

The Bycocket: A Study of Felted Headwear

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The Bycocket Hat can be traced widely throughout the 14th century and beyond. Other names for this functional yet stylish headgear include the Robin Hood hat, pointed hat or *chapel à bec*, translated from French meaning “chapel with a beak.” Very close to that translation would be *chapeaux a bec*, which would simply mean hat with a beak. For the purpose of this paper, the term most widely recognized, “Bycocket” will be used.

Bycockets tend to come in varying degree of shape, size and color and one can find many images and iterations in illuminations, paintings and carvings. In most scenarios the Bycocket is worn when outdoors, though many are seen in indoor scenes as well. Research indicates the Bycockets we see in period sources were probably made from a wool felting process. One such felted extant hat, the Lappvattnet hat, comes from a bog find in Sweden. The hat is entirely wool felted and shaped over a stock or block. According to Historian, Hillevi Wadenstein of Vasterbotton Museum in Sweden, the “hat through analysis is dated to somewhere between 1310 and 1440. Thus a Medieval Hat.” (Wadenstein, 2014) This particular hat may not have been a Bycocket as we modernly may think of one, however, it is interesting to note the hat may have had a turned up brim, before it was restored to be placed in the museum. A far-fetched conclusion? Perhaps. However it does give us insight in to the construction of hats during the 14th century and beyond.

Though the process of creating felt has an unknown date of origin, there are many legends as to how this interlocked woolen material came in to being. In



Figure 2 Lappvattnet hat, Sweden, 1310-1440



Figure 1 Lappvattnet hat before conservation

one such tale, it was none other than a saintly creation and it was this tale that inspired the author to think about ways to create a felted hat.

“Felt makers and hatters have St. Clement as their patron saint because, so tradition says, St. Clement, forced to flee from his native city was worn out by constant tramping, his feet were badly cut and blistered and he sought a remedy by collecting bits of wool clinging to the bushes, and placing them in his sandals. After a day's journey he found that pressure and warmth had united the wool into a firm substance. When he reached Rome he perfected the process and manufactured felt.” (York, 2017)

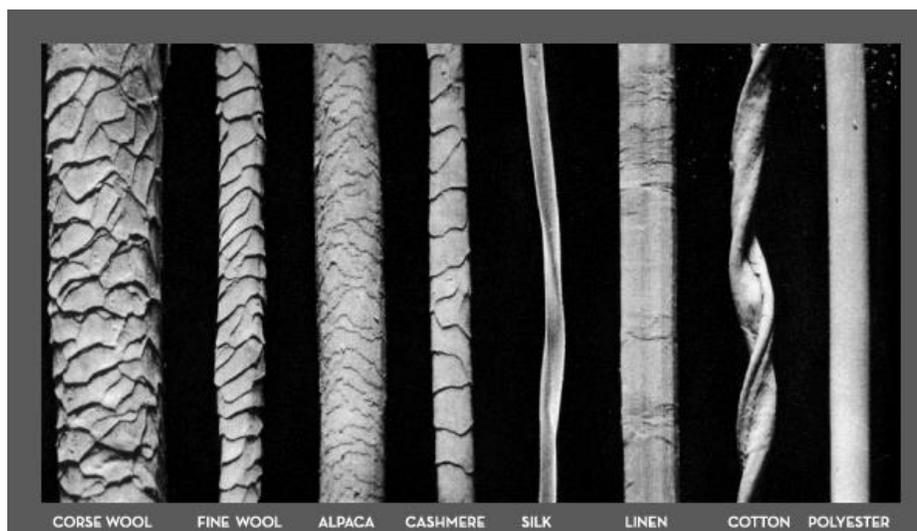
Dozens of books and countless articles were scoured trying to find the exact method in which Bycocks were created, when no absolute sources were found, experimentation took place. Like a period cooking recipe, all of the ingredients are mentioned and none of the measurements given. As in the saintly story above, one can determine in order to create felt one needs; moisture, wool, and lots of agitation to form a product that will in essence become its own material.

Learning the difference between what wools would felt well and which ones would not could be the subject matter of an entire set of research itself. Wool is an amazing fiber that has the ability to cling and matt to itself, as well as to condense and close off gaps or holes if used in weaving. Though spun and woven fabric is different from felting straight wool alone, it also lends to figuring out the process. The Industrial Archaeology Society's report on the Fulling Mills of the Ilse of Wright, explains that; “Fulling intended to consolidate and thicken the structure of the fabric by knitting the fibers together more thoroughly and by shrinking them. Wool has the ability to expand during the process to fill in the minute gaps in the weave. Wool fibres are made up of a series of scales and these scales mesh together, thus strengthening the fabric and giving it a smoother finish.” (Society, 2017) Fulling fabric requires agitation to help woolen fibers condense and so too is it required to create felt.

