

A Knight's Thrust: Was the Use of a Codpiece for Protection or for Exertion of Masculinity? An Evaluation through History and its Reemergence in Modern Times

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Introduction: Medieval military history is marked by an evolution of armor design and protection that was driven by advances in weaponry. The codpiece was a 14th century innovation to provide a genital shield in battle but was used in civilian life as well. Our objective was to clarify whether the codpiece served as an essential component of a knight's safe keeping or as a mere outward display of virility.

Sources and Methods: A comprehensive literature search was performed using PubMed and Google Scholar. Primary historical texts, museum archives, scholarly works, popular media, documentaries, and artwork were reviewed.

Results: The armor used in the early Middle Ages was chain mail, which covered the neck, trunk, and upper arms and legs but failed to protect against blunt injury to the groin as weaponry became increasingly powerful. Full plate armor, developed by the 1300s, eventually included the codpiece, a small metal pouch to house the genitalia. In the late 1400s, however, codpieces appeared in civilian wear, modestly laced to men's stockings as upper body shirts and tunics became shorter. Codpieces quickly became more ostentatious and bulkier in an 'Arms Race' of masculinity, were soon ridiculed in contemporary satires including works by Shakespeare and Rabelais and inspired royal edicts limiting their use. However, the codpiece was used in the management of genital disease as well, as the bulky wraps and ointments used to treat endemic syphilis were thus more easily concealed. The codpiece fell out of fashion by the late 16th century but its descendants, in sports and the performing arts, still have practical use today in genital protection and in men's haute couture clothing design.

Conclusions: In the medieval battlefield, the codpiece was both protective and assertive of masculinity. Its military popularity eventually waned as armored battle proved no match for more modern weaponry, but the codpiece had a long influence on sartorial culture. The codpiece's modern descendant, the athletic 'cup', has therefore a long and most unusual history in the pages of war and Renaissance clothing.

Keywords: Codpiece, armor, medieval history



Medieval military history is marked by an evolution of protective armor design required by advances in weaponry.(1,2) Displays of full body 'knights in shining armor' at many military museums will include a metallic genital covering or cup called a 'codpiece'. Designers throughout Europe included the codpiece in the full suit as early as the 14th century for the equestrian knight although the codpiece became adopted by civilian tailors as well. The use of the codpiece in military and civilian life thus presented a 'double role' of both practical and fashionable use. Though lauded by royalty and commoner alike, the

codpiece was also the subject of medieval legal action and of ridicule in popular contemporary literature. After the 1570s, the codpiece was no longer included in military design manuals, and the decline in its civilian use followed, only to be revived in the 20th century. We investigated what roles were served by the codpiece, and whether the codpiece was an important aspect of genital protection or merely an outward display designed to promote images of virility.

SOURCES AND METHODS

A comprehensive literature search was performed, and historical texts, documentaries, and artwork were reviewed. The Musée de l'Armée Invalides (Paris, France) was accessed to examine historical suits of armor and their codpieces. Original artwork was obtained from the archives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the National Library of Paris (gallica.bnf.fr) including the Gustave de Ridder collection of military uniforms and the François-Roger de Gaignières collection of medieval fashions.

RESULTS

The codpiece

The 230-foot-long 11th century Bayeux Tapestry reveals, in painstaking embroidery and needlework, the precise details of the peoples, locations, and weaponry involved in the Battle of Hastings of 1066. The work reveals exquisite details of medieval life including clothing across the strata of contemporary society. Soldiers are shown wearing chain mail, a mesh-like weave of small metal rings, worn as an overgarment that offered real protection from low velocity weapons including swords, clubs, spears, and maces. Chain mail initially covered the trunk, upper arms and upper legs, and evolved to cover the hands and neck as well.(2) The development of the long bow, the crossbow, and high velocity piercing weaponry led to the development of full plate armor by the 15th century (Figure 1). Some features of plate armor, such as raised shoulder pads, were used for protection, while other features had origins in civilian fashion, such as square-toed shoes (Figures 1 and 2A). At some point, plate armor also included a 'cod' (Mid. Eng, "bag") of metal later known as a 'codpiece' that became increasingly popular throughout the Continent.(3) Known in Italy as a 'sacco', in German as a 'Hosenbeutel', and in French as a 'braguette', the codpiece became an essential method to protect the exposed genitals as the tunic of the 1360s barely reached the thigh.(3)

