

Apparence(s)

11 | 2022

Modes Animales

Whalebone and the Wardrobe of Elizabeth I

Whaling and the Making of Aristocratic Fashions in Sixteenth-Century Europe

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/apparences.3653>

Résumés

English Français

During the sixteenth century the bodies of Europe's elites began to change in size and form as both men and women adopted wide starched ruffs and collars, ballooning sleeves, stiffened or bombast upper garments and puffy lower garments. This early modern aristocratic body was the result of many different ideas that emerged during the sixteenth century, such as self-control, civility and physical uprightness. Often overlooked in explanations of late sixteenth-century fashions is the availability of new raw materials that allowed artisans to fabricate clothing that portrayed these aristocratic ideals. This article traces the emergence of baleen, an animal material derived from whales, in the wardrobe of Elizabeth I of England, to argue that the emergence of the queen's recognisable early modern aristocratic European silhouette was closely tied to this industry and the trading networks it created. The use of whalebone to create the ostentatious fashions of the late sixteenth century demonstrate that fashion and whaling have been inextricably linked since at least the sixteenth century.

Au cours du XVI^e siècle, les silhouettes des élites européennes se sont profondément transformées avec l'adoption par les hommes et les femmes de larges collerettes et cols amidonnés, de manches bouffantes, de corsages et pourpoints raidis au crin ou rembourrés et de hauts de chausse ou jupons amples. Ce corps aristocratique des débuts de l'ère moderne était le résultat de nouveaux idéaux aristocratiques apparus au cours du XVI^e siècle, telles que la maîtrise de soi, la civilité et la droiture physique. Les analyses de la mode de la fin du XVI^e siècle oublient parfois pourtant de se pencher sur les matériaux, souvent nouveaux, qui permettaient aux artisans de sculpter les vêtements et donner forme ainsi à ces idéaux aristocratiques. Cet article retrace l'émergence de l'utilisation des fanons de baleine dans la garde-robe d'Elizabeth I d'Angleterre pour montrer que la silhouette si reconnaissable de la reine devenue emblème de la silhouette aristocratique des débuts de l'époque moderne était étroitement liée à la pêche baleinière et aux réseaux commerciaux qui la sous-tendaient. L'utilisation des fanons de baleine pour créer les modes ostentatoires de la fin du XVI^e siècle montre que mode et chasse à la baleine sont inextricablement liées depuis au moins le XVI^e siècle.



Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : fanons de baleine, Elizabeth I, mode aristocratique, méthodes de construction, pêche à la baleine

Keywords: whalebone, Elizabeth I, aristocratic fashion, tailoring, whaling

Texte intégral

- 1 Renaissance European courts were notorious for their fixation on artifice and symbolism in dress. By the latter half of the sixteenth century both men and women's fashions in north-west Europe consisted of ballooning sleeves, stiffened or bombast upper garments, puffy lower garments, wide starched ruffs (*fraises*) and standing collars. (Fig. 1) The sixteenth century saw new uses of colour, textiles, materials and cutting techniques that allowed makers and courtiers alike to deliberately manipulate textiles into new forms and shapes.¹ The utilisation of many of these experimental techniques had begun in the fifteenth century when structured garments such as women's farthingales (*vertugadins*) and headpieces called *henins*, as well as men's codpieces (*braguettes*), emerged. Importantly, in addition to new tailoring techniques, the fashionable silhouette of the sixteenth century was increasingly constructed from rigid materials such as cardboard or pasteboard, wood, wire and bundles of reeds or grasses called bents (*jonc*).

Fig. 1: Giroux, after French School, *Ball at the Court of King Henry III of France*, Nineteenth-century engraving after original oil painting c. 1581 at the Musée du Louvre, Paris



New York Public Library, inv. *MGZFD Clo F Bal 1

- 2 Scholars whose research focuses on design, cut and construction have investigated the materials used to make these fashions.² However, an untold part of this story, and one that has not been explored much beyond observations of its increased presence in tailoring bills and surviving garments, is the sourcing and use of an animal material known as whalebone. Baleen, as this material is now known, is the name given to keratinous plates in the mouth of baleen whales that form part of a filter-feeder system. (Fig. 2) In the early modern period, it was known as whale fin (*fanons de baleines*) in its raw form or whalebone (*baleine*) after being processed for use. The unique flexibility, strength and malleability of this natural material made it popular in clothing manufacturing and by the nineteenth century baleen appeared in common objects such as walking sticks, parasols, riding whips, bonnets and corsets.



Fig. 2: The mouth of a Bowhead whale (*balaena mysticetus*) caught by Inupiaq whalers in the Chukchi Sea Arctic (Alaska), showing the black plates of baleen hanging from the top of the mouth



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- 3 There has been no extensive examination of baleen in the fashionable clothing of Western Europe during the sixteenth century, even though this was the century when European commercial whaling in North America first began.³ Previous studies have established that whale products first appeared in European dress and decorative arts objects in the early medieval period when communities around the shores of the North Atlantic began to scavenge, and eventually hunt, local whale species. Actual bones were used to craft everything from mundane tools to combs, pins, keys, gaming pieces and caskets.⁴ By the thirteenth century, references to what could be either whale baleen or bone appear in elite Anglo-Norman and French records relating to battle and tournament armours.⁵ The prevalence of whale products in these sources is unsurprising given that the Basques from southern France and northern Spain were the first Europeans to create industries built around whaling along the coastline of the Bay of Biscay during the Middle Ages.⁶ Sporadic references to baleen or bones that were used to support the long toes in shoes known as poulaines also appear in English and French wardrobe accounts during the fourteenth century.⁷ However, by the fifteenth



century it appears that baleen had largely fallen out of use in fashionable dress, particularly in England.

