

Leather gloves and mittens – examples recovered from the Netherlands

by Marloes Rijkelijhuizen

Introduction

Gloves and mittens are used for various purposes. Nowadays gloves and mittens are mainly worn for protection against the cold and are used by some professions such as doctors and dentists. In earlier periods gloves had a protective function but could also have a symbolic meaning when used to display social status, or as an indication of the profession of the owner or wearer.

Gloves and mittens can be made of various materials, such as metal, textile, leather, or a combination of these materials. This article presents leather gloves and mittens recovered from archaeological contexts in the Netherlands and shows the different uses of these items of apparel. Literature on archaeological leather gloves is scarce and few finds have been excavated and/or published. The recovered gloves presented here date from the late medieval to the post-medieval period, with the earliest examples from the 14th century.

Armour gloves and gauntlets

Armour was used in the medieval and post-medieval period for body protection during tournaments, one-on-one combat or warfare. Metal plate armour and flexible chainmail are well known, but less well known is the use of leather for body protection: for example, garments made from scales of thick or hardened leather (Puype & Stevens 2010). Protective clothing using a combination of metal and leather was also known. Linings and underclothes may have been made of textile or leather, but armour itself could have been made of hardened leather. Protection for hands usually consisted of metal gauntlets, which often had flexible finger protections (Puype & Stevens 2010). Leather hand protections were also probably used, possibly in combination with metal.

However, the archaeological evidence of leather armour is scarce. An example of leather armour from the Netherlands has been excavated in Leiden: an exceptional leather arm-piece or vambrace that was made from hardened leather by

the cuirbouilli method. It was made of two layers of leather and had metal strips for extra protection (Brandenburgh 2006; experiments with cuirbouilli have been conducted by C. Dobson).

Two leather finger protection pieces, for the top of the finger, from the Statenplein site in Dordrecht are unique artefacts that provide new information on the use of leather for protection. The first finger protection (Fig. 1) consists only of the first two joints. Made from 5mm thick adult cowhide, the current length of the fragment is 75.5mm, the width of the finger part is 23-25mm. The middle of the fragment contains a circle shape, made by two half circular cuts, with a third half circle at the broken end. The diameter of the circle is c.17 to 18mm. The circular cuts were placed over the finger joints in order to improve the flexibility. The small hinge at the junction between the half circles is a weak point, as shown by the breakage at the second finger joint. Stitch holes are visible along the edge on the flesh side of the fragment; the corresponding holes on the grain side are contained in a channel and therefore protected from abrasion. The object was found in a landfill layer that was dated



Figure 1. Finger protection from Dordrecht (left, flesh side; right, grain side). Collection: Regional Archives Dordrecht. Photograph: Roel Weenink.

between 1325 and 1400 AD. The context could not be associated with a particular house or other structure (find number 2001.060.006).

The second finger protection (Fig. 2) is complete and measures c.165mm in length and 20-32mm in width. It is thinner than the first but also made from adult cow leather. There is a small half circle stamped through the leather at the first finger joint, two half circles stamped through at the middle joint and a larger semicircular cut into the surface of the leather at the knuckle. The flesh side has tunnel stitches around the edge. This finger protection was found in the same landfill layer as the first but near a house, and also dates to between 1325 and 1400. A large quantity of leather was in the vicinity of this house, possibly representing a leather worker's waste (find number 9701.892.004).

The thickness and rigidity of these leather fragments indicate that they were intended as protection for the top of the fingers. According to Goubitz's notes on the leather finds from this excavation, the pieces were sewn onto a glove made from thinner, more flexible leather. The exact use of these finger protections is uncertain; they could have been used for military equipment, as part of tournament gear or for specialised work applications. Why they were among the waste of a leather worker and their exact use requires further research, both on finger protectors and the other leather finds from Dordrecht.

Early gloves and mittens - 14th century

Much is still unknown about early gloves and mittens: where they were made, whether the raw material or the gloves themselves were imported and for what purpose they were used. Although historical sources show that gloves and mittens were known from earlier periods (Volken & Volken 2006), the oldest excavated examples from the Netherlands date from the 14th century.

So far three 14th century examples have been recorded: a calfskin glove from Gorinchem (Rijkelijkhuisen 2013), a mitten from Den Bosch (Rijkelijkhuisen, report in progress) and a goatskin glove from Hoorn (van de Walle-van der Woude 2006). All were made from one piece of leather with a separate thumb piece. The context for all three was not clear enough to provide any information on a possible function or social context.