To attempt to find a wool that gives the same look as Bycocks one sees in illuminations or paintings, an attempt at felting several varieties was conducted. Wools of Sheep that have old origins or those found to contain similarities to sheep breeds of old were sought out. According to Katie Cannon, Historian and Sheep Shearer, “The breeds that were around in the Middle Ages no longer exist. There were not really "breeds" in the modern sense until the very late 18th century, and virtually all the known modern breeds were developed in the last 200 years. Even a breed labeled as "primitive" or "ancient" has not remained in a vacuum; modern sheep farmers may select for different traits than their ancestors did, which has an impact on the flock's characteristics.” (Cannon, 2017) Cannon worked to compile a list of sheep that have traits that closely resemble those of medieval breeds and it was from those few types that Bycocks were mostly likely created

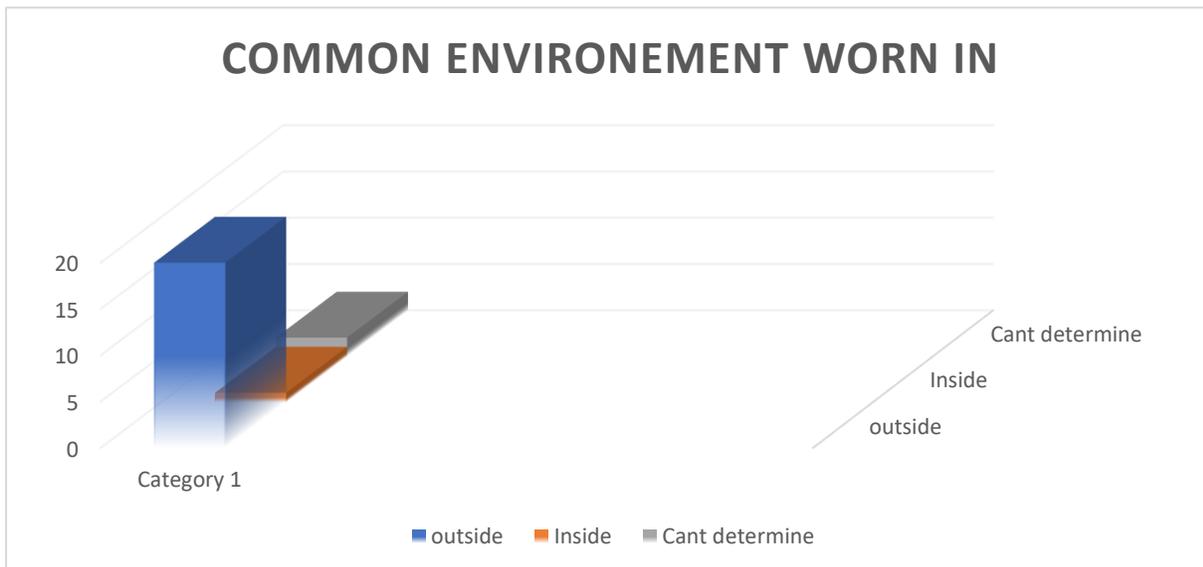
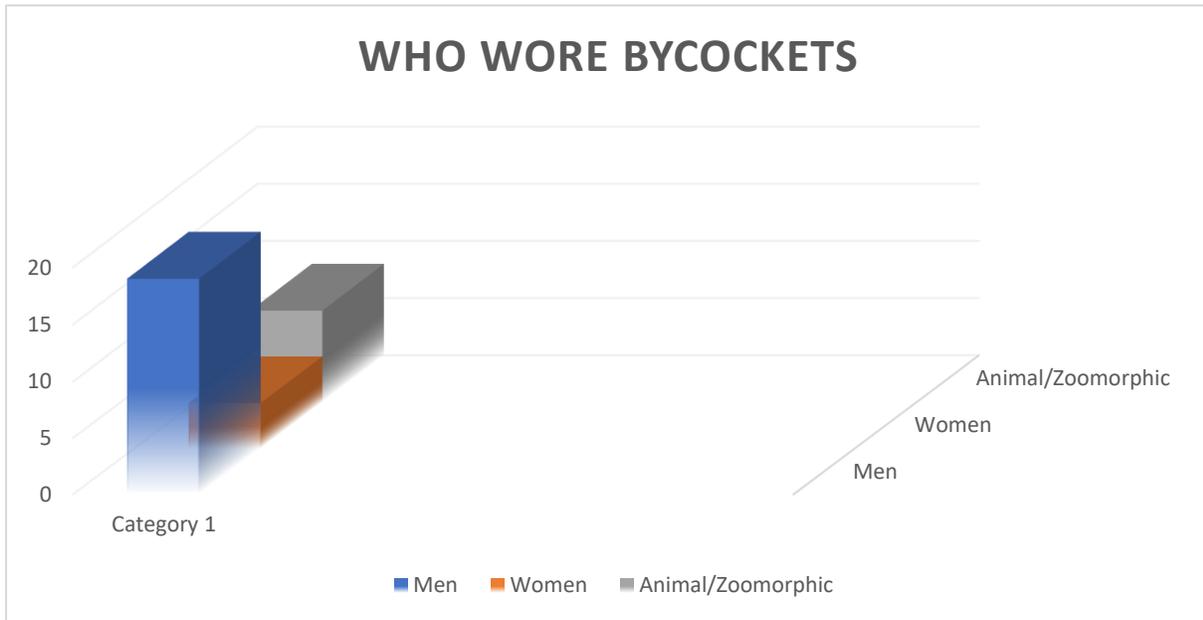
Sheep	Wool Color	Wool Characteristics
Shetland	There is a great variety in fleece color and patterning, and while there were some colored sheep in the medieval period, solid white was more common (Cannon, 2017)	Fleeces without much kemp would probably be considered a medieval "fine" wool, while the more kempy varieties would be "coarse." (Cannon, 2017)
Old Norwegian	greyish, dark brown, badger face, muflon pattern and black (Mason, 1996)	The wool is highly valued for making high quality craft products like hand knitting yarns and for felt-making (Mason, 1996)
Merino	White wool	Fine (King, 2017)

