Although it is often difficult to determine the original colour of preserved cloth by eye, through the work of Penelope Walton Rogers, a growing number of excavated textiles has been tested for the chemical signatures left by possible dyestuffs. Traces of woad or indigo, lichen, madder, bedstraw, kermes, weld and an unknown yellow dyestuff dubbed 'yellow-X' have been identified on textiles from Scandinavian sites (Walton 1989a, 1990).

Perhaps the most surprising fact to emerge from this analysis has been the great preponderance of cloth revealing traces of indigotin, the active ingredient of dyes derived from woad and indigo; this means that the majority of Scandinavian dyed cloth was blue in colour, just as it is in the sagas. This contrasts strikingly with comparative evidence from Britain and Ireland (see accompanying handout). In respect of this, Walton Rogers has drawn attention to the eleventh-century debate poem *Conflictus Ovis et Lini*, which describes the different cloths and colours favoured by various nations (l.161-212). The Scandinavian taste for blue and green dyes is probably also reflected in the adjective 'blue-green' (*gormglas*) used of the Vikings in the Irish *Cogadh Gaedhel* ch.91.

In medieval Northern Europe, blue dye came from woad. Woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) is a native of southern Europe and parts of Asia, which appears to have been grown in Scandinavia from Roman times (Jørgensen 2003, 135). Woad was also found in the Oseberg burial, locked up in the queen's chest (Christensen *et al.* 1992). To make the dye, the young leaves are crushed and fermented, and the resulting colourless dye is dissolved in a vat of hot alkali such as lant or lye. The moist cloths, yarns or wools are stirred in this vat, then wrung out and hung up to dry. It is only during drying that the cloth takes on the blue colour which is described in the sagas as *blár*.

Although the existence of the compound adjectives *kolblár* and *hrafnblár* might suggest that the word *blár* always denotes a very dark colour, it could equally be that *kolblár* actually denotes a particularly dark shade of *blár*. If the first element of *kolblár* acts as an intensifier (much as 'pitch' does in the English phrase 'pitch black'), it would appear that the darker shades might have been perceived as the truest shades of *blár*. Such a perception would be consistent with the process of dyeing cloth with woad. Woad can dye pale shades as well as dark. The depth of colour depends largely on the strength of the dyebath, but darker shades can only be achieved by skilled dyers. In medieval Europe, lighter shades were sometimes produced by reusing a dyebath, and would typically have been less expensive than the more intense darker shades. I cannot offer a positive definition of the adjective *bláhvitr* (*Guðrúnarhvöt* st.4, *Hamðismál* st.7), but it is possibly suggestive of lighter shades of blue.

There has been a long-standing interest in the fact that, in the sagas, blue clothes are often worn in the context of a killing, and the suggestion that blue clothing might have expressed some deadly purpose has proved seductive for many commentators. Perhaps most notably, since it has long been familiar to English readers as an introduction to the sagas, Hermann Pálsson wrote in his introduction to the Penguin translation of *Hrafnkels saga*, 'The image of Hrafnkell riding in blue clothing tells us precisely all we need to know about his mood and intentions, for in the sagas blue clothing is conventionally worn by killers' (Pálsson 1971, 25). Suggested explanations for this include the suggestions that dark clothes are chosen as a means of camouflage, that blue clothes are worn by those who with 'a cold breast and a grim heart' (*Ok merkir blár litr kallt brjóst ok grímt hjarta*, *Piðreks saga* ch.174, Mundt 1971), or that it is purely literary convention.

But to what extent can this supposed convention actually be validated by an examination of the sagas? There is of course the famous example of Hrafnkell, who appears in blue clothes whenever he is about to kill. And more pertinently, Valla-Ljótr is said to have two kirtles, a black (*svartr*) one for everyday wear, and a blue (*blár*) one for killings. Various individual instances of killers wearing blue clothes could be adduced to make up an impressive tally. But the significance of such an exercise is questionable, if we do not consider that blue clothes are also worn when there is no prospect of killing⁴, and that killers are also to be found sporting other colours than blue. Taken together, these two facts outweigh any list of blue-clad killers.

Killers wear coloured clothes of other hues than blue in *Njáls saga* ch.92, where Helgi wears a red kirtle, and Kári wears a silk jacket which is simply described as 'coloured' (it is probably yellow; cf. *Ólafs saga Kyrra* ch.1, *gult hár sem silki*), though Skarpheðinn wears blue.

Clothes of an unspecified colour are worn by would-be killers in *Færeyinga saga* ch.54, where the combination of coloured clothes and weapons is clearly ominous. So, it is not only blue clothes that can alert us to deadly intent. Perhaps, amongst those who could afford silks and red clothes, these were as good if not better as clothes for a killing.

