1. Introduction

16th century Ireland is a difficult period in time to research, especially compared to the prolific extant finds from nearby Tudor and Elizabethan England. There are scarce surviving garments, portraits, illuminations, or other finds from this period, partly because of the state of oppression Ireland was in at the time. The English nobility and parliament of the 16th century were constantly enforcing laws aimed at controlling the Irish by stamping out the clothing and traditions that the state of oppression Ireland was in at the time. The English nobility and parliament of the 16th century were constantly enforcing laws aimed at controlling the Irish by stamping out the clothing and traditions that they were accustomed to.

Examples of such legislation, as published by Dunlevy (1989) and McClintock (1950), includes:

**A letter of Henry VIII to the town of Galway (1536)**

"Item, that no man, nor man child, do wear no mantles in the streets, but cloaks or gowns... doublets and hose, shaped after the English fashion, of the country cloth or any other cloth (it) shall please them to buy.

Item, that no man, woman, or child, do wear in their shirts or smocks, or any other garments, no saffron, nor have any more cloth in their shirts or smocks, but 5 standard ells of that country cloth."

**An Act of Henry VIII's reign (1539)**

"forbids any person in Ireland to dress their hair in the Irish fashion or to: wear any shirt, smock, kerchor, bendel (band/ribbon), nekerchour, mocket, or linnen cappe coloured, or dyed with Saffron, ne ye to use, or ware in any of their shirts or smockes above seven yarde of cloth to be measured according to the King's Standard, and that also no woman use or ware any kyrteall, or cote tucked up, or imbroydered or garnished with silke, or couched (overlaid/embroidered) ne laid with usker (jewel/ornement), after the Irish fashion, and that no person or persons, of what estate, condition or degree they be, shall use, or ware any mantles, cote or hood, made after the Irish fashion."

**Act of Parliament, Dublin (1541)**

"Limited the amount of linen cloth to be worn in the shirts of various classes as follows:

- Nobleman – 20 cubits
- Vassal or horseman – 18 cubits
- Kerne (turbarius) or Scot – 16 cubits
- Groom, messenger or other servant of lords – 12 cubits
- Husbandman or labourer – 10 cubits"

**Ordinances proclaimed at Limerick by Sir John Perrot, Lord President of Munster (1571)**

"The inhabitants of cities and corporate towns shall wear no mantles... Irish coats, or great shirts, nor suffer their hair to grow glib, but to wear clerk's gowns, jackets, jerkins, and some civil garments; and no maid or single woman shall wear or put on any great roll or kercher of linen cloth upon their heads, neither any great smock with great sleeves, but to put on hats, French hoods, tippets, or some other civil attire upon their heads."

**Extant Clothing and Accessories**

The following information describes some of the resources available that depict or describe Irish attire from the 16th century. It is not exhaustive, but it gives an idea of the types of information available and gives references for them.

**Moy Gown** - is an extant kirtle-like dress that was found in a bog at Moy, County Clare, Ireland. It is housed in the National Museum of Ireland and has not yet been accurately dated, however, is estimated to be from somewhere around the 14th-17th centuries. There are trickings of the remnants of this dress (as well as a modern reconstruction) available on Matilda la Zouche’s Wardrobe: [http://matildalazouche.livejournal.com/3658.html](http://matildalazouche.livejournal.com/3658.html)

**Shinrone Gown** - is an extant wool dress that is front-laced and high-wasted with hanging sleeves. It was found in a bog near Shinrone, County Tipperary, Ireland and is housed in the National Museum of Ireland. The Shinrone Gown is dated to the second half of the 16th century. A greyscale photo of the extant gown is available online: [http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~mgtatum/IrishWomen/IShinrone.html](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~mgtatum/IrishWomen/IShinrone.html)

**Killary Outfit** - is an Irishman's outfit dated to the late 16th century. As well as such laws, which go some way to describing what the Irish might have been wearing in the 16th century, there are many other contemporary sources that can be found, including a handful of extant items, stone effigies, contemporary literature describing Irish attire, watercolours, drawings and woodcuts.

**Kilcommon Doublet** - is an Irishman's jacket found in Kilcommon Bog in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. It is dated to the 16th-17th centuries and made from a coarsely woven wool. The skirt on the doublet is pleated and it appeared to have hanging sleeves. A greyscale image of the extant jacket is available online: [https://www.pinterest.com/source/irishhistoricaltextiles.com/](https://www.pinterest.com/source/irishhistoricaltextiles.com/)

**Felted Hats** - there are three extant Irish hats found in Knockfola (County Donegal), Derrinaddfield (County Mayo), and Tawnamore (County Sligo) in Ireland. Each of them is a different shape, but all are felted and blocked hats dated to the 16th-17th centuries. Images..."
of these hats can be seen in Dunlevy's *Ancient Irish Dress: A History* (1989), or online: http://irishhistoricaltextiles.com/2012/04/30/abundantly-happy-when-they-can-afford-an-athlone-hat/

**Carnamoyle Stockings** - a knitted pair of stockings dated to c1600, housed in the National Museum of Ireland. Photos and the museum analysis of these stockings is available online: http://scanorthernlights.org/results/2006/RP-Carnamoyle_Stockings-LadyAngharad.pdf

**Stone Effigies and Tombs**

In this context, effigies are stone likenesses of the deceased. These effigies were often atop the burial tomb of those the effigies depicted - typically noblemen and noblewomen. These burial tombs often had ornate carvings around the effigies, providing further images of people and their clothing carved in the 16th century.