Attempts were made to felt Bycockets in each type of wool, Merino, Old Norwegian, and Shetland, by far the most successful of those used was Merino wool. The Merino felts in to a true fabric that has little to no fluff or flyaway fibers when felted, unlike the Shetland and Icelandic. The image below shows single fibers under a microscope. The first strand is a more course wool like the Icelandic or Norwegian, the second strand is a fine wool such as Merino. Merino wool has origins in medieval Spain. Author David Nolan states that Spain was, “the jewel of wool production in this period. Spain produced the best and the most wool during the early modern period, forbidding the export of its Merino sheep until the early eighteenth century.” (Nolan, 2017) In fact, the Merino Sheep was introduced around the 12th century to Europe, and it was a punishable crime to export the sheep from its home in Spain. The Merino was so desirable because it was comfortable to the wearer in a cold or warm climate and is slightly moisture repellent, not to mention very soft. (Frost, 2016)



(Biel, 2017)

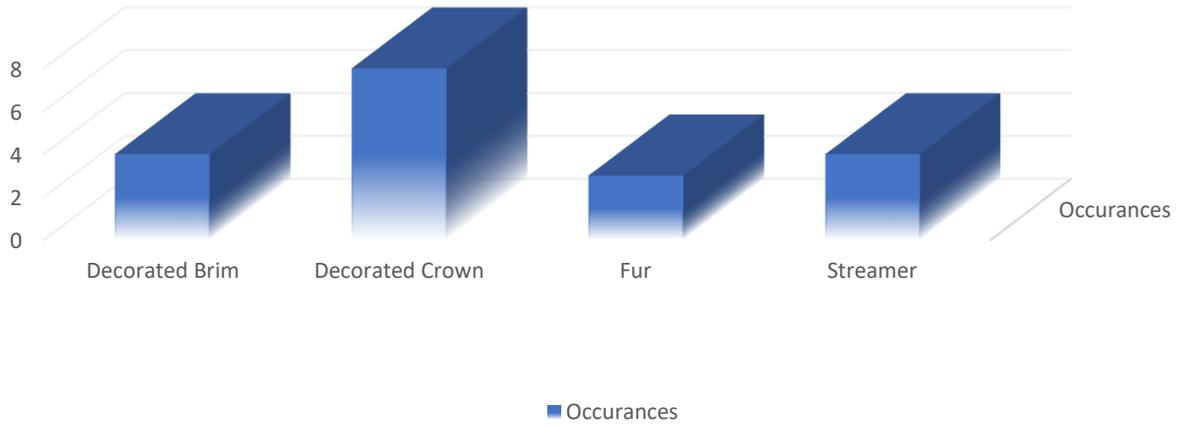
Bycockets come in many varieties, dozens of images, be they illumination, fresco or ivory carving exist and are a testament to the hats variability. In order to understand the commonality of how, when and where the Bycocket was donned a study was carried out. For this study, 31 different Bycockets found in period pieces of artwork were look at a tallied based on color, décor, wearer and environment worn. See bibliography for listing of resources.



