

# A Spectacular Survivor from the time of Henry VIII

## *The Study of a Mid-Sixteenth Century Brigandine*

BY JENNY TIRAMANI, Veronika Gervers Fellowship 2010

ROM M.1350 933.34.1

BRIGANDINE: Crimson Velvet, linen lining and interlining.

From the collection of Count Hans Wilczek, Castle Kreuzenstein, Austria

Sold at Sotheby's May 26 1933

Purchased with M.1351 933.34.2, a sallet from H. Fumage for a total of £440.00p (Bequest Reuben Wells Leonard).

While visiting Toronto in 2002 to speak at the *Picturing Shakespeare* symposium at the University of Toronto I spent a stimulating morning in the galleries of ROM where I found many wonderful exhibits relating to sixteenth century Europe. One in particular was of great interest. In the arms and armour gallery I was drawn to a crimson silk velvet brigandine dating from the mid-sixteenth century. When working as a costume designer at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre between 1997 and 2005 I sought out extant examples of clothing from Shakespeare's time to use as references for the hand sewn reconstructed garments we made for actors in Globe productions and since leaving I have continued this research. Therefore when I was offered the Veronika Gervers Fellowship in 2010 I requested the brigandine as one of the

objects to look at in detail. I studied the brigandine in the metal conservation studio at ROM in the spring of 2010. At this time the brigandine was mounted on an early twentieth century mannequin, as seen in the images shown here, so the inside of the garment could not be examined. Consequently certain details are absent from the following survey.

The garment consists of a front and a back with each piece comprising three layers; crimson silk velvet on the outside, a natural linen lining and a creamy coloured linen interlining. Both of these linens have an average thread count of 34 x 34. There are small triangular piecings in the velvet at each side of the front skirt, indicating that the velvet was 22" wide plus selvedges that were used as the seam allowance. Throughout the central areas of both the front and back a series of iron plates were riveted through all three layers of fabric, mainly in vertical lines, but with additional decorative areas. Vertical lines of tacking stitches (in natural linen thread) remain including some along the outer edge of the iron plated area on the left front and it is probable that the tacking goes through the two layers of linen as well as the silk velvet. As well as giving a guide for placement, the stitches would have also held all the layers together while the plates were attached. However, this could only be verified by examining the interior of the brigandine. The front also has a row of backstitching in white thread approximately 1/2" from the outer edges of the sides and bottom, in places where it has not suffered damage or alternation.

The front and back are joined together by a series of silk ribbon points, threaded through pairs of eyelet holes on the shoulders and sides. The brigandine needed to fit perfectly, with the sides and shoulders meeting edge to edge when the points were tied. On the left hand side of the front there are extra pairs of worked eyelet holes about 1/2" nearer the edge than those they lie next to. As these are on the outside of the backstitched outline they were probably added later, perhaps because the brigandine was too tight. They are much more crudely worked in thick thread, rather



1 The front of the brigandine, showing the slit at the lower centre front, where a codpiece would have been seen.



2 The back of the brigandine, showing the ribbon points that tie the front to the back. The patch of dark brownish velvet near the lower edge is a later repair.

than the pale pink silk thread of those inside the back-stitched outline, and they have fewer stitches around them than those within the outline, as if they were sewn in a hurry.

The brigandine was probably worn over a padded doublet and a linen shirt, possibly with chain mail sleeves tied to the doublet, like those worn by the man in figure 3. Alternatively, there may have originally been a pair of matching velvet, plated sleeves and even matching trunk hose. The armholes themselves are not the original shape; they have been cut away in places to increase their size so it not possible to say whether they had some kind of wing detail, binding (as on the neck) or fastenings to attach a pair of sleeves. However, it is very likely that the ROM brigandine was originally part of a whole matching ensemble, the other pieces of which are now lost. Such a suit, belonging to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, is kept in the collections of the Armeria del Palacio Real de Madrid. The ROM brigandine was purchased with a red velvet sallet but the velvets of the two objects are not the same, nor are the nail heads of the sallet gilded as are those on the brigandine, so it is highly unlikely that they were made as part of the same ensemble.