4 This article addresses the absence of studies of whalebone in the sixteenth century, when this material re-emerged in fashionable European dress, by presenting a case study of the wardrobe accounts of Queen Elizabeth I of England (r. 1558-1603). The two sets of records that this article makes use of are a *Register of warrants for the Great Wardrobe, 1567-89* (MS Egerton 2806) from the British Library and the *Copy of warrants for the Great Wardrobe, 1585-1603* (LC 5/36-37) from The National Archives. These records detail the clothing commissioned by the Tudor queen from the Great Wardrobe during the final thirty-six-years of her reign and shed light on when, how and why this material was used in elite clothing production in England during the sixteenth century. To systematically examine the emergence of whalebone in the queen's clothing, I utilise my own transcriptions of these manuscript sources, which have been crossed checked with those provided by Drea Leed in her online database of the Queen's wardrobe.⁸ Importantly, my reading of these archival sources is informed by portraits of the queen, that were either known to be taken from life or were court-approved images (and their copies), and my own experience of reconstructing some of the garments that are mentioned in these accounts.⁹ Finally, examples from other elite wardrobes, popular literature concerning dress, as well as English state papers and other information gained from studies of the European whaling trade, are used to further contextualise the royal wardrobe accounts. Although Elizabeth I was not the first person to use baleen in fashion, by studying these records we can explore one example of when baleen first began to be used in England, Tudor connections to continental styles and the effects that this material had on the queen's clothing.

5 Sixteenth-century fashions were not just the product of elite ideals of bodily behaviour that dictated that aristocratic bodies should be erect and physically imposing, but these extreme forms also coincided with an increased interest in commercial whaling by Europeans. It is no coincidence that as European mariners ventured further into the waters of North America and the Arctic in search of whales, European fashions began to become more and more structured. Such commercial ventures expanded trade networks and led to innovative uses of whale products in clothing, particularly in France. The use of whalebone to create the ostentatious fashions of the late sixteenth century show that fashion and whaling have been inextricably linked since at least the sixteenth century when many long-lasting innovations using this animal product first took place.

1. Proud and Imposing: The Sixteenth-Century Aristocratic Body

6 The meanings of the artificial and ostentatious fashions of the sixteenth century, and the subsequent criticisms that they received, have been previously explored by a range of scholars.¹⁰ However, it is useful here to outline the origins of these fashions, their dissemination, and meanings throughout Western Europe. By 1530 both men and women's clothing began to become more close fitting around the torso and full around the hips.¹¹ Such structured dress has been attributed to the power and influence of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty who controlled territories in Spain, Austria, the Holy Roman Empire, the Low Countries and the Americas.¹² Indeed, hooped skirts called *verdugados* had first appeared in the Castilian court in the mid to late fifteenth century, and Carmen Bernis and Amalia Descalzo have argued that during the reign of Phillip II of Spain male and female fashions reduced movement to a minimum.¹³ At this time, decorative frills on the necklines of linen smocks and shirts began to turn into standing collars and ruffs (*fraises*). These forced the head to be held erect in order to achieve a "grave, calm and haughty" bodily deportment that reflected the "fame then enjoyed by the Spaniards as owners of half the world" and "as arrogant and proud people".¹⁴ (Fig.



3) David Kunzle has also suggested that rigid modes of dressing first embraced by southern European courts, such as Spain and Portugal, coincided with their military might and expansion in the Americas and garments such as male doublets (*pourpoints*) mimicked the armour of the Spanish conquistadors.¹⁵ Regardless of exactly how these fashions came about, they soon disseminated throughout Europe.¹⁶ As Spanish influence grew, other European aristocracy began to adopt this style of power dressing as these new form altering fashions created a body that signified authority and high social rank.¹⁷

Fig. 3: Alonso Sánchez Coello, *Portrait of Ernst, Archduke of Austria*, 1568. Oil on canvas, 99 x 81 cm. This portrait of the Austrian Habsburg Archduke was painted when he was at the Spanish court of his uncle King Philip II



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- 7 Such fashions that originated in Spain were attractive to the elites of Europe as the early modern aristocratic body was, as E. Jane Burns has outlined, “the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a raw, passive nature” but rather one that is “civilised, overlaid, [and] polished by culture”.¹⁸ Thus, physical appearance was highly valued and usually expressed through lavish spending on expensive textiles, lace, embroidery and jewellery.¹⁹ Importantly, courts throughout the sixteenth century were increasingly influenced both directly and indirectly by Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). This “how to” guide for courtiers emphasised what Castiglione termed *sprezzatura*, or acting and speaking elegantly in an effortless manner. Such a concept did not just focus on actions and words, but also on the



presentation of the body through dress to achieve these ideals. In addition, humanist art and literature outlined new concepts of beauty that emphasized the desirability of slender forms, not just physical strength.²⁰ Artistic movements of the sixteenth century also focused on *artifizioso*, and art and literature were expected to be created with artifice, or “an artificial imitation of nature”.²¹ This general mantra which influenced cultural styles during the period, now referred to as mannerism, may account for the stylisation of elite forms, which Susan Vincent has noted was “unbalanced and distorted” with “separate parts of the dressed anatomy given independent status”.²²

- 8 Cultural ideals during the sixteenth century also dictated that elite male and female bodies should be erect and physically restrained, or as Philippe Perrot has stated, “proud, imposing, theatrical form[s], manifesting the qualities of a soul and the virtues of a state”.²³ Georges Vigarello has argued that in the sixteenth-century when “a new court nobility was being established as the world of chivalry faded” there emerged new rules of deportment for the body.²⁴ In particular, these rules focused on what Vigarello has termed the “upward training of the body”, meaning that increasing emphasis was placed on having and maintaining good posture. During the sixteenth century, particularly in France, writings increasingly emphasised a “stricter control over posture and the right position” of the noble body.²⁵ Such ideals that circulated throughout European courts therefore set the ideological framework that court dress was expected to operate within. As a result, the form of clothing became particularly important during the sixteenth century and garments that complemented these aristocratic ideals such as farthingales, codpieces, bombast doublets, stiffened bodices and large ruffs emerged.

