
Purses in Pieces

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Archaeological finds of late medieval and 16th-century leather purses,
pouches, bags and cases in the Netherlands

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Colofon

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Preface

During my twenty-five-year career at the then State Service for Archaeological Investigations (ROB) at Amersfoort, I was engaged in the conservation of organic artefacts. After cleaning these finds, I conserved, restored and drew them.

One of the major excavation projects of the ROB in this period was that conducted at Dordrecht from 1969 to 1985. From 1985 on, the project was continued by the municipal archaeological service of Dordrecht (DAC). Not only several thousand shoes, but also a wealth of other leather items were excavated. Besides some three hundred knife sheaths, nine gloves, and inscribed parchment, the excavations brought to light parts of some sixty girdle purses and a score of leather cases. Purses and cases, together with other items that medieval people carried suspended from their belts, are a category of finds to which in the Netherlands no specialised publication has yet been dedicated.

The basis of this book is provided by material excavated in the Netherlands. The Dordrecht finds especially account for the great variety of recorded forms. For the sake of comparison, occasional references are made to finds from surrounding European countries. For references to paintings and prints I have drawn on material available in museums throughout Europe. Unless stated otherwise, the drawings in this publication are my own, and the depicted objects are made of cowhide. The quoted sizes refer to width and height. The owners of objects discussed or illustrated are mentioned in brackets.

The material presented here is in fact a selection from the many objects known to me. Without doubt, many interesting additions will still be hiding in dust-covered boxes and dark drawers.

I have aimed not only to describe the types, the uses and the make of the purses typically worn by men and women, but also to obtain insight into the chronology of their use and appearance. Apart from a few exceptions, no attempt is made to reconstruct entire purses. Yet, wherever possible, cross-sections are given of their most likely composition. This publication is mainly a presentation of recovered fragments, with a view to eventually, through sequel studies by myself or others, arriving at a fuller picture on the basis of more, and especially more complete finds. For the sake of presenting as full as possible an overview of types, I have included also some purses, pouches and other receptacles that are known only from iconographic sources.

In the process of identifying fragments and sorting them in order to create a typology, some new names had to be coined, when existing designations were insufficiently specific. Examples are the *Secondary-ring framed purse*, *Hinged-ring purse*, *Harp-framed purse* and *Bar purse*. In ancient and contemporary artisanal circles, among the makers and sellers as well as in the trade literature and indeed in dictionaries, there are widely differing interpretations of even such basic terms as *purse*, *bag* or *pouch*. The terminology used in this book will, I hope, clear up much of this confusion. For those who wish to examine iconographic material, there are, wherever possible, references to works of art that show relevant details.

Although the rich finds from Dordrecht constitute the basis for this book, I wish to thank many municipal archaeologists and museums, who made a significant contribution in allowing me to examine and draw their material. Also I want to express my gratitude to all amateur archaeologists who reported their finds to me and thus supplied very useful additions.



Introduction

Since prehistoric times, people have carried things around with them in pouches or other containers. The Neolithic ice man Ötzi carried several pouches, each for different purposes, and even transported glowing embers in birch-bark containers. Palaeolithic men and women with all their bundles, bags and pouches followed their game, who were continually migrating in search of food. Bags and bundles were carried in different ways, depending on their contents and weight: on the arm, on the shoulder, on the head, on the back, around the waist, by a strap across the forehead or from a yoke, on a sledge, on a dragrack or in a drag bag. People took their hunting gear and tools wherever they went, as well as food, water, spare clothes, bedding and shelter material, and of course their infants. Once fire was used and tended, also fire-making and cooking equipment and even fuel will have been brought along. In due course, people started using pack animals for carrying or dragging the heaviest baggage. Much later, when the wheel was adopted, transport across open land became a great deal easier. The skins of game and, eventually, domestic animals were used to make all sorts of containers, and people soon discovered that the skins of some animals served this purpose better than others. Fresh skins made suitable holders for their original contents - meat - and various other things. Until people learned to process the skins to make them more durable, these containers would rapidly need replacing. In the simplest holders, the original animal can still be recognised. In the rural Near East and Asia, animals are still flayed in such a way that once the legs, anus and neck have been sewn up, the skin may serve as a water bag or - inflated - as a float. After the epoch of hunting and gathering, during which people always lived in temporary encampments, man gradually became an arable farmer and stock-breeder, and permanent settlements evolved. This made it possible to use storage containers and other vessels made of pottery. From this point on, the demand for containers of various kinds greatly increased. For instance, there were containers for gathering the harvest and carrying it home in. There, special containers would be used for storing it, as well as containers for transporting farm produce, natural commodities and products of industry as traded goods. We need only to think of carrying aprons, bags, pouches, bundles, sacks, baskets, vats, pots, bottles, crates and cages (fig. 1). Hunting continued, be it from permanent settlements. Hunters still needed to carry their hunting gear, as well as material for brief stays in camps and the journeys to and from the hunting grounds. In the Netherlands, archaeological research has uncovered numerous hunting encampments, especially along contemporary coastlines, riverbanks and lakeshores. Such a camp of hunters and fishers might see seasonal use for many years, in the course of which a mass of bones, antler fragments, fish remains and disused fish traps would accumulate, together with pottery, charcoal and flint flakes. Of course the game population shrank as the human population grew. Hunting as a livelihood increas-