Figure 2. Finger protection from Dordrecht (left, flesh side; right, grain side). Collection: Regional Archives Dordrecht. Photograph: Roel Weenink.

Workmen's mittens

Gloves and mittens were also used to protect the hand from injury or from certain liquids or materials used by specific professions. Usually mittens, rather than gloves, were used for heavy work. Workmen's mittens were made from thick adult cow leather and sometimes a second layer was added. Normally, one large piece of leather was folded to form the top and bottom sides; the thumb piece was separate. Only when the piece of leather was not sufficiently large

were small completion pieces added.

During the 2011 excavations at Enkhuizen a double layered mitten was found (Fig. 3). The outer layer was made of cow leather and has one completion piece and a separate thumb. The inner layer was made of calfskin; two completion pieces and a separate thumb piece were present (identification and description by Ans Vissie & Els Winters). The leather was covered with a fatty substance and after decades still smells strongly of tar or a tar-like substance and suggests that this mitten could have been used in woodworking or at a shipyard. Tar or pitch was also used to waterproof leather, particularly for whaling or fishermen's work (Marquita Volken, pers. comm.). The mitten was found in a refuse layer, dated between 1550 and 1585 (341-312; report in progress). A second workman's mitten has been found at the same excavation site.

Three similar 16th century workmen's mittens have been found in landfill layers at different locations in Amsterdam (Gawronski & Jayasena 2013: HE10-10-1, Herengracht 78, 16th century; WLO-155-89, Vlooienburg, 1592-1596; DIJ-14, Dijkstraat, 1500-1550). These workmen's mittens could have been used in different trades where the hands must be protected from heavy duty work, cold, heat or certain materials.

A range of other professions could have used gloves - such as soldiers or doctors, to protect against disease. These gloves were probably made from other materials, such as textiles or non vegetable tanned leathers. Falconry gloves or mittens haven't been positively identified from archaeological finds in the Netherlands, though a find from Schleswig with a decorated band is interpreted as a falconry glove (Schnack 1998).

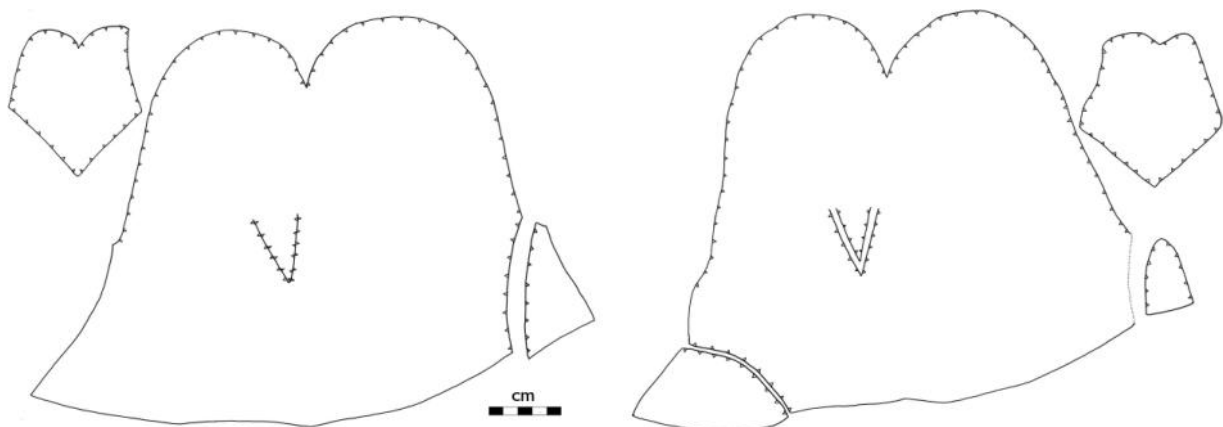


Figure 3. Workman's mitten from Enkhuizen (left: outer layer of cow leather, right: inner layer of calfskin). Drawing by Ans Vissie & Els Winters. Collection: Archeologie West-Friesland.

Luxury gloves – Display of status and profession

Luxury gloves were used to display the status or profession of an individual, for example episcopal or pontifical gloves. Gloves feature in paintings, especially from the 16th century onwards, being worn by high-ranking individuals. An example is the brewer Philips Denijs who was portrayed holding gloves (Fig. 4). Luxury gloves could be made of various materials or a combination of materials. Leather gloves were usually made of thin, supple leather such as deer, goat, lamb, sheep, or calfskin. Leather was used in combination with textile and embroidered cuffs. The archaeological record, however, only leaves us with the vegetable tanned examples, while the white tawed and chamois leather gloves disintegrate in the soil. The type of leather from the glove fragments remaining on archaeological sites is often difficult to identify.