2. Whaling, Continental Fashions and the English Court: 1570-82

- 9 Examining the wardrobe accounts of Queen Elizabeth I of England can help us understand how tailors and other artisans were able to innovate with both new and old materials to make novel designs that complimented notions of the aristocratic body into reality. Whalebone is first mentioned in surviving English warrants from the Great Wardrobe on 28 September 1580 when the queen’s farthingale maker Robert Sibthorpe was recorded as “translating”, “enlarging” and “stiffening” half farthingales with “whale bone and bent”.²⁶ Farthingales were skirt supports that enlarged the lower half of woman’s gown and they reflected those previously discussed ideals of the aristocratic body. The female elites of England wore farthingales to show their high social position and wealth, as these garments not only required that the outer skirts be made of many yards of expensive fabrics but also increased the amount of space that a woman consumed.²⁷ There appears to have been three main styles in England. The first, known as the Spanish farthingale in England, consisted of an underskirt in the shape of a cone structured by hoops that started small at the waist and slowly widened until it reached the feet. (Fig. 4) The other styles were known colloquially as French farthingales and appear to have consisted of either large rolls that sat around the level of the waistline, or hooped wheel-like structures that sat on top of a roll. (Fig. 10) In the accounts of Elizabeth I, these latter styles appear to have been called “rolls”, “half” and “great” farthingales.²⁸

Fig. 4: Abraham de Bruyn, *Omnium pene Europae, Asiae, Africae atque Americae Gentium Habitus*, c. 1581, Engraving on paper and gouache colouring, 27.31 x 35.56 cm





Los Angeles County Museum of Art, inv. AC1997.164.1cc

- 10 Between the years 1580-82, Sibthorpe was recorded as using whalebone in the making, enlarging, stiffening and “translating” of many Spanish farthingales, half farthingales and farthingale rolls.²⁹ Translating in this context meant altering, and it is rather fitting here that the first uses of whalebone in the accounts of the queen were to alter pre-existing farthingales with this new and improved material. Entries in MS Egerton 2806, dated before 1580, show that the queen’s farthingales had been made from bents or kersey, a woollen fabric that was made into ropes, and then sometimes additionally stiffened with buckram. This appears to have been the standard way to make farthingales in Europe up until this point. In Florence, between the years 1550-72, Spanish-style farthingales owned by Eleanor de Toledo (wife of Cosimo I de’ Medici) and her daughters were made from bents (“*bastone*”) and rope.³⁰ The only surviving Spanish-style of farthingale, now in the Museo Etnográfico de Castilla y León, also contains hoops made from bents and wire.³¹ Even the new fashionable half farthingales and rolls that appeared in the Queen’s wardrobe around 1579 were originally made with bents.³²
- 11 While farthingales were traditionally made from bents and rope, the properties of whalebone made it the perfect material to achieve both structure and flexibility in a garment. Baleen had an advantage over other materials as it was essentially the equivalent of modern-day plastic: lightweight, elastic and flexible. Importantly, it could also be shaped using heat.³³ It was also stronger and more durable than bundles of reeds or ropes of kersey fabric, which were frequently replaced in the queen’s farthingales after they had lost their shape.³⁴ After 1580, whalebone was always used in conjunction with these older materials to structure these garments in the queen’s wardrobe warrants.
- 12 The first use of whalebone in Elizabeth’s wardrobe in 1580 is unsurprising, given that there had been an increased interest in whaling and whale products in England during the preceding three decades. The Company of Merchant Adventurers to New Lands (later known as the Muscovy Company) was granted a charter by the English Crown to adventure around the North Cape of what is now Norway where whales were plentiful in 1555. Later in 1577 they were granted another twenty-year monopoly by Queen Elizabeth for a charter to kill whales and to import their products. However, the English did not do any considerable hunting of whales until the seventeenth century.³⁵ During the sixteenth century, merchants and artisans in England therefore relied on other



nations for their whale products and this need was serviced by French and Spanish Basque whalers and merchants. By 1530 the Basques had expanded their local whaling industry from the Bay of Biscay to the southern shores of Labrador, in what is now the Canadian province of Newfoundland. Here they hunted North Atlantic Right and Bowhead whales, species that were rich in whale blubber and baleen.³⁶

- 13 To understand where and how the English sourced their baleen during the sixteenth century, it is useful to turn our attention to the other great commodity provided by the exploitation of this marine mammal: whale oil. Whale oil was initially the chief motivator for Basque whaling in Labrador. After killing a whale, its thick layer of blubber was stripped away, chopped up and placed in large vats where it was slowly cooked and rendered into oil. Whale oil was used for a variety of purposes in sixteenth-century Europe. However, it was primarily employed to lubricate woollen threads in textile manufacturing and to make soap that was used to wash clothing.³⁷ Brad Loewen has reconstructed the route that whale oil took once it was offloaded from ships in Basque ports. He found that by the mid-sixteenth century, the primary market destinations for Newfoundland whale oil were in North-West of Europe: Antwerp, Rouen and, increasingly, England.³⁸