ingly became the work of particular individuals, but continued to be practised as a source of skins and fur, bone, horn and antler, as well as a supplementary source of food. Once settlements were permanent, it became possible to tan the skins of the hunted game. The tanning process, using vegetable chemicals, took a great deal of time and close supervision, and could therefore only be practised under sedentary conditions. The demand for leather, skins and fur for clothing remained undiminished even after people started to spin yarn from wool, hair and vegetable fibres such as flax, and to produce woven fabrics. Worn-out receptacles, garments, footwear and tent material when discarded would rapidly decay. Only when such organic material ended up deep in the soil where it also became waterlogged, as in a well or a marsh, might it be preserved. For instance, remnants of leather and woven garments have been found on quite a few bog bodies throughout northwestern Europe.¹

Fig. 1. Homo portans, man the carrier. After a 13th-century miniature.



Processing skins and hides, first with grease or smoke and later by tanning with acid substances, made it possible to considerably increase their durability and to improve wearability.

A supple tanned skin may take on various shapes: the leather container will adapt to its contents, which in turn reinforces its function. In most cases the shape of a container is related to its purpose, which may be more or less specific; for instance, a bag may hold almost anything, while a purse or small pouch will contain only items of very limited quantity and volume.

Specific types of pouch or bag were definitely used where special items were concerned such as amulets or fire-making kits of spindle, flint and moss, or materials for knapping flint weapons and tools.

Such personal belongings more than any other document individual lives. Representing personal preferences and social roles, they can be quite idiosyncratic, emotive 'footprints'. This is evident from many finds of grave goods, among which often containers of this kind are recovered on or beside the human remains.

Throughout northwestern Europe, most preserved late-medieval purses, bags and pouches have lain in wet soil, often literally beneath our feet. A prominent example is the old town centre of Dordrecht, where at several sites archaeologists were able to excavate deep trenches while examining every spadeful of soil. Owing to the high water table in the sediment, most of the material discarded by our ancestors had been preserved. It had been cut off from oxygen, which impeded bacterial decay.

During the ROB excavations at Dordrecht between 1968 and 1985, at least 15,000 shoes were recovered.² Subsequently thousands more were found by Dordrecht's archaeological service DAC. Ninety per cent of these shoes date from the Late Middle Ages. Yet the number of purses and parts of purses salvaged at Dordrecht totals just fifty-five. Therefore it seems that many purses did not end up being preserved in the medieval canals and harbours (where thieves presumably would dump stolen purses).

Another point is that people must have used up many more shoes than purses. A purse, well maintained, could last a lifetime, depending on its use: a tradesman would of course use it more intensively than the average person.

Of the late medieval purses from Dordrecht, and indeed elsewhere, just a handful have been recovered in their entirety. And these tend to be the simplest in design. These purses, and particularly the girdle purses, usually lack parts of the interior of the various compartments. These parts might be made from skin processed in a different way, which decayed more easily. A number of purses also show imprints of textile which had been used in panels for the interior (fig. 2), but which had completely decomposed in the acid soil. This probably was linen fabric, which was the strongest material for this

Fig. 2. Reconstruction of a purse from Dordrecht (see also fig. 26).