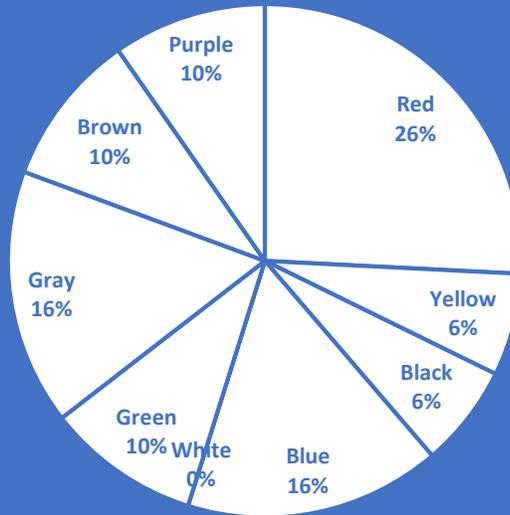
*Decorated Brim include fur, possible artistically drawn fur, possible stitching and possible pearls.

*Decorated Crown include, feathers, possible embroidery, possible fancy material covers.

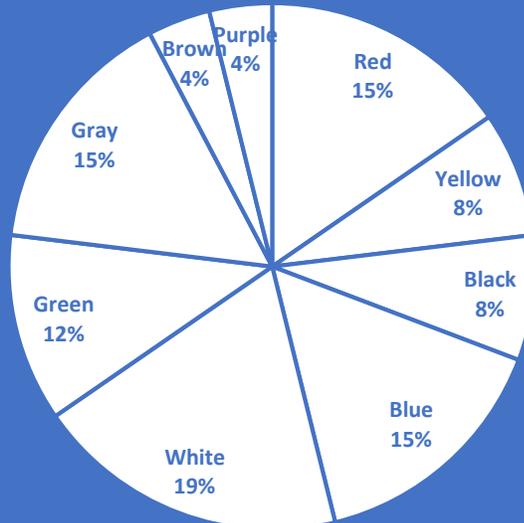
DECORATION OCCURANCES



CROWN COLORS



BRIM COLORS



Different Types of Bycockets in Imagery



Figure 3 Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift (Codex Manesse) — Zürich, ca. 1300 bis ca. 1340

Note the use of two items on this Bycocket, first the use of feathers to decorate the crown and second, the streamers tied at the back of the wearers head.



Figure 4 Legend of the True Cross, 1380, Agnolo Gaddi, (Florence, Santa Croce).

There has been much discussion on surrounding interest in whether or not the Bycocket was decorated. IN this image we can see the use of, possibly gold work, a woven fabric used or possibly a technique such as dry felting.



Figure 5 The triumph of death, around 1360, Anonymous (Pisa Camposanto)

These two women wear their pointed hats. When photographed from the front, the Bycocket many times can make the hat look tubular in nature (looking at the figure on the right). One feature to notice here is the decorative brim.

The Attempts and Personal Process of Bycocket Creation.



When I began creating Bycockets, in 2011, the first one was extremely pointed on both brim and crown, I did this to mimic an image I saw that in retrospect I think was the artists interesting use of perspective. My hat was made from 80% wool felt blend, sewn together with one seam down the middle and all done on machine.

Though ultimately happy with the product, I consistently found myself thinking about the construction and methods of those living in the 14th century. Continual research had me finding something to change every time I created another. From changing the shapes of the crowns of the hats in order to better recreate what I was seeing in period images, to adding woven streamers of silk and wool, the need to improve and constantly better the product was paramount. I began to produce shapes, sizes and colors that I was happy with, even going as far as to use

period and natural dyes such as onion peel and turmeric, Woad and Anarkart. Still though something was just not right. Research indicated that wool could be felted, steamed, heated, stretched and formed into many shapes. Could it be that Bycockets were seamless, created like so many hats are still today, on a block?

Building my own form was simply a calamity and took three attempts to finally get something that worked. Purchasing a form made of wood was out of the question as the cost was extremely high, and though I tried to create a wooden form, I lacked the skill set to make it truly functional. Therefore, as necessity is the mother of invention I went to Hardware store and got...window sealant. I created the shape of a Bycocket with the brim folded down out of felt, and filled it with window sealant which expanded to epic proportions. It hardened overnight and I trimmed off the excess that had spilled out. It was a risk, however it worked!



