

# Constructing the Headdresses of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

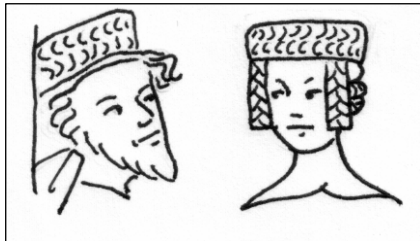
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From the comics pages to Halloween costumes, we continue to see representations of the dynamic headdresses of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Social and technological forces joined to create a time of great change in fashion which has never wholly left the public imagination. The purpose of this paper is to explore the development and possible construction of men and women's headdresses of this time, primarily those of France and those countries with immediate French contact: England, Germany, and the Low Countries. Due to a paucity of extant evidence, the majority of research concerns representations in illustration or sculpture.

The practice of veil-wearing was not so strict in the fourteenth century as the fifteenth; at least, it is common to find representations of women without them. Women are depicted wearing either uncovered hair, a hood, or a veil.<sup>i</sup>

The hood is a ubiquitous clothing item in the fourteenth century, worn by both genders. It is common in depictions from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, but by the 14<sup>th</sup> had become more fitted, and developed an increasingly narrower and longer tail, called by costumers the liripipe. Fashion dictated a long liripipe, and over time it must have become an encumbrance. Illustrations depict the liripipe being tucked into belts or flung over the shoulder to prevent it dragging on the ground or entangling legs.

Under their hoods or veils, women wore their hair braided and arranged predominantly in a style referred to as the templete<sup>ii</sup> - a style that framed the face with vertical columns of braid.



*Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince* mentions that at this time, written records refer to men and women wearing hats as well as hoods. The frequency of mention is greater than in previous records, showing the hat has come to a new prominence as an object of personal adornment.

Hats at this time are worn at the top of the head, and tend to be in a pill-box style. Fur caps are popular, and men's caps in particular were heavily adorned. The importance of the hood was such that, frequently we find depictions of both a hat and a hood, either the hat worn on top of the hood, or the hood worn draped around the shoulders, leaving the head free for additional adornment.

The Museum of London has published in their book *Dress Accessories* two archeological finds significant to this discussion: fourteenth-century human hair plaits, and wire headdress frames.

The plaits are of human hair, stitched with silk thread to maintain its shape, and sewn onto a narrow band of silk from which octagonal mounts were sewn and removed. The hair piece is sized to hang on the sides of the head, folded in half, like the braids in the images of women

wearing the templet style.<sup>iii</sup>

Therefore, I suspect that the templet was held together by being sewn, or by binding with ribbons or twisted threads. We know artificial templets were bound with twisted threads and sewn, and these were worn in addition to the lady's own hair.

I conjecture that for some of these templets a wire may be utilized, in place of or in conjunction with a silken band across the forehead, to hold both hairstyle and veil in place. Whatever the reason, we know that shortly afterward, wire headdress frames appear in the archeological record, and that these frames were frequently wrapped in silk thread, lending them a lovely hair-like appearance. (This is pure conjecture, that a hair-like appearance was desired, but there are portraits that show an edge on a headdress that is braided or twisted, looking like human hair, tawny or brown in appearance<sup>iv</sup>, and the human-hair plait was bound with a twisted yarn of human hair, which this may be a technological advance upon.)

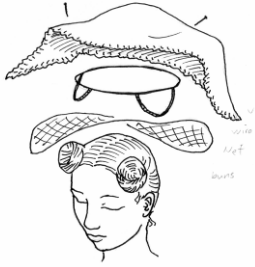
The wire headdress frames in *Dress Accessories* all come from a late 14<sup>th</sup>-Century deposit where preservation conditions were remarkably good – these wires would have decayed elsewhere. Eleven are covered in silk thread, four are uncovered. The wires are drawn, range in diameter from 1mm to 3mm, and some have their ends flattened and pierced with a small hole, others have their ends hammered into a taper or triangular cross-section<sup>v</sup>. It is clear to see how these were means for fastening the wire about the head, either with thread passed through holes on either end and tied, or by hooking the wires to each other or burying them in the hair.