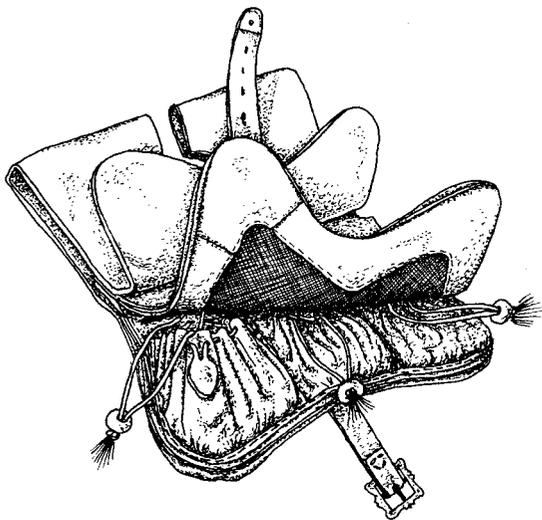
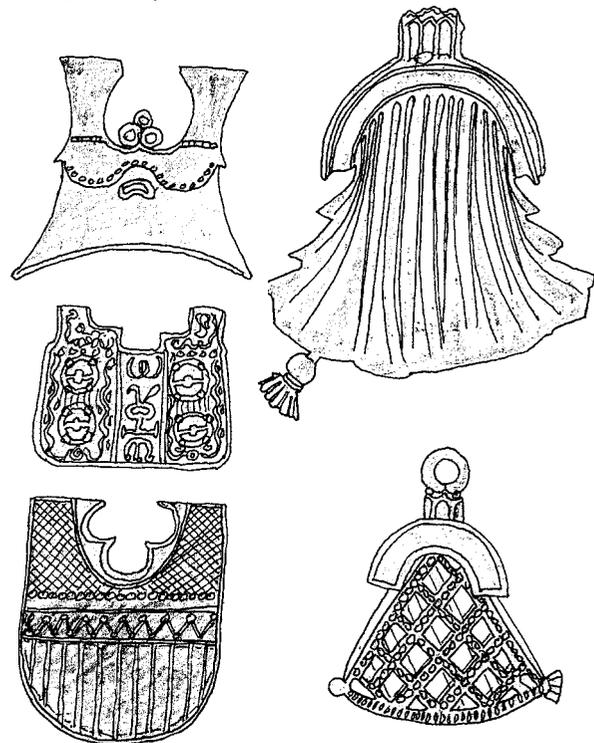


Fig. 3. Pilgrims' signs of pewter, in the shape of purses. Source of illustrations: see note 9.



purpose. But why textile was used is unclear. At any rate there would have been little point in giving a leather purse a textile lining.

It is hardly surprising that purses and similar objects are generally found in the form of fragments or loose parts. Even if they did not enter the soil incomplete or in pieces, their sewing thread would soon have decayed, so that during recovery detached parts could be left behind. The same is known to have happened in the case of shoes and other items of sewn leather. Bits of wet leather are just as soft and brown as the surrounding soil, and therefore are not always recognised as artefacts.

The diversity of shapes, construction and function is much greater among purses than among footwear. Shoes must always follow the shape of the foot, whereas purses are made for holding a range of different objects and more than footwear are subject to fashion and the owner's sense of status (figs 4 and 11).

Containers of leather, made durable by tanning, naturally present an invitation to decoration. This was done especially on amulet containers and receptacles for fire-making equipment, because of their great significance to everyday life. Pouches for herbs will at least have been marked with signs or symbols for telling them apart. Of course also garments were decorated. Through the centuries, particular decorations for every kind of leather item evolved out of this tradition. The ornamentation was in part determined by the kind of object to be

held within a container. Another factor was the kind of protection that the container was required to offer. Hide, and later leather, was the obvious choice for covering and transporting both fragile and hard, sharp objects. The Neolithic ice man Ötzi carried several bundles, each containing different items, and even glowing embers in containers of birch bark.³ A knife, of flint or metal, is best protected in a sheath: a casing of thick, stiff leather. Such hard leather will be given a different kind of decoration than the soft leather of a pouch or garment.

The use of purses, pouches, bags, sheaths and other containers saw its heyday in the Middle Ages. In large towns with many commercial activities, a girdle purse or bag was indispensable, and apart from holding documents it was very useful for keeping together personal items such as money, keys, seal, strike-a-light, spectacles, comb, ear scoop, dice, etc., which themselves might also be held in cases. No purse, no prestige! The purse became a fashion item and was an essential part of a person's outfit. The decorations on the purses in figures 35, 37 and 62 are probably among the most elaborate made in northwestern Europe - items made in southern and eastern Europe tend to be bolder and more colourful, as a result of cultural influences from the south and east. Small pouches ('pouchlets') would be stitched onto almost any type of purse or pouch.