Thus, although the number of killers dressed in blue far exceeds the number dressed in other colours, we can see that blue is not the only colour chosen by killers. And since the overall number of references to blue clothing exceeds the number for other colours, no significance can be read into the large number of blue-clad killers. Blue is simply the commonest clothing colour in the sagas, and this appears to straightforwardly reflect the actual prevalence of blue-dyed clothing as revealed by archaeology.

The use of blue clothing by saga killers is then simply, as Ian Maxwell originally suggested, a matter of choosing one's best clothes for an important job (Foote 1963). When coloured clothing is worn by saga characters, it often suggests that they have a purpose in mind. Coloured clothing might be chosen to wear for a wedding or at the Thing. As an expression of prosperity and success, and with its connotations of foreign luxury, it was seen as appropriate dress for a homecoming traveller, and indeed in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri goði is ridiculed for coming home in his plain 'black cape' (*svartr kápa*, Valtýr Guðmundsson 1893, 196). Sometimes the aim might be simply to make a show, but at other times it is somewhat more serious. Wearing one's best clothes for a killing, signals the deliberate nature of the act and its importance. It amounts to a public statement of commitment to the killing, which recalls the legal distinction between 'killing' (*víg*) conducted in public as a matter of honour, and 'murder' (*morðr*) done in secret or under cover of darkness.

Coloured clothing is easily spotted at a distance. Indeed, when coloured clothes are mentioned in the sagas, they are very often seen from afar ⁵. For the would-be killer, this is another advantage. Far from wanting to disguise themselves, as some proponents of the dark-clothed killer hypothesis have suggested, most saga killers want to be known and recognised. They might be killers, but, by the law of the time, they are not murderers.

Turning now to red-dyed textiles in archaeology, we find support for the saga image of red as a colour of splendour and finery. Red dye was usually derived from madder (*Rubia tinctorum*), which was grown in France and England, but not in Scandinavia. Madder was traded in the markets of ninth-century Quentovic and Paris, and could have been brought to Scandinavia for use in dyeing, but the rare finds of madder-dyed textile probably arrived as ready-dyed cloth. Madder-red cloth in Scandinavian burials is always associated with wealth and imported goods; all examples are from high-status contexts, the most notable being those from Oseberg, Norway, and Mammen, Denmark. What is more, the red cloth from Oseberg is generally considered to represent an imported luxury (Ingstad 1988), and this may well be true of the example from Mammen. The Mammen cloth is woven in Z/S diamond twill, which whilst common in British and European contexts, is relatively unknown in Scandinavia; it is also the only heavily embroidered textile from Viking Scandinavia and includes motifs reminiscent of the English Winchester style; an origin in Britain, possibly in an area of Scandinavian settlement, seems most likely.

Thus, the red cloaks sported by the poets of Haraldr Hárfagr were probably highly prized luxury imports (*Haraldskvæði* st.19), which had been given by the king. Similarly, the *serki valrauða* with which Knefröðr tries to tempt Gunnar and Högni (*Atlakviða* st.4) should probably be rendered as 'foreign-red tunics'.

Madder seems to have been especially popular in Britain, as is noted in *Conflictus Ovis et Lini* (l.175-6). As well as the evidence of the textiles from London and York (see handout), a large amount of madder was found in Anglo-Scandinavian levels at York, and fragments of madder-stained dypots have been found from Anglo-Saxon London, Thetford, Winchester and Canterbury (Walton Rogers 1997, 1999). Madder continues to predominate in later-medieval British dyed textiles (Walton 1984). Three madder bags appear on the crest of the London dyers, while in Norwich the site of an early-medieval market is still known as the Madder Market.

In *Kormáks saga* ch.12, the hero recites a verse which mentions 'lichen-red hose' (*hosu mosrauða*, st.38). Lichen-dyed cloth is particularly common from Viking Dublin (see handout), and from the *landnám*-era settlement at Narsaq, Greenland. A variety of lichens can be used, but the Scandinavian world probably favoured *Lichen tartareus*, known in Icelandic as *litunarmosi*, 'dyeing lichen' (Valtýr Guðmundsson 1893), and in Færøese as *korkji*, a word which is probably derived from Old Irish *corcur* meaning 'purple' (Bugge 1911).

Another dyestuff known from Scandinavian archaeology is the Common Walnut (*Juglans regia*), and evidence of its use comes from Hedeby and Oseberg, whilst nuts of an American species (*J. cinerea*) which had been imported to L'Anse aux Meadows might also have been used in dyeing. Walnut dyes to a rich reddish brown.