One Silk-covered, copper alloy wire headdress frame is an especial find. It has traces of a silk veil still sewn to it, (which is tabby-woven in an open texture making it likely semi-transparent when it was new), and it forms two complete loops. Smaller silk-wrapped wires have been coiled decoratively around it making it thicker, but, more to my own excitement, making it similar in appearance to the narrow bands of decoration going over and around some of the later, smaller, more bun-like templets.<sup>vi</sup>

By 1400 these templet plaits have been bound ever tighter, and instead of hanging by the sides of the face are coiled up against the temples, and, as I mentioned, depicted with a narrow band encircling them, in addition to the circlet or head-band above. This style comes to be called the “caul”<sup>vii</sup>. Some depictions right around 1400 have an almost staple-shaped headdress, the band across the forehead alike in thickness to the two small templets, producing a short frame of the temple, with a net behind.<sup>viii</sup>

The word caul originates referring to close-fitting caps, (commonly referred to in the SCA as “baby hats”), which are worn by women and men alike. Thus circa 1374 Chaucer writes in his *Troilus*. “And makyn hym a howve [hood] above a calle.”<sup>ix</sup>

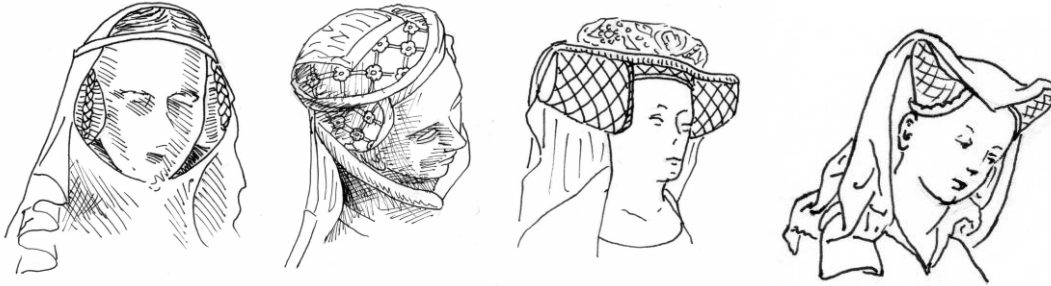
By the end of the fourteenth century, women's skull-caps had fallen out of use in favor of netting, and so the usage of caul changes as well. See this quote from around 1391, “A maner krokede strikes..like to the werk of a womanes calle.” Not only is caul now specialized for women, it is described as being made up of crooked stripes – which I conjecture refers to the zig-zags of netting, and by 1540 the OED has usage of ‘calle’ to mean a net or spider's web.<sup>x</sup>



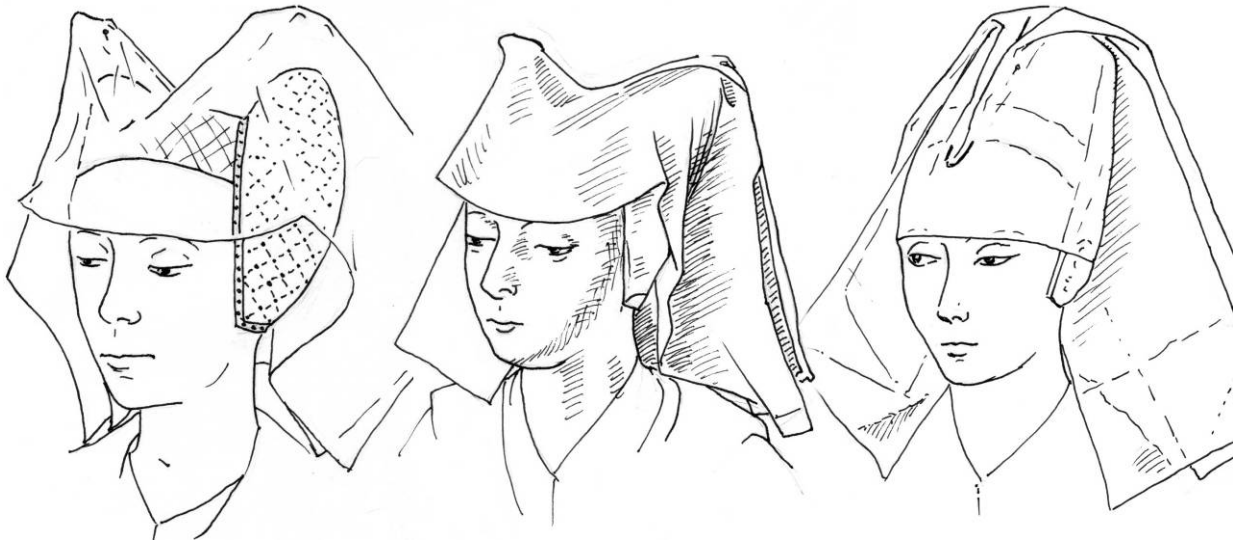
My conjecture is that the caul style evolved from the templete, and relied on a simple support structure - possibly a circlet of wire with ribbon and netting sewn to it. This exploded view shows how the hair would first be arranged, and then covered with netting, which may be sewn directly to a supporting circlet. Loops of ribbon or other more flexible material may have depended below the hair buns to provide for a more adjustable shape. At any rate, a 'braided' appearance is common

in depictions.