All recovered leather objects from Roman times up to the 18th century were tanned with vegetable products. Towards the end of the 18th century, different, less time-consuming methods were developed. Unfortunately, of the leather items tanned by these new methods fewer tended to survive their sojourn in the soil.

Fig. 4. Girdle purse from Dordrecht, with a decorated compartment for writing tablets (see also fig. 34).





Girdle purse

The girdle purse is a leather, bag-shaped container with one or two loops on the top by which the purse is strung onto the girdle. Purses with a single girdle loop are generally closed by means of a thong running through the accordion-style folded leather. Any closing strap has a metal buckle and sometimes a metal strap-end. Any decorations may be of metal too. The leather is cowhide, calf- or goatskin, with the grain of the leather on the outside. Size often says more about the wearer than about the purse's use. For instance, small purses were not necessarily worn by children. Girdle purses feature in images from the 14th century on and continue at least into the 17th century.

Purse with two girdle loops (figs 5 and 6)

This type is the most prevalent. Only men wore this kind of purse (fig. 8): contemporary images show no women with this kind of girdle purse. Women did occasionally wear single-loop purses. The girdle purse was worn by rich and poor, by peasants and aristocrats alike. It is a general attribute, which among rural folk and artisans had a no-nonsense shape but was of more frivolous design for the rich and high-born - as the iconographic evidence reveals. And as with garments, the purses are all the more extravagant when they feature in illustrations of biblical stories. Their flights of fancy may result in grotesque forms.

Fig. 5. Man wearing a girdle purse.



Fig. 6. Girdle purse with its buckle strap missing.



Fig. 7. Parts of a girdle purse, some of them cut up.

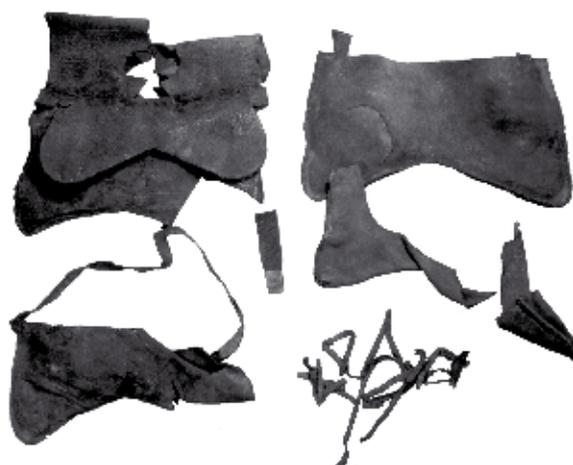


Fig. 8. Love for sale. The woman is ready to open her purse as the man fumbles for money in his.



Fig. 9b. Back of the purse from Nieuwlande, and traces of pouchlets on the front of its rear compartment.

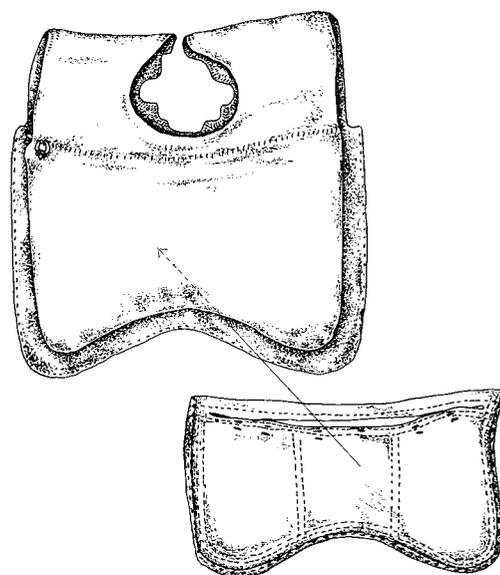


Fig. 9a. Front of the purse from Nieuwlande, whose missing flap has left an imprint. 22 x 22 cm.