- 14 By 1565 merchants were regularly importing whale oil into England via Barnstaple, Dartmouth, Southampton, Ipswich and Hull. These came from multiple Basque ports in Spain, the French ports of La Rochelle and Bordeaux, and also Hamburg.³⁹ Although whale oil was the primary motivator for the hunt and the main commodity traded, Basques whalers also brought back significant quantities of whalebone from Newfoundland too.⁴⁰ By the 1560s there is evidence that quantities of whalebone were being traded with cargos of oil to markets in western France along traditional wine and textile routes. These passed through Bordeaux and La Rochelle bound for Toulouse, Nantes, Rouen and Saint-Malo.⁴¹ As this evidence demonstrates, during the sixteenth century where whale oil went, whalebone was likely to follow. Whalebone was therefore prevalent in Spain and France decades before 1580 when it was first used in the wardrobe accounts of Elizabeth I. Why then did it take so long to be used in Elizabeth I's clothing? This is still unclear. However, two events in the late 1570s may have led to both knowledge about how to use this material in clothing construction and to an increased trade in this commodity in England.

- 15 On 17 March 1577 the English ambassador to Paris, Amyas Paulet, sent a new type of farthingale to Queen Elizabeth I stating that it was "such as is now used by the French Queen and the Queen of Navarre".⁴² Janet Arnold had suggested that this farthingale was a roll that sat over the older Spanish style, creating a bell rather than cone-shape.⁴³ This gift from France was delivered to the Queen just two years before new styles of "half farthingales and "rolls", began to be made by the queen's farthingale-maker Robert Sibthorpe. It is possible that this gift-exchange introduced not only this new fashion to the English court, but also reintroduced knowledge of how to use whalebone in clothing. Unsurprisingly, given that French Basque whalers were involved in the profitable Newfoundland whaling industry, and whalebone had been traded in Western-France since at least the Middle Ages, the Valois and Navarre courts used this material in their farthingales much earlier than the English.

- 16 During the 1560s Mary Queen of Scots' farthingales were recorded as being made with hoops of "*quhail horne* [whale horn]" or whalebone.⁴⁴ Mary had been raised in France and when this was recorded, in 1562, she had only just returned to Scotland. So her wardrobe was much more reflective of French fashions of the time than those of Scotland. Later, in 1577, the same year that Elizabeth received a new style of French farthingale from her ambassador to France, the farthingale-maker Nicholas Regnault was paid to make farthingales of damask with whalebone for Marguerite of Valois, Queen of Navarre.⁴⁵ By the 1580s, English court fashions borrowed heavily from the French courts and Elizabeth I actively sought out both French fashions and the skills of French tailors. As a result, there are many references to gowns "sent out of France" in her wardrobe accounts, and it appears that the queen commissioned garments from French tailors that were then altered or replicated by her own English artisans.⁴⁶



Therefore, gifting events such as those described in 1577, or the queen's own pursuit of the latest fashions through requests made to French tailors, could have inspired the queen's artificers to begin using whalebone in 1580.⁴⁷

- 17 A second event that may have hastened the English utilisation of whalebone came in January 1579 when Elizabeth I gave orders that "no whale oil is to be allowed to enter this country [England], where nearly 2,000 tons of it was yearly consumed, most of it coming from Biscay", mostly for cloth and soap manufacturing.⁴⁸ This proclamation was the result of disputes over the use of whale oil in soap making. It appears to have been a protectionist measure implemented to support the growing English rapeseed industry. Importantly, while whale oil was banned by this proclamation, albeit only temporarily it seems, there were no restrictions on the importation of whalebone. While it may be mere coincidence that the first use of whalebone in the queen's wardrobe in 1580 came only a year after this proclamation forbidding the importation of oil, it is possible that the queen's order encouraged the interest in and trade of other whale materials like whalebone. After all, these trade networks between merchants and whalers were clearly already well established by this time and the ban on oil may have encouraged the increased importation of this other whale product.

Fig. 5: Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I*, c. 1572. Watercolour on vellum, 5.1 x 4.8 cm



National Portrait Gallery London, inv. NPG 108

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3. Whalebone and the Elizabethan Silhouette: 1583-1603

18 After 1580 the final and most iconic evolution of Elizabeth's silhouette began to take shape, and wardrobe accounts show that whalebone was integral to these final changes. Farthingale-makers were the first artisans in the Great Wardrobe to use whalebone, however, by 1583 the queen's tailors were using this material too. The first recorded use of whalebone for something other than a farthingale was in 1583 when the tailor William Jones was recorded as making "Twenty and four payer of Rolls of whale bone covered with taffeta and bound with ribbon of our great Garderobe".⁴⁹ The four pairs of rolls mentioned here refer to fashionable padded rolls that sat on the edge of the shoulders of women's gowns and bodices, as is visible in an image of a young French noblewomen in the top left of an engraving c. 1581 by Abraham de Bruyn. (Fig. 4) Before 1580 the Queen's shoulder rolls were made from bents or stuffed with a woollen cloth called baize, which provided structure, as is pictured in a portrait miniature from Nicholas Hilliard c. 1572.⁵⁰ (Fig. 5) However, in MS Egerton 2806 after 1583 the rolls produced by Elizabeth's tailors also contained whalebone, in combination with these other materials. By 1585, to further enhance the stiffening provided by whalebone, wire was also incorporated to produce larger standing shoulder rolls.⁵¹

Fig. 6: Associated with Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I (The "Phoenix Portrait")*, c. 1575. Oil on panel, 78.7 x 61 cm