The shape of the brigandine displays many features of tailored garments made c1540-1550. At the back neck a portion extends for 2" to form a 'grown-on' collar. Surviving doublets such as one of yellow satin c1547 belonging to Moritz, Elector of Saxony, in the Dresden Royal Armoury, have similar shaped necks with two separate collar pieces sewn onto the fronts to form a whole collar. The lack of such front collar pieces on the brigandine is slightly perplexing, although a matching doublet may have been seen here. The crimson silk velvet that binds the front neck certainly appears to be part of the original construction. The second tailoring feature is that the front skirt of the brigandine is longer than the back, just as it is on the doublet of the Elector of Saxony mentioned above. This may indicate that the brigandine may have been designed to wear with another garment (such as a cloak or gown) covering the back, as does the fact that only the eyelet holes on the front are worked with thread, while those on the back are not worked. This characteristic is helpful in dating the garment as it is also found on other surviving clothing specifically of the 1540s; it occurs on at least four of the leather jerkins recovered from the wreck of the *Mary Rose*, Henry VIII's warship sunk in July 1545. All these garments, including the brigandine, have a centre front split in the skirt, regardless of whether they have centre front opening on the body. The split enabled movement and a codpiece would have protruded through the opening in this period. In addition, there is a strip around the waist without plates that has the curved, dropped waistline of mid-sixteenth century doublets and jerkins at the front, rising to the natural waistline at the sides. This would have allowed the wearer to bend at the waist to sit or ride a horse and it may be where a sword belt was worn as in figure 3. Another feature found on the brigandine and on tailored garments of the mid-sixteenth century onwards is that the shoulder seam sits towards the back of the shoulder, not on top, and the front has most of the circumference



3. An unknown man by Titian  
c 1550-52  
Staatliche Museen, Kassel

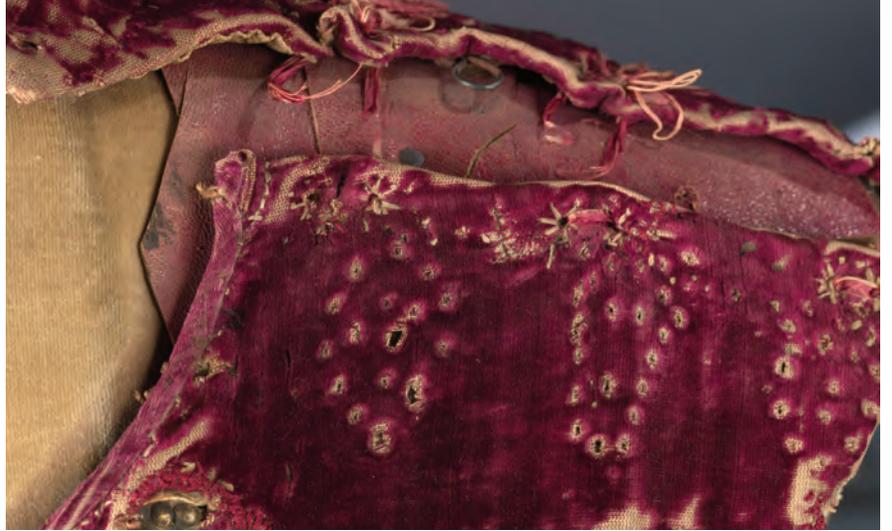
of the armhole on it with the side seam not on the true side of the body, but again set slightly further back. This leaves only a small portion of the armhole on the back. It is almost a continuation of the side of the back. This positioning of the shoulder and side-back seams has continued in various forms on upper body tailored garments for both men and women until the present day.

The decorative patterns of nail heads that appear on the brigandine deserve some consideration. The shapes of these are now somewhat distorted and many of them are missing, such as those on the left front shoulder where there are three patterns that echo the shapes of buckles or strap ends. There is no sign of any such shapes on the right shoulder but there is a similar shape on the left front waist in the strip without rivets. Many early- to mid-sixteenth century portraits show jerkins with side fastenings and these are often on the left-hand side of the garment only. Because of the nature of a brigandine openings on both sides and shoulders were necessary, as on plate armour, but it is yet another connection between this defensive garment and a civilian tailored one, to affect the notion of a one-sided opening on it decoratively. An additional tromp l'oeil feature is the pattern of diamonds set on triangular bases curved around the front neck that creates an effect similar to that of a gilt collar or necklace. There is also a row of six-petaled flowers (or six-pointed stars?) along the lower edge of the front and back.



