

SCOTTISH TARTANS MUSEUM

FACT SHEET

THE HISTORY OF THE KILT

IN THE BEGINNING

If you were to travel back in time and visit the Highlands of Scotland 1000 years ago, you wouldn't see anything even remotely resembling the modern kilt. The standard garment of the Gael was a tunic called a *léine*. This is the Gaelic word for "shirt" and the styles varied according to the time period. Initially it was a rather simple long tunic, pulled on over the head, and worn either full-length or to the knee. By the sixteenth century the *léine* had evolved into an elaborate garment that was very full, having sleeves that hung down to the knees. The most common color was saffron, although they were often undyed. Over this a woolen shawl or wrap was often worn. This mantle was called a *brat* in Ireland, and in later centuries was called a *plaid* in Scots Gaelic (the word originally meant "blanket"). Though named clan tartans did not exist in this early period, these wraps could very well have been of some tartan pattern. Archaeological evidence shows tartan cloth being worn in Scotland from the third or fourth century.

THE BELTED PLAID

It is this tartan wrap that would later evolve into the kilt. As stated previously, the fashion in sixteenth century Gaelic Scotland was for very full clothing. The cost of wool dropping towards the end of the sixteenth century in Scotland, coupled with a cooling climate, gave rise to ever-larger wraps or *plaids*. At a certain point, people began to gather these large wraps into folds and belt them around the waist. This is what we call the belted plaid. In Gaelic it was called either *feileadh-mor*, which means "great wrap," or *breacan-an-feileadh*, which means "tartan wrap." The earliest mention of this garment in the historic record comes from *The Life of Red Hugh O'Donnell*, written in Irish Gaelic in 1594. This work describes Scottish mercenaries from the Hebrides being noticeable among the Irish because of the difference in their dress. The Scots wore their belts outside their mantles – the belted plaid! This garment was about 4 to 6 yards long and made from two lengths of 25-30" wide cloth sewn together. The length of the cloth was gathered and belted at the waist, with the lower part falling to the knees and the upper part being brought up to the shoulders and arranged in any number of ways. This garment was the common dress of the Highland male during the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.

THE PHILLABEG

Phillabeg is the Anglicized spelling of the Gaelic *feileadh-beag*, which means, "little wrap." This garment was essentially the lower half of the belted plaid. Many today use "phillabeg" to refer to the modern tailored kilt, but the original phillabeg was untailored. Like the belted plaid, it consisted of a length of cloth about 4 yards long, but only about 25" wide. It would be gathered loosely into folds and belted about the waist, the bottom reaching to just above the knee and the top few inches overlapping the belt. Often an separate length of tartan would be worn over the shoulders for warmth or protection from the elements. Most Highland Dress historians admit to uncertainty about when the phillabeg originated, but by the early eighteenth century it was in widespread use. Thomas Rawlinson, an Englishman, is documented as "inventing" the phillabeg in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. However there are paintings and armorial bearings that depict men in what appear to be phillabegs pre-dating Rawlinson. Most likely the *feileadh-beag* came about as a natural extension of the *feileadh-mor*, the fashion spreading over time.

THE KILT

The tailored kilt differs from the phillabeg in that it has regular, sewn down pleats. In other words, it is an actual tailored garment. The earliest examples we have are military kilts from the 1790s. These first tailored kilts were made from an average of 4 yards of cloth, and were box pleated to the stripe. There was no tapering at the waist, and the length of the kilt was selvaige to selvaige (about 25"). Tailored kilts for civilian wear were at first pleated to nothing (i.e. to no particular line or pattern), then about 1820 pleated to the stripe. The amount of cloth used in the kilt grew over the course of the nineteenth century. In 1853 the Gordon Highlanders became the first regiment to adopt the knife pleat. By the year 1900 knife pleating had become the norm in civilian kilts and the idea of "pleating to sett" (i.e. arranging the pleats to mimic the pattern of the tartan) was becoming popular. The standard kilt of today is made from a nominal 8 yards of cloth and is knife pleated, though other styles remain available.



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