National Portrait Gallery London, inv. NPG 190

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- 19 In addition to these shoulder rolls, the queen's sleeves also began to expand. During the 1570s there are sporadic entries in the wardrobe accounts for "sleeves of bent" and for "rolls of bent in the sleeves".⁵² These entries perhaps referred to structures that were placed in the upper part of the sleeve to enlarge it. This created the structure that is depicted in the "Phoenix Portrait" of Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard (Fig. 6) and in those sleeves worn by a Parisian woman and a Burgundian noblewoman in the engraving by de Bruyn. (Fig. 4) In both artworks, the top of the sleeve near the shoulder is noticeably larger than the rest of the arm and does not appear to have a separate roll to which it is attached. While bent was clearly able to structure the sleeves in the desired manner, by the mid-1580s whalebone also began to appear in descriptions of sleeves too. In 1585 an entry in the accounts noted that "four pair of sleeves of white fustian bented with whales bone" were made by the queen's tailors.⁵³ In 1586 another ten pairs of fustian and holland-cloth sleeves "bented all over with whales bone" were made for the queen.⁵⁴ These all appear to have been under-sleeves, as they were made from plain fabrics — not those silks or other fine textiles used in the queen's gowns.⁵⁵ As the 1580s progressed, it appears that these under-structures began to consume more of the arm resulting in sleeves that had a large and puffy appearance, as portrayed by Nicholas Hilliard in his sketch of the queen taken around 1585 for her Great Seal. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7: Nicholas Hilliard, *Sketch of Queen Elizabeth I*, c. 1585. Pen and ink on vellum, 14.2 x 12 cm

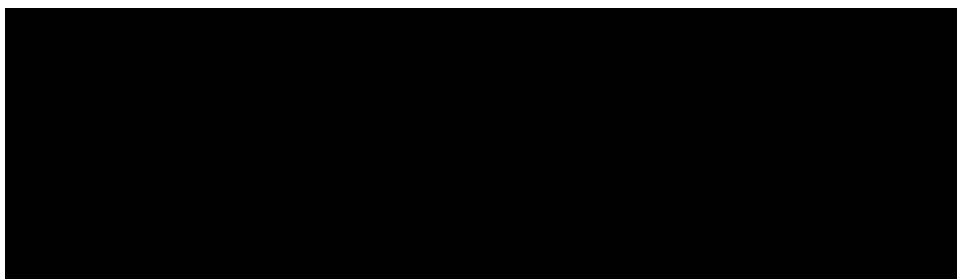


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- 20 Another dress object worn by the queen during the 1580s was the busk. The busk was a long, narrow piece of wood, metal, or whalebone that was placed into a stitched channel in the centre front of the bodice. (Fig. 8) Before 1580, the bodices of Elizabeth's garments were usually stiffened with a mixture of thick fabrics. However, in 1577 the queen received six busks.⁵⁶ These are the first busks recorded in her accounts, and, they were sourced from a carpenter and coffer-maker named Thomas Greene, meaning they were likely made of wood or metal. However, after the introduction of whalebone into her wardrobe in 1580 it appears that the queen preferred this animal material, as the overwhelming majority of busks in the wardrobe accounts thereafter were made from whalebone. In MS Egerton 2806, between the years 1581 and 1586, fifty-eight busks were delivered to the queen. Of these, fourteen were made from metal or wood, twelve from whalebone and wire, and thirty-two from just whalebone.⁵⁷

Fig. 8: Carved ivory Busk, French, c. 1590-1610







Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. 5608-1859

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²¹ Whalebone busks were also common in France, as Henri Estienne wrote in 1579 that French “ladies call a whalebone (or something else, in the absence of the latter) their stay, which they put under their breast, right in the middle, in order to keep straighter”.⁵⁸ Indeed, the primary function of the busk was, as Randle Holme later wrote, to keep the torso “straight and in compass”.⁵⁹ Strips of baleen were placed in the front of men’s doublets and jerkins (*justaucorps*) for this reason too. It is unclear whether this practice occurred during the sixteenth century in England, as whalebone is not specifically mentioned in tailors’ bills for doublets that contained “stiffening”. However, this material is present in surviving early seventeenth-century examples.⁶⁰ As well as creating this upright aristocratic body, for women the busk also had an additional purpose, as Holme noted that “a strong piece of Wood, or Whale-bone” was used so that the “Breast nor Belly shall not swell too much out.” Indeed, reconstruction experiments have shown that when a busk is placed down the front of a bodice it does prevent slouching, forces the wearer to maintain an upright composure and creates a straight line from neck to groin.⁶¹

²² As Vigarello has also argued, in addition to showing civility and refinement, an upright body also signalled that there were no physical deformities.⁶² For a female monarch such as Elizabeth having an aristocratic body devoid of deformities was crucial to securing her image as a powerful and capable queen, potentially able to produce an heir. At this time, it was still hoped that the queen would marry and have issue, and she was in negotiations with the French to marry François, Duke of Alençon and Anjou between 1578-82. Any physical abnormalities would likely have led to disinterest by suitors or fear over the queen’s fertility, so always maintaining the appearance of a perfect aristocratic body with the help of a material like whalebone was crucial.



By the mid-1580s whalebone was a staple in the queen’s wardrobe. In September 1586 the Great Wardrobe received a staggering “v [5] hundred xxxvii [37] yards of

whales bone and bent”.⁶³ Accounts reveal that most of the whalebone was delivered to the workrooms of the Great Wardrobe by the farthingale-maker Robert Sibthorpe, as in 1587 a warrant recorded that Sibthorpe delivered “Two hundredth yard of whales bone & bent” to the tailor Williams Jones.⁶⁴ As Rebecca Unsworth noted in her examination of the queen’s wardrobe accounts, the supply of whalebone by Sibthorpe is likely because his trade was the first to use this material and so he was “already connected to a supplier”.⁶⁵ This supplier was probably a London Merchant trading to the Basque regions of France and Spain. During this decade whalebone was also supplied to the Great Wardrobe by a haberdasher named Roger Montague who may have had similar connections.⁶⁶

Fig. 9: Crispijn van de Passe after Isaac Oliver, *Portrait of Elizabeth I, Queen of England*, c. 1603-20. Engraving, 34.8 × 22.4 cm



Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. RP-P-1939-392

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Deliveries of whalebone to the Great Wardrobe continued to increase during the 1590s, occurring twice yearly usually in autumn and spring. It was during this decade that the queen’s appearance took on its final most exaggerated and imposing form. (Fig.

