



New Varangian Guard Inc.

Handakas Garrison

**Basic Guide to Living History**  
Focus: Equipment and Clothing

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(based on article by Cheryl Fuhlbohm of Antioch Garrison)

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The New Varangian Guard is a re-enactment society with a strong focus on Living History – the realistic and authentic recreation of medieval life throughout the Byzantine Empire, its allies and enemies during the 9th to 13th centuries CE.

Every NVG member is encouraged to recreate medieval culture and lifestyle to the best of their ability. The barter system is always open amongst members through which you can access a variety of skills, which you may not wish to achieve yourself. This frees everyone to do the parts of medieval re-enactment that they enjoy most and create a community atmosphere in the group where each member benefits the other.

If you do wish to learn skills mentioned in any aspect of the group, you are always welcome to ask questions of your fellow garrison members or members of the national community via our website (<http://www.nvg.org.au>). When you are proficient in any of the wide variety of medieval skills you are encouraged to teach others so that you can give back to your medieval community.

To start off on your medieval journey there are a couple of things to remember when creating and collecting your medieval clothing and accessories.

**1. Pick a culture and a time frame, and stick to it**

You can decide on a culture and / or a time based on a piece of equipment or clothing you would really like to own, especially if you have already obtained that piece. For example, if you would really like to own a Rus coat then you can base the rest of our outfit around the Rus culture 9th century and make the Senmurven Kaftan as part of your kit. Try to keep the rest of your outfit focused on your chosen culture and period so that you are re-enacting as a "complete unit".

When you pick your time and culture try not to be either too broad or too specific or you will run in to difficulties when researching your clothing and accessories.

Eg. Viking 800-1066 – too broad  
Viking from Coppergate, York 963 AD – too specific  
Anglo-Scandinavian (Viking in the UK) 10th Century – perfect

You do not have to stick to one culture/time for all your clothing – for example you may have Viking combat equipment and Byzantine civilian clothes.

## 2. Collect Source Materials

Sources are very important to help you create accurate medieval gear from your chosen time and area. When you are recreating clothing and accessories from a time and place in history try to gather as much primary source evidence as you can. Back up your primary sources with any additional secondary source information.

Primary Sources include:

- Actual items excavated (extant items) such as jewellery, weapons and fabric pieces
- Illustrations or artwork from the time including manuscript illuminations, mosaics and frescoes, drawings, paintings and statues

Secondary Sources include:

- Reports from people examining primary sources (useful for extrapolating clothing patterns, etc from finds)

Try to avoid tertiary sources as they are unreliable sources of information. Tertiary Sources include websites with no primary source info and photos, "artistic" pictures such as Osprey book colour plates, and other re-enactors gear.

## 3. Create Patterns

Unfortunately not a lot of complete garments have survived; however there are a few and these should be your first preference when deciding on patterns (eg. The Viking Viborg Tunic, the Rus Senmurven Kaftan or the Parliament Shoe)

Illustrations sometimes show enough details to make a pretty accurate pattern, but occasional you must just do the best you can with the picture and make up bits so that it looks like the one in the illustration. Examine patterns that you know were used in similar circumstances to help you decide what is appropriate and what is potentially using too much creative license.

## 4. Choose Materials

Any extant items found during your research should be used as your primary guide however there are often some general rules of thumb if an extant item cannot be found as a primary source.

For example, with fabric and textile items it is a general rule of thumb that you wear linen underclothes and woollen over garments and cloaks. Cotton is not really an option as it was extremely difficult to make in medieval times and the only people who would have perhaps had it were very rich people in the east (refer to the Introduction to Textiles). Silk is only an option if the character you are portraying is *very* rich AND you have the rest of the personal equipment and accessories to portray this wealthy status. For leather items, suede is not an option as it was not created until the 14th century.