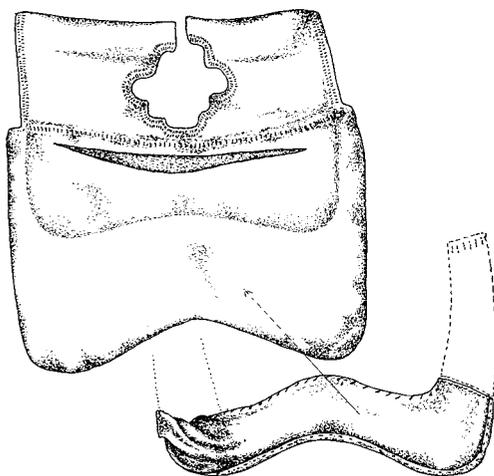
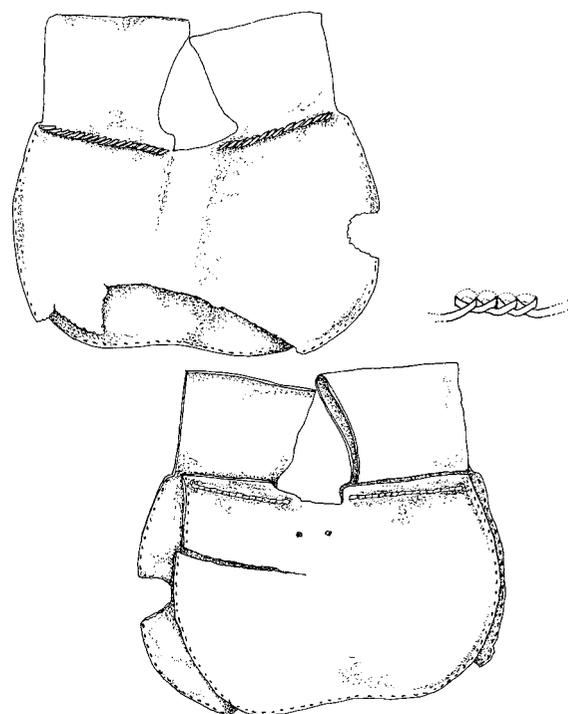


Fig. 10. Front and back of a purse without a flap, from Dordrecht. The apertures of the compartments were on the inside. 23 x 23 cm.



Frescoes reveal that Roman officers already knew girdle purses.⁴ From the Late Middle Ages we know two types: the purse with a flap (fig. 17) and the purse without a flap (fig. 10). In the former, the flap usually is of a piece with the two loops above it and extends further back to form the back panel of the rear compartment (fig. 17). In some purses the flap covers a compartment aperture, while other purses have no flap, the aperture of their front compartment being opposite the rear compartment (cross-section in fig. 18). Figure 11 even shows a purse with a separately sewn-on flap that is purely decorative.

The shape of the purse

In most purses, the compartments widen somewhat towards the bottom. Their overall shape will be roughly square, or, if the purse is elongated, rectangular. The profile of the bottom varies from purse to purse, ranging from square to rounded, bracket-shaped or pointed (fig. 12). When there are two or more compartments, all will follow the overall shape, be it that the length and width of the second (and even third) compartments will be slightly smaller than those of the front compartment (fig. 13).

In figure 14a we see a 15th-century friar making girdle pouches.⁵

Fig. 11. Girdle purse (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam) with a false flap, decorated with studs of tin-plated iron.

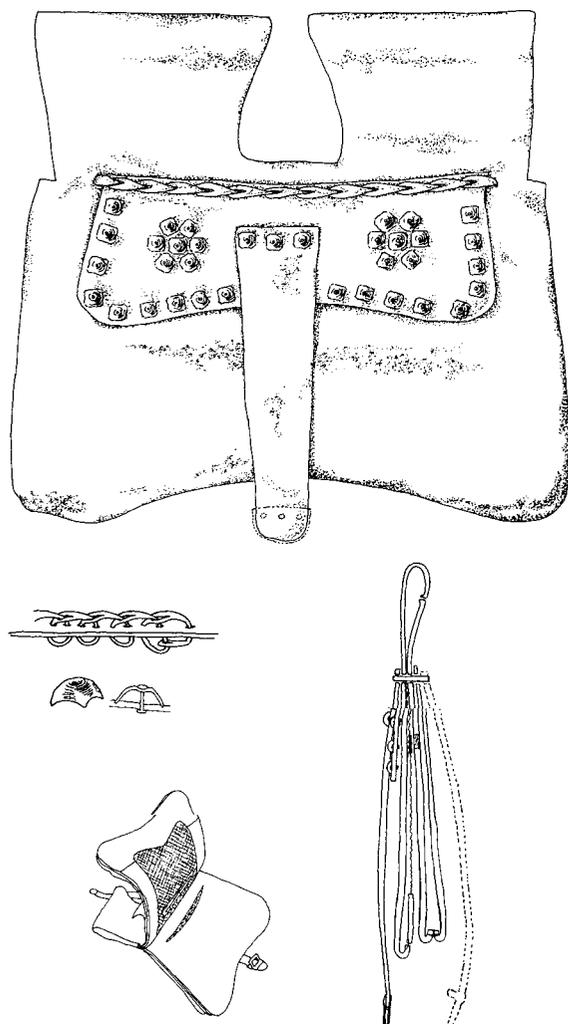


Fig. 12. Shapes of girdle purses. The three at the bottom are shapes of girdle bags.