9) At this time, the queen's farthingales became much larger in size. They appear to have grown and evolved into a structure made from several hoops of whalebone and bent that graduated outwards from the level of the waistline in a wheel shape, that sat on top of a roll.⁶⁷ I have previously experimented with reconstructing this garment, of which we have no surviving examples. My making experiments suggested that such a design would not have been possible without whalebone, as it is unlikely that bents alone would have provided enough structural support. (Fig. 10) Indeed, in my reconstruction of this garment I was compelled to include wire, as the synthetic German baleen that I used (which is designed to imitate the properties of whalebone in garments such as stays and corsets), could not support the garment or additional skirts.⁶⁸ While wire is not mentioned in relation to these garments in Elizabeth's records, it is possible that thicker, and thus stronger, pieces of baleen were inserted into the garment instead.

Fig. 10: Author's reconstruction of French wheel farthingale. The view from the back shows the red roll that has been incorporated into the design



- 25 In some instances, this hooped structure around the waist may even have had an attached skirt with some hoops, which would have given it more stability, as an entry in 1597 recorded “for altering stiffening & making lighter of three half farthingales of straw colour taffeta the whales bone new covered with like colour taffeta”.⁶⁹ What this entry appears to record are hoops of whalebone that were covered separately in fabric before being attached to the half farthingale. These hoops may have been part of the structure that sat around the waist or they could have been attached to a skirt that hung from the waist, just as hoops bound in fabric were attached to the skirt of the previously mentioned surviving *verdugado*, rather than being sewn into the garment itself.⁷⁰
- 26 The queen’s iconic silhouette during the last years of her reign was also achieved using two other garments to which whalebone was integral: farthingale sleeves and French bodies. A farthingale sleeve was a sleeve support that was made of plain fabrics like holland cloth and fustian. Instead of only adding bulk at the very top of the sleeve, as the queen’s earlier sleeve supports had done, farthingale sleeves gave an extremely large and bulbous appearance to the whole arm. This was depicted in the famous Ditchley portrait of Elizabeth I by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. (Fig. 11) Farthingale sleeves required large amounts of baleen to maintain such an inflated structure: in 1597 “cxii [112] yards of whales bone” was required “for altering & stiffening of vii [7] pair of farthingale sleeves”.⁷¹ Besides differing in size and shape, these sleeve supports also diverged from those that came before as whalebone was the sole stiffening material used.⁷² Additionally, farthingale sleeves were the only garments in the queen’s wardrobe that were made by both tailors and farthingale-makers during this decade, and it also appears that the use of whalebone in these sleeves utilised the same techniques used in farthingales, which is why they were named “farthingale” sleeves.

Fig. 11: Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Queen Elizabeth I ('The Ditchley portrait')*, c. 1592. Oil on canvas, 24.13 x 15.24 cm





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- 27 The final and, arguably, the most enduring fashion innovation in the wardrobe of Elizabeth I, and one that would not have been possible without whalebone, were “French bodies”, also called “whalebone bodies” (*corps de baleine*). These were sleeveless garments stiffened with strips of whalebone that were later called stays during the eighteenth century and then corsets during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These garments were first recorded in the queen’s wardrobe accounts in 1590: “Item for making of a pair of French bodies of carnation Taffeta Lined with fustian stitched all over with whales bone of our great wardrobe”.⁷³ As the name indicates, this style came to England from the French, who appear to have used this type of garment before the English. In 1577, the Venetian ambassador at the French court Jerome Lippomano remarked of French women that “they wear a bodice they call *corps piqué* [stitched body] which makes their shape more delicate and more slender”,