Medieval civilian use

The use of the codpiece in civilian attire became rather common, but the degree of its conservative or more ostentatious display was up to the discretion of the wearer. The misuse of the codpiece apparently irked the upper classes, so much so that England's King Edward IV (1442-1483) passed a law forbidding anyone below the rank of lord to expose their private "sinful" parts.(3) The decree was apparently unpopular because



Figure 1. Foot jousting armor, 15th century, full body. Details include articulation at every joint, lines and seams to mimic fabric, and the codpiece. (Author's collection, Musée d'Armée, Paris)

it required men to sew their tunic to their pants, rendering it difficult to access the penis for urination or other activities. Geoffrey Chaucer (c1340s-1400) described these early codpieces in his late 14th century work, *The Canterbury Tales*:

"Alas, let us notice these short-cut smocks or jackets, which, because of their shortness, cover not the shameful members of man, to the wicked calling of them to attention. Some of them show the very boss of the privy member and the horrible pushed out testicles that look like the malady of a hernia in the wrapping of their hose..." (4)

Eventually three-cornered fabric codpieces were tied over the front of the hose. In the Middle Ages, this was unobtrusive, but it became a fashion accessory in the era of the Tudors (1485-1603).(3) Codpieces were a prominent feature of a man's wardrobe of all age groups from the 1540s to 1590s. The Tudor period codpiece was designed to emphasize rather than conceal.(3) Codpieces were shaped and padded upright or outward protruding. The rigid structure was achieved by stuffing fabric with straw or horsehair and was molded into harder shapes by using buckram or leather.(5) The



Figure 2A. (Left) Armor of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–1564) by the German master, Kunz Lochner, complete with virgin mary breastplate, articulated gauntlets, and codpiece.(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
Figure 2B. (Right) Copy of the original Hans Holbein the Younger portrait of Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547) made for the monarch after the birth of his son, Edward VI (1537-1553)(WikiCommons, Public Domain, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)

roomy space inside protected genitals from the swords, daggers, and purses that could be hung from a man's belt. Codpieces were highly decorated with ribbons and bows, and some held money and other valuables. The use of the codpiece as secret hiding places for valuable items gave rise to the phrase to 'keep safe the family jewels'.(3)

Codpieces became intrinsic to the late medieval male psyche and symbolic of male conquest, prowess, and dominance. Borachio, the somewhat clever drunkard in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, also noted the somewhat crudely commonplace use of the codpiece.

"Seest thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is," he admits to his friend Conrade. "How giddily he turns about all the hot bloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty, sometimes fashioning

them like Pharaoh's soldiers in the reechy painting... sometimes like the shaven Hercules* in the smirched worm-eaten tapestry, where his codpiece seems as massy as his club?"(6)

Codpieces were theorized to conveniently offer both protection during a time of endemic syphilis as well as add a modicum of dignity. Syphilitic sores discharged a large quantity of malodorous matter. Animal grease and mercury were popularly applied as a paste to the affected areas which were wrapped in bulky bandages that gave the genital region a prominent frontal bulge.(3) Fashionable codpieces thus served as both a container for the ointments that would otherwise stain outer clothing and as a disguise for the copious bandages and applications.

*Editor's note: This may have been Shakespeare's reference to, as the British scholar Otto Kurz suggested in 1945, a 16th century tapestry from the great weaving powerhouse of Tournai, the Netherlands that depicted the death scene of the 'shaven Hercules'. "The dying hero...is beardless and dressed in 16th century costume, and answers to Shakespeare's description in every detail" codpiece and all.(7) (see cover art)



Figure 3a. (Left) The 1532 portrait of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) by Jakob Seisenegger (1505-1567) with his English water dog and royal raiments including cloth codpiece (Vienna Art History Museum, Public Domain). **Fig. 3b** (Right) A contemporaneous 1535-1538 portrait of the the Seventh Count of San Secondo, Spain, Pier Maria Rossi di San Secondo (1504-1547) by GFM Mazzola (1503 –1540), also known as ‘Parmigianino’, depicting the wealthy noble in front of a golden damask tapestry and wearing resplendent fur coats, French cut pants, and a padded codpiece (Prado Museum, Madrid, Public Domain)

Renaissance use and the nobility

Many prominent men appeared in portraits that showcased their codpieces, including the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), and his Count Pietro Maria Rossi (1504-1547) (Figures 3a and b, respectively). Codpieces became more ostentatious during the Tudor Era (1480s-1600s), increasing in size and ornamentation in an ‘Arms Race of Masculinity’. Men were known to sport the largest and most decorative codpieces to emphasize their masculinity if their virility were ever in question.⁽³⁾ Hans Holbein the Younger (c1497-1543) was commissioned to create the now-famous portrait of King Henry VIII (1491-1547) just after the birth of Henry’s only living son, Edward, in 1537. The original portrait, long destroyed in the Whitehall Palace fire of 1698, had many copies, so posterity can still appreciate Holbein’s depiction of Henry, with a majestic, somewhat aggressive posture, without crown, sword, or scepter, but with his prominent codpiece (Figure 2b).⁽⁵⁾ Henry’s apparent intent was to affirm his virility after Edward’s birth, should others question his fertility as the king.