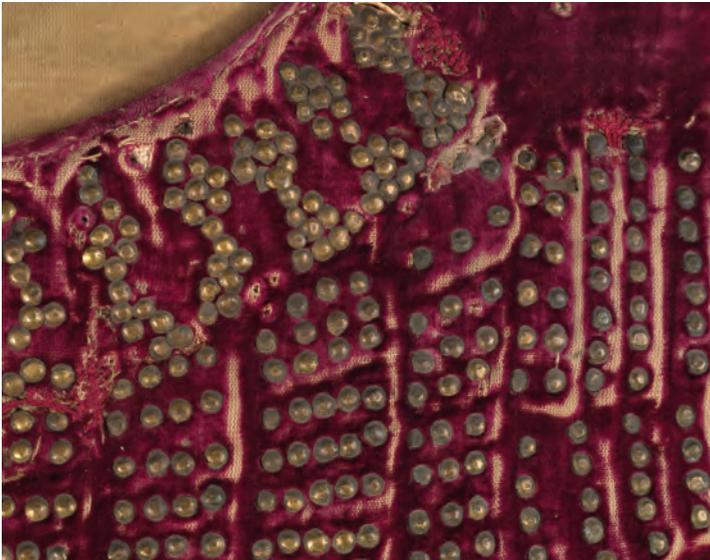
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4 The scalloped edges of the iron plates inside the left front, seen through the armhole.



5

5 Holes where nail heads are missing on the left-front shoulder. The shapes echo those of buckles or strap ends.



6



7

6 The pattern of diamonds mounted on triangular bases around the left-front neck.

7 The left side where the front and back are tied together with a crimson silk ribbon point.

Although in earlier periods, armoured garments such as brigandines and coats of plates were worn for combat, by the sixteenth century they were also worn for pageants, processions and displays of power, as well as actual fighting. Their use for civilian self-defence is also recorded in England by the 1579 proclamation of Elizabeth I that stated ‘whereas divers of late years have used to wear privy coats and doublets of defense, thereby intending to quarrel and make frays upon others unharmed, not only in cities, towns and public assembly but within her majesty’s court ... her majesty doth expressly prohibit and forbid all and every of her subjects whatsoever the wearing of any such privy or secret kind of coat or doublet of defense’. Any versions worn secretly would however, probably not have been so gloriously decorated. Although the ROM brigandine now shows many signs of having had a hard life, there is no doubt that when it was new, it would have looked spectacular. The rich silk pile of the crimson velvet, much of which has since worn away, would have been sumptuous, and the gilding on the many thousands of riveted nail heads would have gleamed. The crimson silk ribbon points are now without their aiglets, but these may originally have been gold and therefore removed as valuable, recyclable

accessories. The brigandine was clearly made for someone of a very high-status, and its materials are of fine quality. Indeed King Henry VIII possessed several similar items including ‘A brigandine covered with Crimsen Satten and sett with guilte Nailles’, recorded in the 1547 Inventory of the Greenwich Armoury. The splendour of such garments is depicted in Titian’s portrait of an unknown man c1550–52 (fig 3). Here the sitter wears a brigandine covered in crimson silk velvet set with gilded nails arranged in diamond shapes, with classical scalloped edges, a matching hat, helmet and trunk hose. A cloth of gold brigandine of the highest quality, again possibly made for Henry VIII, survives in the Royal Armouries, Leeds, and shares the feature of having scalloped lames in common with that in ROM. That is to say, one long side of certain lames or plates has a scalloped edge. The reason for these scallops is uncertain. They could have been made to enable more movement and flexibility, and/or to reduce the overall weight of them. It would certainly have been a labour-intensive task, adding to the cost of the garment. All in all, this is a splendid rare survivor from an age when men dressed as flamboyantly as women, even when wearing the sixteenth century equivalent of a twenty-first century bullet-proof vest.