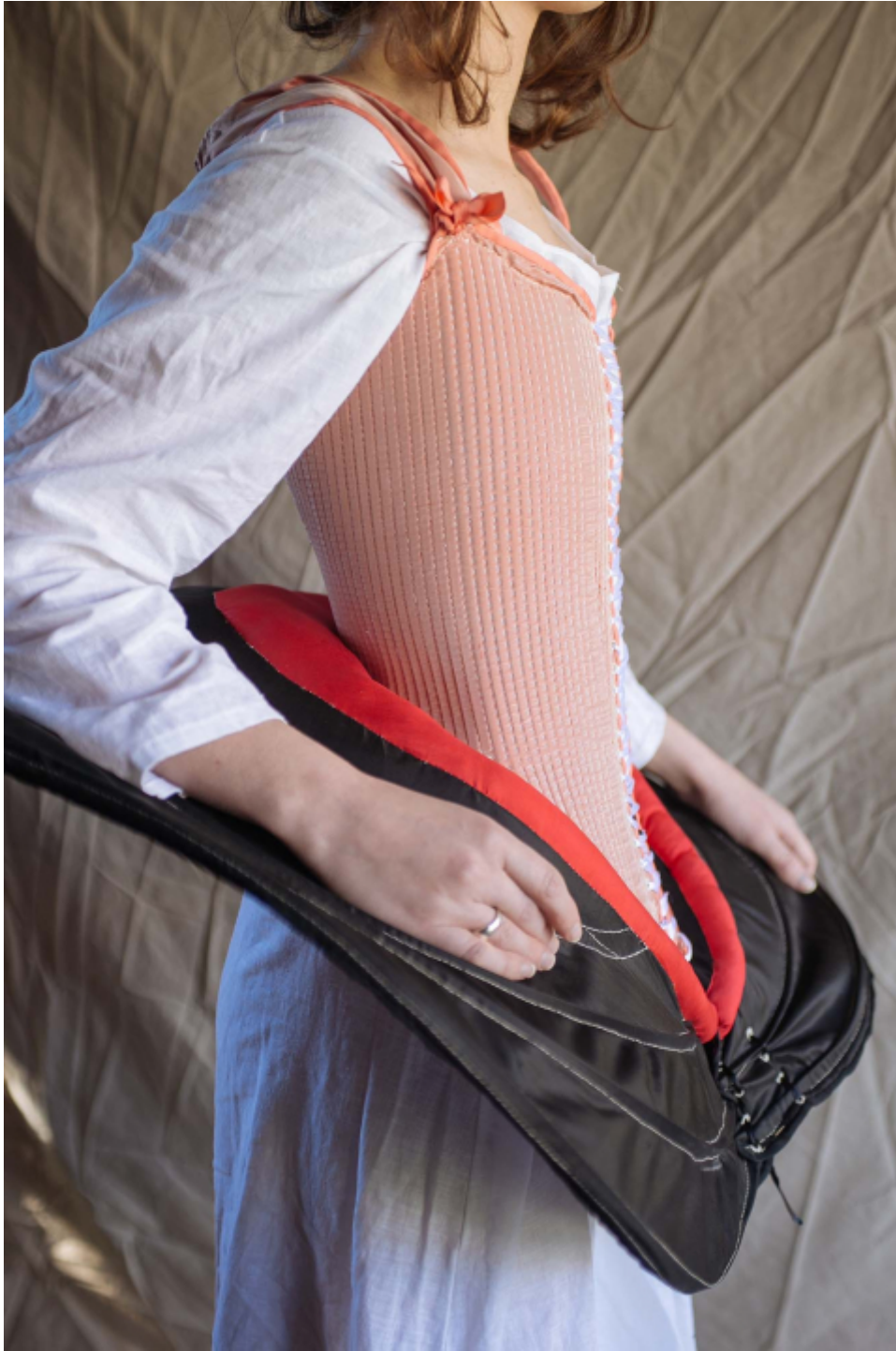
likely referring to the stitched channels on this garment into which stiffening was placed.⁷⁴

28 While no farthingales or sleeves from the Great Wardrobe have survived, a pair of bodies stiffened with whalebone still clothe the queen's funeral effigy in Westminster Abbey. These bodies demonstrate both the innovative use of whalebone and the laborious nature of its preparation. The bodies contain over 120 hand stitched boning channels that contain multiple lengths of 6mm and 12.7mm-wide whalebone.⁷⁵ In my reconstruction of this garment, which replicated the exact shape and dimensions of the original, I used approximately 25 metres of synthetic baleen to stiffen the garment. The synthetic baleen that I utilised was bought in ready-made widths, meaning that all I had to do was to cut the boning into desired lengths. However, in 1603 these lengths of whalebone would have had to be shaved to the desired thickness and cut to the desired length from the raw plates of baleen.

29 Funerary records show that these "straight bodies" were specially constructed by a tailor from the Great Wardrobe for the "the Image [effigy] representing her late Majestie" in 1603.⁷⁶ The bodies appear to have been created in haste for her funerary procession, as x-rays of the garment taken by the School of Historical Dress show that the baleen strips have been crudely cut and do not fit the channels of the garment correctly. This was likely the result of the baleen strips needing to be pushed in easily and quickly by the tailor.⁷⁷ The examination of later bodies shows that much more care and time was usually taken in preparing the whalebone before inserting it into the garment. Such time-consuming preparation was required to obtain a correct and comfortable fit and to create the desired aristocratic silhouette. When my reconstruction was placed on a model, the design of these bodies created the quintessential conical-shaped torso that is visible in portraits from the end of the queen's reign, especially when paired with a large French farthingale. (Fig. 12) The properties of baleen — of strength and flexibility — would have allowed for movement, while still flattening the bust and pulling in the stomach. Further, by extending the centre front of the garment past the waist to the groin the optical illusion of an impossibly long and lean torso was created.

Fig. 12: Author's reconstruction of the "straight bodies" of Elizabeth now on the queen's effigy in Westminster Abbey) and a French wheel farthingale





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30 By her death in 1603, the silhouette of Elizabeth I was characterised by a long tapering torso, large bulbous sleeves and wide skirts that created the impression of an imposing and powerful figure. During the final decade of Elizabeth's reign garments made with whalebone also became commonplace in the wardrobes of England's female elites. Tailoring bills from the Bacon family of Norfolk in 1591-2 show that farthingales, bodies and farthingale sleeves, made with materials like bent and whalebone, were worn by women of the Norfolk gentry.⁷⁸ In 1594, a wealthy orphan and heiress named Thomasine Wolters was also given a gown with "a pair of whalebone sleeves" while she boarded in Canterbury.⁷⁹ It remains unclear if the fashion for whalebone in England came from the queen herself, or from other influences in the court. This may well be impossible to trace due to the fragmentary nature of archival records relating to non-royal dress during the late sixteenth century. However, by the queen's death, this material was being widely used by the female elites of England in their wardrobes.



4. Conclusion

31 As this article has demonstrated, the development of Elizabeth's structured aristocratic silhouette did not just reflect cultural ideas of court elites, but the construction of such fashions was also facilitated by the expansion of European whaling and the trade of whale products. By the middle of the sixteenth century large quantities of whale products were being imported into Europe from Newfoundland by Basque whalers. Although the English traded with Spain, it appears that inspiration for how to use whalebone came to England around 1580 via the French who had used this material in their court fashions much earlier. As the wardrobe accounts of Elizabeth demonstrate, the ability to render into material form those often-abstract ideals that dictated aristocratic appearances was also made possible by the knowledge of tailors, farthingale-makers and other artisans who developed ways to utilise the unique properties of baleen in their creations.