Military Use

There are few reports in contemporary medical texts of genital injuries during battle, but some historians argue

the codpiece was both protective and assertive, given that martial strength was an integral part of masculinity at that time.⁽³⁾ Codpieces were a common addition to the best full harnesses of the fighting equestrian, although genitals may have been equally protected by flexible chain mail. The codpiece may have also created other difficulties in sitting astride a moving horse and is absent in the suit of armor Henry VIII himself wore during equestrian events. Contemporary renderings of military conflicts suggest a relatively low risk of genital injuries and that a codpiece had become an anticipated ornamental standard. ⁽¹⁾ The French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais (c1480-1553) may have satirically ignored the military insignificance of the codpiece in his 16th century novels the *Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Rabelais cited the codpiece as the chief piece of the military harness. He depicted two characters, Pantagruel and Panurge, debating the value and vices of the codpiece as battle-worthy equipage. Panurge suggests that men’s genitals should be protected in battle just as the ‘seeds of all plants are well fortified by their husks or casings’ to perpetuate reproduction. He posited that Nature had given all things their own protective codpieces by “strengthening, covering, guarding, and fortifying them with... cases, (scarfs), and swads”.⁽⁸⁾ Nature had been unfair to man, per Rabelais’

Panurge, by creating men "naked, tender, and frail without... defensive arms". This necessitated man to "put on arms... If the ballocks be marred, the whole race of human kind would forthwith perish and be lost forever".(8) Rabelais tells of a certain Lord Humphrey de Merville who tried on a new suit of armor, "for of his old rusty harness he could make no more use, by reason that some few years since the skin of his belly was a great way removed from his kidneys". Merville's wife commented that he was covering all of his body against attack except for what she considered a "most precious ingredient" to their marriage. She offered to give him an old tilting helmet to "shield, fence, and 'gabionate'" his genitalia. Rabelais writes that "(on) this lady was penned these subsequent verses, which are extant in the third book of the '*Chiabrana des pucelles*':"

"When she saw her spouse equip'd for fight,
and save the codpiece all in armour dight,
My dear, she cried, why, pray, of all the rest
Is that exposed, you know I love the best?
Was she to blame for an ill-managed fear,
Or rather pious, conscionable care?
Wise lady she! In hurly-burly fight,

Can any tell where random blows may light?"(8)

The fading years

However popular the codpiece was, its use was short lived and largely receded by the time Queen Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558.(3) According to DH Breiding, the codpiece remained in use until 1570 but was no longer illustrated in continental military uniform atlases by the 17th century.(9,10) The codpiece remained, however, a practical and artistic presence (Figure 4). Peter Garland traced the declining use and acceptance of the codpiece from the 1700-1900s. The codpiece and stiff garments of the French court gave way to tighter fitting garments with a small flap, or 'rabort', which could provide some protection and rapid access.(11) Garland notes that the double buttoned 'rabort' or 'braguette' can still be seen in the frontal covering of the modern naval breeches.

Victorian etiquette looked down upon any flamboyant or ostentatious bodily display as "shameful". The codpiece would be revived in the 19th century when the accentuation of physical prowess would be the *modus operandi* of comic strip superheroes. Superman first appeared in cartoon form in 1938 with a much flatter appearing groin than in later representations. The



Figure 4. Early 16th century depiction of the codpiece or 'braguette' in layman's fashion, allowing for function and modesty in a time of the short tunic that did not reach the legs. These 'braguettes' were the forerunner of the front access panel of the 13-button Victorian and 20th century naval pants (From *Ancient colored costumes: Italy, Spain, Scotland, Germany and Holland, Oriental countries and the Indies*, 1572, National Library of France, Collection of Roger de Gaignières)

original Superman artist, Joseph Shuster (1914-1992), apparently illustrated an underground fetish comic featuring a more robust nether region. As more of the public became aware, the mainstream appearance of Superman's trademark red trunks enlarged.(12) As impressive a figure as Superman was, his codpiece is no match for D.C.'s villain, "the Codpiece", created by Rachel Pollock and Scott Eaton. First appearing in *Doom Patrol* Volume 2, #70, in September of 1993, the Codpiece had apparently acquired an inferiority complex after the character experienced a 'misunderstanding' in high school. To compensate for his perceived deficiencies, he created a codpiece that among other weapons included missiles, tools, and retractable boxing gloves.(13)