When looking at these images, one needs to remember that the clothing and accessories depicted may be purely ceremonial and not an accurate representation of clothing worn at the time. It is encouraged to compare images from these sources with information and images from other sources to determine how accurate these representations might be.

The Trinity College Dublin has an online database called Trinity’s Access to Research Archive (TARA). Searching through this database will allow you to find many high resolution photos of 15th and 16th century Irish tombs and effigies (author Edwin Rae has published many good images there to this affect): http://www.tara.tcd.ie/discover

**Contemporary Literature**

Thanks to the bright and diverse differences between Irish and English dress in the 16th century, there are many contemporary descriptions available that outline what was being worn by the Irish at this time.

Most of these writings are in the context that the characteristics of the clothing were considered to be odd and different when compared to their neighbours. Some of the sources are accounts from travellers from various European origin, and some are legislative proclamations (such as those listed earlier). The differences written about are often very prescriptive and distinctive to Irish wear at the time, making them useful to compare with images from the time.

When thinking about the validity of any given description, however, it is important to consider the context of the writer. Some writers were biased against the Irish due to the various rebellions, wars and hostile takeovers that were occurring at the time.

Again, It is encouraged to compare images from these sources with information and images from other sources to determine how accurate these representations might be.

Excerpts of descriptions such as these can be found in Dunlevy's *Dress in Ireland: A History* (1989), and McClintock's *Old Irish and Highland Dress* (1950).

**Watercolours and Drawings**

Several 16th century artists published manuscripts of watercolours depicting national costumes of a variety of localities around the world. Several of these include depictions of Irish men and women of various status (i.e. from the poor ‘wilde Irish’, to the middle classes, and to the rich noblemen and noblewomen).


*Kostüm der Männer und Frauen in Augsburg und Nürnberg, Deutschland, Europa, Orient und Afrika* is an anonymous manuscript published c1500 that depicts hundreds of watercolour plates of the national dress of various cultures around the world at the time. Plates 81 to 83 depict between four Irish women, four Irish men and an Irish boy from the 16th century of varying social statuses. These plates are available in high resolution from the University Library of Ghent's website: http://adore.ugent.be/view?q=_id:%22archive.ugent.be:1EEACAD8-B1E8-11DF-966C-0D0679F64438%22&search_type=advanced

John Speed published a map in 1610 that included colour images of ‘Gentle, Civill, Wilde Irish’ dress. It is available on the Irish Historical Textiles website: http://irishhistoricaltextiles.com/blog/

**Woodcuts**

There are a number of woodcuts available that specifically depict 16th century Irish people.

A woodcut by Albrecht Durer dated to 1521 depicts five Irish soldiers, potentially a mixture of gallowglasses (heavily armed) and kerns (lightly armed). The original is held by the National Museum of Berlin, and an online image is available on Irish Archaeology’s website: http://irisharchaeology.ie/2013/12/16th-century-images-of-irish-people/

These (and other) class notes are available for download from Ceara’s blog: http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/
An anonymous woodcut of Irish warriors dated to the reign of King Henry VIII (1491-1547) is held in the Victoria and Albert Museum. An online copy of the image is available from Irish Archaeology: http://irisharchaeology.ie/2013/12/16th-century-images-of-irish-people/

Another example is the *The Image of Irelande* by John Derrick (1581). Something to keep in mind when looking at Derrick’s woodcuts is that it was created to be English propaganda that slandered their Irish enemies. As such, attributes of the clothing worn by Irishmen in the woodcuts may be exaggerated to insult them. There are, however, several aspects of the clothing that appear to match attributes evident in other, less slanderous references for example, the doughnut-like hats worn by the women depicted in Derrick’s woodcuts are much like those observed in various watercolours by de Heere and described in various contemporary accounts of Irish people at the time: http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/bgallery/Gallery/researchcoll/ireland.html

3. Textiles and Dyes Available

According to Dunlevy (1989), McClintock (1950) and Duffy (2005), wealthier Irish people had access to rich textiles such as silk, satin, velvet, damask, linen, wool (particularly white wool), and a variety of furs (lamb skin, wolf, fox squirrel, marten, otter and rabbit).

Conversely, the so-called ‘wilde Irish’ would have had access to predominantly black wool and linen. Black wool is specified because, thanks to English influences, a higher value was attached to white sheep from the 12th century in Ireland (Duffy, 2005) and thus is would have been less accessible to the poorer Irish people.

One of the strikingly Irish characteristics, according to contemporary descriptions and watercolours, was their use of bright and contrasting colours. According to Duffy (2005), Biggam (2006), Dunlevy (1989), Walker Esq. (1818), and McClintock (1950), the following dyes were included in the Irish repertoire: crimson, scarlet, orange, yellow, bright-yellow green, brown-blue red-purple, violet, light-violet, and purple.


For those interested in 16th century Irish clothing and accessories, the following is a list of references (most of which are available online) that explore elements of these:


4. References

I have a research article and Pinterest board that explore some elements of 16th century Irish fashion, particularly women’s attire:


These (and other) class notes are available for download from Ceara’s blog: http://cearashionnach.wordpress.com/