The gloves recovered all have separate thumb pieces but sometimes also separate little finger pieces. This was visible on three of a total of six leather gloves found at Dordrecht, examined for this article (one glove was published in Goubitz 2008). It also occurs on the example of a glove from Switzerland (Volken & Volken 2006). When a separate (decorated) cuff was originally present, it is usually missing in archaeological finds. Well-made examples have fourchettes: small leather pieces that form the sides of the glove's fingers. A goat leather glove from Middelburg has the fourchettes and cuff still present (Goubitz 1994). One of the gloves from Dordrecht was recovered with the fourchettes.

On some gloves the finger tips have been cut off. It is not known whether this was done in order to remove the abraded parts or to facilitate cer-



Figure 4. Painting of Philips Denijs by Huygh Pietersz Voskuyl, 1640. Photograph and collection: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

tain activities to be conducted with gloves. On two gloves from Dordrecht, the index and middle finger tips were removed (one is published in Goubitz 2008). A glove with all the finger tips cut off has been found in Switzerland (Volken & Volken 2006).

Conclusions

Gloves and mittens are rare archaeological finds, due to different leather tanning processes, the use of textiles and the fact that these were not common items to own. It is still not known what the early 14th century leather gloves and mittens were used for, but their rarity suggests that these were expensive items. Leather armour is rarely found and the two leather armour finger protectors from Dordrecht provide us with new information. It is likely they were sewn onto more flexible gloves.

More research is necessary on leather armour and these finger parts. Workmen used mittens for heavy work rather than gloves. Thick adult cow leather or a double layer of leather provided enough thickness for protection in a work environment. Mittens could be used for different crafts, but the example from Enkhuizen was probably used for woodworking or at a shipyard.

High status and luxury gloves were made of thinner leather and in combination with other materials. Separate cuffs or fourchettes increased the quality of the gloves.

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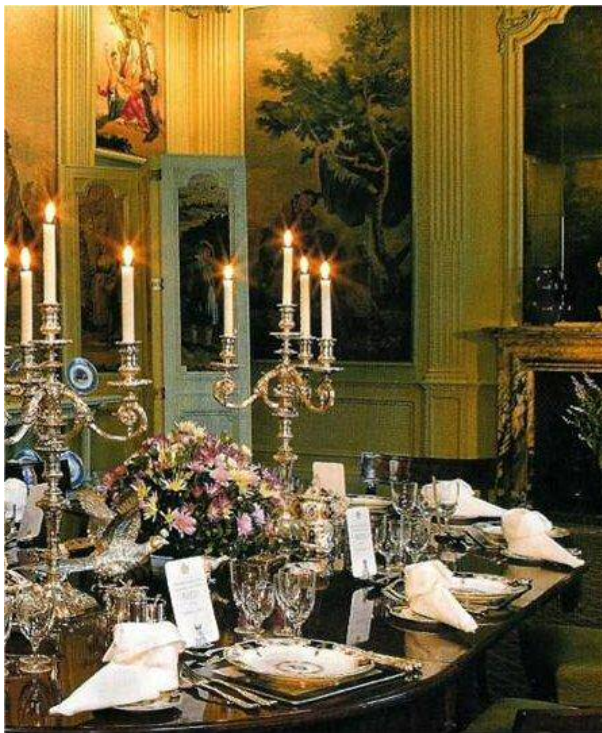


Sheaths on the pavement

On a recent visit to Waterford city in Ireland, I looked down at my feet and found some leather sheaths! Well, not really, but what I did find is one of a number of bronze plaques set in the pavement around the 13th century Reginald's Tower, which now houses the city's Viking Museum. The plaques each show a different type of artefact, such as combs or these sheaths. Waterford is another city that has produced a lot of well preserved archaeological leather, due to the waterlogged conditions. A new purpose-built museum close by contains the city's medieval collections. Further information about the museums can be found here:

<http://www.waterfordtreasures.com/>

Jackie Keily



Something for your next dinner party perhaps?

When setting the table for your next elegant soirée why not present your napkins in the manner of our own dear Queen? On a recent visit to Sandringham House we were thrilled to see the napkins on each place setting folded in the style of a fifteenth century turnshoe! The Queen and her family always use this table when in residence.

Quita Mould

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