This is my first fully hand felted and blocked Bycocket, the black color was achieved using commercial dye. There are no seams to this hat though decorative stitching was added.



Figure 6 First attempt at no seam, block formed hat

Originally, the process involved forming a flat piece of felted wool over my form and though the shape was there the hat created thusly, could not hold its shape for more than a few days. I thought, pondered and cursed the lack of information until one night I had a thought. Could you make felted wool in the round? The answer is yes! This was the first time I had the feeling that I may be on to something that could actually have been the period method. The hat came from felting around a shape was thick, firm, held its shape well and had no visible stitched seams. Below you will see my current process of Bycocket creation.



Figure 7 and 8 One begins by laying small pulls of wool over a form until completely covering the pattern, I begin with horizontal lines.



Figure 9 Next I place a piece of porous fabric over the wool and flip it to its other side and repeat the process. Overall, there are six layers of wool on each side.



Figure 10 Next is to layer your wool going in a vertical manner, I lay the wool in almost a rainbow shape around the pattern. My rationale for the alternating layers is to help the already barbed fibers gain a more meshing effect



Figure 8 The result of the 12 layers (in total) of wool result in what looks like a large fluffy pillow. This Process takes about an hour and a half.



Figure 9 Now you drench your wool with a mixture of water and soap. In the middle ages urine, soapwort, woodash or soda may have been used. After the 1200's another type of soap, Castille Soap and Olive oil based soaps emerged. For my hats I opt to use the Olive oil and Castille soap. The lubrication keeps the wool fibers from pulling apart..



Figure 11 Now begins the agitation process, here you pat the fibers gently until they begin to adhere to each other, generally around 30-45 minutes of gentle patting. The wool will show you if you are being too aggressive and the fibers will pull away from each other.



Figure 14 As the wool begins to adhere you can be more aggressive with your patting as well as begin to roll the hat and smooth it with a stone or piece of glass. When the wool is truly turning itself into a felted fabric it is almost magical.



Figure 15 Next is to flip the hat, agitate the inside fibers and work to stretch the seam, making it appear much less prominent.



Figure 6 Now you can take your wool and form it around pretty much any shape you can come up with!

Here you see photos of how a Bycocket is worn with a 14th Century ensemble.



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Bycocket Views looked at for purpose of Study and Data

Fols. 9r, 40v, 57v, 78v, 123r, the Smithfield Decretals (British Library Royal 10 E IV), c. 1300-1340

Claudas and his sons riding out, Lancelot Cycle (Ashmole 828, fol. 10r), beginning of the 14th century

Markgraf Heinrich von Meißen (fol. 14v), Herr Heinrich Hetzbold von Weißensee (fol. 228r), and Kunz von Rosenheim (fol. 394r), Manesse Codex (UBH Cod. Pal. germ. 848), 1300-1330

An ivory writing-tablet with a hunting scene, made in France in the early 14th century

Ivory mirror-backs with hunting scenes, carved in Paris in the 14th century:

Louvre MRR 196 (c. 1300-1330)

Walters 71.275 (c. 1325-1350)

V&A 219-1867 (c. 1330-1340)

British Museum M&ME 1856,6-23,103 (c. 1325-1375)

V&A 222-1867 (c. 1330-1350)

Hunting birds, the Queen Mary Psalter (British Library Royal 2 B VII, fol. 190), c. 1310-1320
Illustrations on fols. 32r, 67v, 70v, 162r, and 170r, the Luttrell Psalter (Brit. Lib. Add. 42130), c. 1325-1340

Gérard, *Miracles de Notre Dame* (BNF Nouvelle acquisition française 24541, fol. 57v), c. 1330-1340

Detail from The Effects of Good Government in the Countryside from the Frescoes of the Good and Bad Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1338-1340

The Three Dead and the Three Living and The Triumph of Death by Buonamico Buffalmacco, c. 1338-1339 (see details)

A man on a horse that pulls a covered wagon, a psalter (Douce 131, fol. 43r), c. 1340

Bas-de-page in Passionnaire l'usage de l'abbaye de Saint-Trond, 14th century

Midianites rob Israel's fields, *Concordantiae caritatis* (SBL 151, fol. 26v), c. 1349-1351

The north wind (fol. 5r) and rain (fol. 89v), *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (ÖNB Codex Vindobonensis, series nova 2644), c. 1370-1400

Pears (fol. 4v), bay laurel (fol. 20), lettuce (fol. 28), partridge (fol. 67v), drunks fighting (fol. 88v), *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (BNF Nouvelle acquisition latine 1673), c. 1390-1400