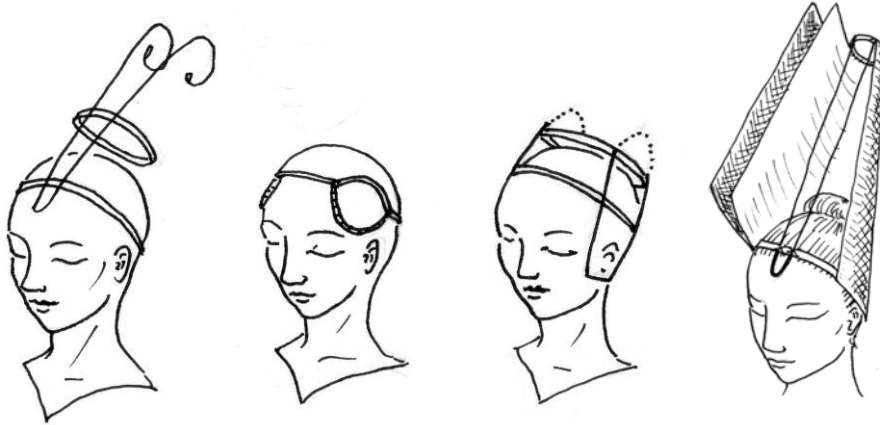
As time wore on the cauls became more defined and large, wider. Fashion moves toward extremes and then abandons them when they have reached the limit of practicality.



The horn-like look of the cauls then moves higher on the head, seeking height rather than width. (Though perhaps the simple physics of maintaining a large structure more stably is at work.)

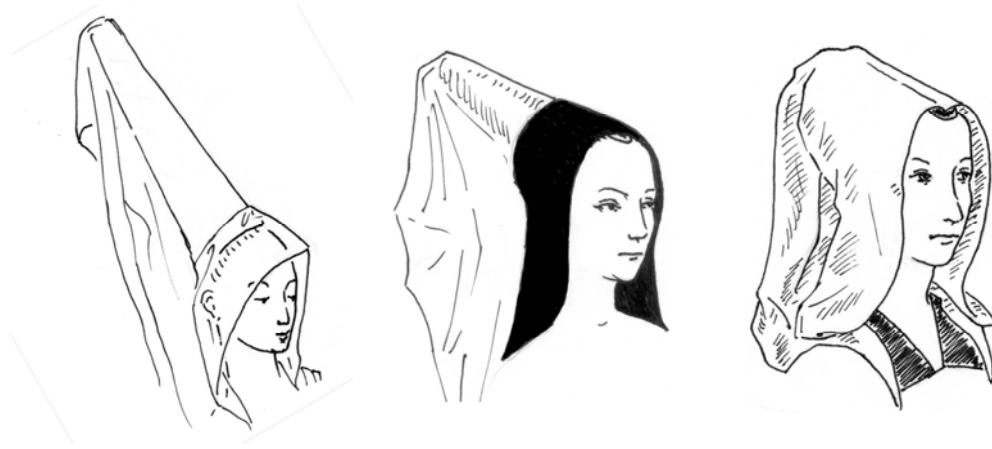


But as the headdresses change, the basic structure evolves simply. It's my theory that all of these headdresses can be achieved with a model of a circlet and supporting wires, though the addition of a rigid cap-like structure helps support height.



In her work “Dress and Fashions c.1470”, Anne Sutton quotes an unknown Burgundian chronicler who found the changes in fashion around him worthy of mention. He writes, “In this year [1467] ladies and young gentlewomen.... wore headdresses ... in the shape of a round bonnet which narrowed above, some to a height of half an ell or three quarters and some lower....”<sup>xi</sup>

The best definition I can find for the length of an “ell” is in the OED, where it is explained that an ell was a form of the cubit – the ancient measurement of one’s forearm. However, at the end of its use the ell varied in length from country to country, from 45 inches (that’d be a long hat!) in England to 27 inches in the Low Countries. Considering Burgundy’s ties to Flemish lands, I’d go with the 27 inch measurement, making a hat half-an-ell tall to be about a foot. This works well with the visual evidence. I looked at several portraits of women in tall hennins. I measured the length of their eye, corner-to-corner, and then the length of their hat along its longest axis. I then “converted” this measurement by comparing the length of the woman’s eye to my own, so that, were I the woman, the hat would be proportional to me. Although foreshortening caused by the three-quarter profile of most sitters will skew this result low, I found when limiting myself to only profile pictures, even the tallest hennins measured not more than two feet, and they varied from eleven to sixteen inches, mostly. As you can see, the claims of some costume historians that these hats were as tall as nine feet are greatly exaggerated<sup>xii</sup>. Even still, when I wear a two-foot hennin, folks comment on how very tall it is. Remember that two feet is one third the height of a six foot person.