32 The innovative use of whalebone in garments like those found in the wardrobe of Elizabeth I marked the beginning of the widespread use of this material in dress, as throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries baleen was used in a wide variety of garments and accessories. Recognising that fashions like those worn by Queen Elizabeth I would not have been possible without animal by-products like baleen can help us to not only appreciate the innovative developments of early modern artisans, but also to understand how fashion participated in one of the world's most profitable but destructive commercial industries, whaling, from its very beginnings in the sixteenth century.

Notes

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4 Vicki Ellen Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic*. Brill, 2008, p. 152, 162.

5 Ralph Moffat, James Spriggs, and Sonia O'Connor, 'The Use of Baleen for Arms, Armour and Heraldic Crests in Medieval Britain'. *The Antiquaries Journal* 88 (2008), p. 207-215.

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8 Drea Leed, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Uploaded* (2008). <http://elizabethancostume.net/cyte/ElizabethI> [last accessed on 15/10/2020].

9 Elizabeth's image was tightly controlled and although the queen rarely sat for portraits, her clothing and jewellery was methodically detailed by artists who likely borrowed items from the Great Wardrobe to mount in their studios. Roy Strong, *The English Icon: Elizabethan & Jacobean Portraiture*. London: Pantheon Books, 1969, p. xi; Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's*



Wardrobe Unlock'd: the Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600, edited from Stowe MS 557 in the British Library, MS LR 2/121 in the Public Record Office, London, and MS V.b.72 in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC. Leeds: Maney, 1988, p. 14-15, 22.

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14 A. Descalzo, 'Spanish Male Costume in The Hapsburg Period', p. 18.

15 D. Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, p. 70-71.

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26 British Library (hereafter BL), inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^o 158v.

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28 It is impossible to determine how many style variations existed during this period in the Queen's accounts, and it is likely that other styles did exist.

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- 43 J. Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 198.
- 44 Joseph Robertson, *Inventaires de la Royne Descosse, Douairiere de France: Catalogues of the Jewels, Dresses, Furniture, Books, and Paintings of Mary Queen of Scots 1556-1569*. Edinburgh: 1863, p. xxviii, footnote 3.
- 45 Jacqueline Boucher, *Deux épouses et reines à la fin du XVIe siècle : Louise de Lorraine et Marguerite de France*. Université de Saint-Etienne, 1995, p. 101.
- 46 Janet Arnold has discussed the queen's use of French fashions. J. Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 115-118.
- 47 My research, so far, has not found references to other English courtiers using whalebone before 1580. Many wardrobe accounts, such as those of Bess of Hardwick, mention farthingales but do not describe what stiffening materials they are made from.
- 48 'Simancas: January 1579', in Calendar of State Papers, Spain (Simancas), Volume 2, 1568-1579, edited by Martin A S Hume. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1894, p. 626-642. British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/simancas/vol2/pp626-642> [last accessed on 21/08/20].
- 49 BL, inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^o 189^o.
- 50 BL, inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^o 124^v.
- 51 BL, inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^{os} 203^v-212^v.
- 52 BL, inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^{os} 31^r, 66^v.
- 53 BL, inv. MS Egerton 2806, f^{os} 207^v-208^r.
- 54 TNA, inv. LC 5/36, f^o 212^v.
- 55 Fustian is a mixed fibre fabric usually made from linen, wool and cotton. Holland cloth was a medium-weight linen cloth.
- 56 BL, Egerton MS 2806, f^o 115^v.
- 57 BL, Egerton MS 2806, f^{os} 166^v, 173^v, 185^v, 190^v, 213^r, 216^v.
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- 61 R. Holme, *Academy of Armory*, p. 94; S. Bendall, *Shaping Femininity*, p. 166-169.
- 62 G. Vigarello, 'Upward Training of the Body', p. 152-153.
- 63 TNA, inv. LC 5/36, f^o 10; BL, inv. MS Egerton, 1586, f^o 214^v.
- 64 BL, inv. MS Egerton, 2806, f^o 220^r.



65 R. Unsworth, 'Impossible Fashions', p. 103.

66 BL, inv. MS Egerton, 2806, f° 216v°.

67 This structure was known as a French farthingale in other accounts of women's dress. However, as previously explained, in Elizabeth's wardrobe accounts these garments may correlate with "half" and "great" farthingales.

68 For a detailed explanation of my reconstruction process, see Sarah A. Bendall, 'The case of the "french vardingale": A Methodological Approach to Reconstructing and Understanding Ephemeral Garments', in *Fashion Theory*, Special Issue on 'The Making Turn', edited by Peter McNeil and Melissa Bellanta 23, no. 3 (2019), p. 369-377, 381-384.

69 TNA, inv. LC 5/37, f° 111.

70 For details of how this Spanish example was constructed, see J. Arnold, et al., *Patterns of Fashion 5*, p. 119-121.

71 TNA, inv. LC 5/37, f° 111.

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76 J. Arnold, 'The "pair of straight bodies"', p. 9.









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79 Thomas Dorman, 'The Sandwich Book of Orphans'. *Archaeologia Cantiana* 16 (1886), p. 190-191.

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Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Sarah A. Bendall, « Whalebone and the Wardrobe of Elizabeth I », *Apparence(s)* [En ligne], 11 | 2022, mis en ligne le 11 février 2022, consulté le 09 mars 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/apparences/3653> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/apparences.3653>

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