Of particular fascination to the saga writers was cloth of 'scarlet' (*skarlat*). Scarlet clothes are frequently given to Icelanders at the courts of foreign kings. Scarlet cloth, which originated at the end of the Viking Age ⁶, was the ultimate luxury woollen cloth of medieval Europe and rivalled Italian and oriental silks. It is thought that the new cloth was woven on the new horizontal loom, and that it was then fulled before the nap was raised and shorn. It is interesting that, whilst many gifts of clothing in the sagas have previously been worn by the giver (and this seems actually to enhance their value), gifts of scarlet clothing are usually specifically said to be newly made. Unlike other luxury cloths, scarlet seems to have been a napped woollen cloth, and presumably the quality of the nap deteriorated with age.

Though it was available in a range of colours, scarlet was most often dyed to the brilliant red colour for which the term 'scarlet' is used today. The dyestuff used for this was not madder, but the much more expensive kermes (*Kermes vermilio*). Kermes dye comes from the dried bodies of a kind of scale insect which lives on the Kermes Oak (*Quercus coccifera*). This evergreen oak grows only in southern Europe; Pliny believed the best to come from what is now Portugal, Tunisia and the Middle East. In medieval times, it was cultivated for its dyestuff throughout the Mediterranean region. Although scarlet cloth was unknown in the Viking Age, kermes dye has been identified in Viking silks, and it might also have been used in imported woollen cloth; it appears to have been used to dye a tunic from the Migration-era burial at Enebø, Norway.

Linen survives less well in the ground than wool, and where it has been preserved it is invariably through the action of metal salts from a nearby dress accessory, most frequently from an oval brooch. These metal salts can colour the fabric, but evidence of dye has not yet been detected in the laboratory on linen cloth. Instead, linen, if it was not simply left in its natural colour, would typically have been bleached. Bleaching would have involved boiling the cloth in lye (a solution of wood ash) and spreading it out in the sun. Bleached cloth would have varied in quality, so that in *Orkneyinga saga* 55, Earl Haraldr covets a linen garment which is described as 'white as snow' (*hvítt sem fönn*), and is presumably noticeably whiter than the shirt and linen breeches he is already wearing, while according to the Byzantine Leo the Deacon, the shirt worn by the tenth-century Rus prince Svyatoslav was noticeably whiter than those of his retinue.

In the sagas, such white clothes often signify Christian piety (Roscoe 1992, 88f). But in this case, we are surely dealing with a literary convention, the saga equivalent of Hollywood's man in the white hat. It is not credible that non-Christians should have deliberately avoided white linen, since linen formed an important part of both men's and women's clothing in the Viking Age. In fact, white clothes do appear in the sagas without religious overtones, when they are simply termed 'linen clothes'. The idea of white clothes signifying piety is probably due to the whiteness of the Christening robe, and runestone references to dying in white clothes probably represent deathbed conversions or baptisms deferred until death.

Although linen does not accept dyes as readily as wool, dyed linen may well have been available, even if relatively rare. Pliny knew of blue, red and purple-dyed linens in Roman times, and according to Einhard's *De Carolo Magno*, red linen breeches (dyed with kermes) were worn by the Franks. Some of the Birka linens, which have not yet been tested in the lab, were very possibly dyed. The medieval Icelandic poem *Sigurðarkviða inn skamma* refers to 'foreign linen well coloured' (*valarípt vel fáð*, st.66), and the blue *serkr* worn by the noblewoman, Moðir, in *Rígsþula* (st.29), would probably have been made of dyed linen.

Overall, the picture of clothing colours portrayed in sagas and poems appears to be broadly confirmed by archaeology. Many clothes were left undyed, particularly in the Atlantic settlements (though this might have been less true of the earliest settlers). Those that were dyed were usually blue. Red clothes were uncommon and indicative of high status.

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Footnotes

1. The term occurs in Eyrbyggja saga ch.20, 40, Færeyinga saga ch.54, Flóamanna saga ch.32, Gísla saga ch.5, Grettis saga ch.52, Hallfreðar saga ch.11, 12, Heiðarvíga saga ch.21, Hrafnkels saga ch.17, Laxdæla saga ch.44, 58, Njáls saga ch.45, 54, 92, and Vatnsdæla saga ch.31.
2. Though the type of cloth identified as a possible 'wadmal' is common in the archaeology of the later middle ages, there is very little archaeological evidence for this cloth from the Viking Age.
3. See in particular Eyrbyggja saga ch.20
4. Blue clothes appear in innocent contexts for instance in Rígsþula st.29, Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa ch.11, Fóstbræðra saga ch.23, Gísla saga ch.12, 20, and Njáls saga ch.40. A long and representative list of occurrences of blue (blár) clothing in the sagas has been assembled by Straubhaar, which she contrasts with a similar list for black (svartr) clothing (Straubhaar 2005).
5. See for example Grettis saga ch.52, Hrafnkels saga ch.17, Njáls saga ch.45
6. The word is first recorded (as scarlachen) in the Old High German Summarium Heinrici dated to between 1007 and 1032 (Munro 1983).