Cheunsoon Song and Lucy Roy Sibley in their article, “The Vertical Headdress of Fifteenth Century Northern Europe”, express a common confusion. “While previously discussed headdresses do have a more or less logical explanation of evolving from the caul and bourrelet of the fourteenth century, it is not clear how the fashion of the cone-shaped headdress began.”<sup>xiii</sup> We have already seen how the predominant styles leading up to the hennin were a series of horn-shapes. How could this have developed into a seemingly new paradigm – the cone?

The illustration given with the above text of Song and Sibley’s article shows the types of headdresses evolved from the caul and bourrelet, arrows leading from cauls and bourrelet to cauls-with-bourrelet or the higher cauls and the horn-shaped veils, with the cone-shaped hats off alone together, even separated into their own box. Unlike the other headdresses, the hennin and truncated hennin are *not drawn with veils*. This, in my opinion, is the source of most of the confusion on their development. Until the very end of the style in the 1490s, these tall hats are never worn without a veil covering the “cone” completely. The veils, however, are uniformly semi-transparent, and show up best at the tip of the hat, where the veil folds, falling against itself for greater opacity. This is the source of the common misconception that these hats had a veil attached only at the tip.

Men’s hats are less flamboyant, but like the women’s they evolve from the styles that came before. Considerably less structure is called for. The movement is from a hood-dominated look to a rolled look to the eventual emergence of the “Richard the Third” style brimmed cap.



At first the rolled-up hood flops forward, or the bulk of the head area of the hood forms a sagging deflated sack on top, with everything else wrapped turban-like around it.<sup>xiv</sup> But as time wears on, the crown of the bourrelet is drawn tighter into the roll, disappearing altogether from view, until the liripipe and the shoulder drape become so many dags hanging off a padded roll<sup>xv</sup>. This rolled headdress is referred to as a bourrelet. The word “bourrelet” is documented in use in 1490 to mean a padded roll worn atop the head by the OED, and the OED hypothesizes that it comes from the old French word *bourrel* meaning, “mass of flocks or wadding”.<sup>xvi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> See, for example Scott, p. 41 (illustration 30), Newton, p. 51 (illustration 17), and page 79 (illustration 24) for images of groups of women together, some with veils, some with hoods, some bare-headed.

<sup>ii</sup> Templet (or templette) first comes into use, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, around 1530, to describe hair-ornamentation. It is simply a feminization of temple, referring to the forehead.

<sup>iii</sup> Dress Accessories, p. 291

<sup>iv</sup> The Arolfini Marriage, for one, and the portrait of Van Eck’s wife, for another, both c. 1430s. This is later than the style which we are discussing, but it is also only later that such vivid photo-realistic portraits are available. We will discuss later on how I feel the headdress of Madame Van Eck and Madame Arolfini is a direct descendant of the fourteenth century templet.

<sup>v</sup> Dress Accessories, p. 293-296

<sup>vi</sup> For many examples, Scott, p. 51-58, particularly the funerary brasses on 51 and 58. Joan Reskymmer, c. 1410, illustration 53 (on page 58 of Scott) very clearly has a hard thick line around the base of her templets and across her forehead.

<sup>vii</sup> Specifically by costume historians. It is unknown if this hair style was called anything like in period.

<sup>viii</sup> See Chaucer reciting before an elegant audience, c. 1400, (Scott, p. 98), or the funerary portrait of Lady Arderne, c. 1400, (Scott, p. 53).

<sup>ix</sup> This quote is given by the OED in its definition of “caul”, however, looking up the line in context in the Riverside Chaucer (p524), it is line 775 of book three of “Troilus and Criseyde”, “...as ye women demen alle,/ That for to hold in love a man in honde,/ And hym hire life and deere hearte calle,/ And maken hym an howve above a calle - / I meene, as love another in this while - / She doth hireself a shame and hym a gyle.” The phrase is then used as a metaphor for deception – a hood over a cap. Therefore this line may more likely refer to the female headdress than the male.

<sup>x</sup> This quote, and the alternate definitions of “calle” are from the Oxford English Dictionary (online edition, accessed March 2006) definition of “caul”.

All illustrations are by Grace Vibbert/ Milesent Vibert.

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<sup>xi</sup> Sutton, p. 6

<sup>xii</sup> From a 1970s costuming book I hesitate to mention should it appear in my list of sources! This costumer claimed the hats had iron counter-weights and were decorated at the tip with flags. Popular misconceptions about these headdresses abound.

<sup>xiii</sup> Song and Sibley, p. 10



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<sup>xiv</sup> See, for example, Scott, p. 98 – the man and woman in the lower left corner of a crowd listening to Chaucer read, c. 1400, are both wearing “flopped over” bourrelets.

<sup>xv</sup> See Scott, p. 68-9, three men in bourrelets, moving from “flopped” to one that is almost completely rolled to one that is completely rolled. See also two portraits of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, c. 1411, Bradley et al, p. 83

<sup>xvi</sup> OED online edition, accessed March, 2006, definition of “bourrelet”.