Modern popular culture

Stanley Kubrick's 1971 *A Clockwork Orange* integrates the modern protective function of the codpiece with artistic statement. The film critic Elena Lazic proclaimed that Kubrick's costume designer Milena Canonero may have "achieved her pinnacle" when costuming the 'droogs', the errant band of hoodlums at the center of the film, "engaging directly with the film's discourse on class, money, and power".(14) The droogs wear their codpieces on the outside rather than the inside of their costume, evoking the violent sexuality Kubrick meant to address. The droogs' costumes became a cultural touchstone, inspiring artists as varied as David Bowie (1947-2016) and Madonna Ciccone (1958-).(15) Numerous musicians have also embraced the codpiece as part of their concert attire. Michael Jackson (1958-2009) wore a codpiece during his 1992 *Dangerous* tour. DM Brockie (aka Oderus Urungus) (1963-2014) (Figure 5) of the band Gwar wore a codpiece with bold colors and teeth, and Chaim Witz (aka Gene Simmons) (b1949) incorporated a codpiece in his concert attire. (18) Witz discussed the use of the codpiece in 2002, positing that "(the codpiece) holds in my manhood.... Otherwise it would be too much for (one) to take. (one) would have to put the book down and confront life. The notion is that if you want to welcome me with open arms, I'm afraid you're also going to have to welcome me with open legs."(17,18)

The codpiece recently returned to its sartorial origins. Gucci and Thom Brown included both leather and satin codpieces in their Spring/Summer 2019 and 2020 collections, with Brown stating that "(the) codpiece is a whimsical representation of masculinity" and that he incorporated codpieces "somewhat for decoration, and for humor".(5,19-21) Similar to the

medieval use of codpieces to conceal bandages for sexually transmitted infections, the brand D.A.B.D. marketed genital aprons used to protect clothing from secretions while supporting the scrotum in the early 1900s. The codpiece is also the predecessor of the modern 'jock strap' and athletic cup.(15) The internet is replete with items from around the world marketed as insertable codpieces, such as the "Bangwear Detachable Codpiece Armored Jockstrap", promoting "bulge enlargement".(22,23)

Conclusions

The medieval knight attained social, cultural, and military dominance. With a metal plate codpiece, he also held dominance in rigidity. The codpiece became part of the male costume out of necessity but became a visual suggestion of masculinity and virility for half a century. In the battlefield, the codpiece on armor was both protective and assertive of masculinity, falling out of favor by the 1570s and revived in 20th century pop performance and sartorial culture. The codpiece may not make a mainstream fashion comeback, but its use on the gridiron and soccer pitch reflects its historic origin on the medieval battlefield.

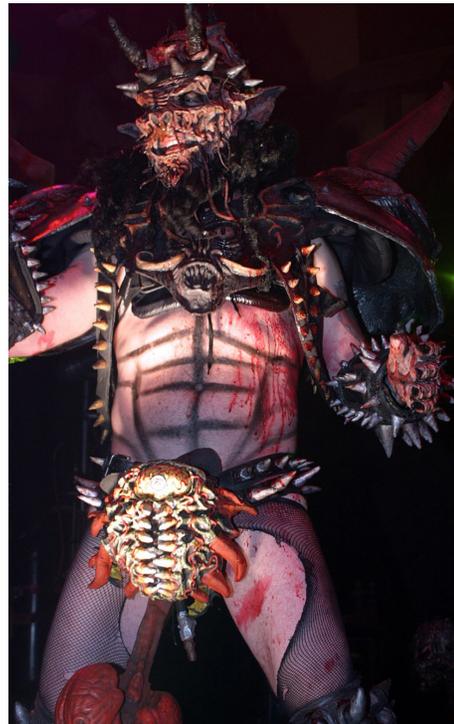


Figure 5. DM Brockie depicting his stage persona Oderus Urungus during his tenure in the rock group *Gwar*, sporting his trademark codpiece. (Creative Commons, Mark Marek, 2005)

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Figure 6. Title page illustration of a *braguette* or codpiece from Francois Rabelais, Chapter VIII, "*Comment la Braguette est Premiere Piece de Harnois Entre Gens de Guerre*".(8)