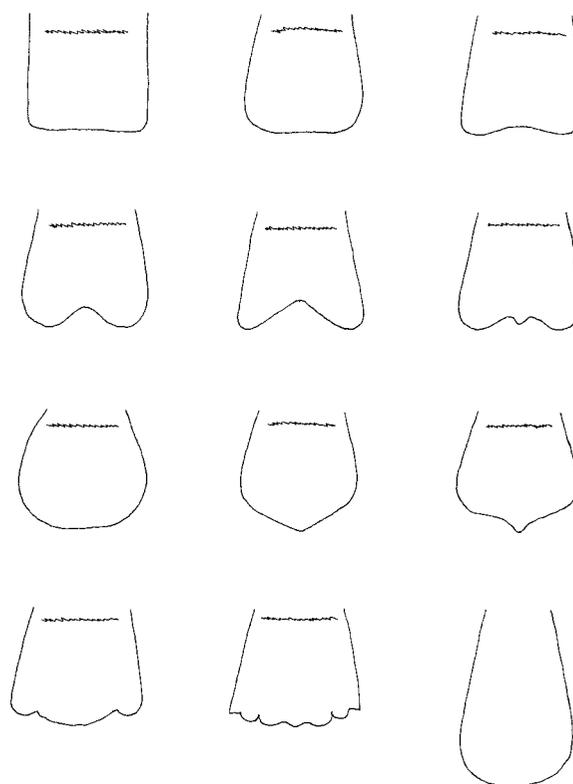
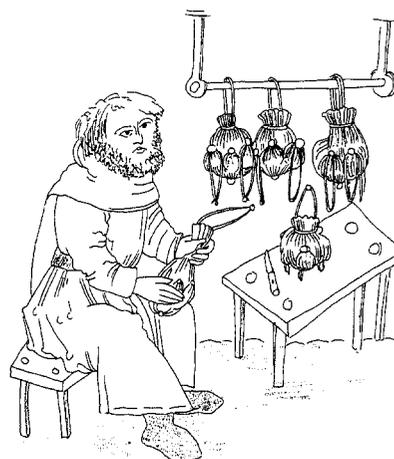


Fig. 13. The Dordrecht purse with Cupid's-bow-shaped panels. The rear compartment is smaller than the front compartment. 23 x 21 cm.



b



c

Fig. 14. Friars in a medieval monastery manufacturing purses and pouches (see note 5).



a



d

The flap

The flap does offer a little protection against pickpockets. But if distracted by a 'professional', one may yet be caught out. In the print by Lucas van Leiden (fig. 15), a woman is lifting the flap or the front compartment of a man's girdle purse and reaching into a money pouchlet.

Or one might become the victim of a cutpurse, as shown in a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, 'The Misanthropist'. Pouches held coinage and therefore were the most sought-after by the light-fingered gentry.

Fig. 15. Engraving by Lucas van Leyden. The woman lifts the flap of the man's purse and is feeling for coins in a pouchlet. From her girdle hang a sheath with knives and a key case.



In the *Decretum Dominorum*⁶ of 1448-1478 from Kampen we read the following. 'Confession by Janneken Maleghise of Eeckloe. [...] At Sluis he stole a money pouch containing two *witstuivers*. At Aardeburg he stole a money pouch containing the equivalent of a *kroon*. In Courtrai he stole a pouch containing two *Rijnse guldens*. In Amsterdam he stole a pouch containing six *dutkens*. Together with somebody else he stole in Leyden four pouches containing a *kroon's* worth in all. His companion cut a purse in Amersfoort, from which he received as his share a bad *postulaatsgulden* and 12 *stuivers*. Here in Kampen he stole a pouch from a priest, containing 21 *stuiver*. He was apprehended here in Kampen in the house of the bailiff while attempting to cut a soldier's pouch. Janneken Maleghise was hanged [...] on 1 April 1471.'

The shape of the flap generally follows that of the bottom of the purse. The leather of the suspension loops is in one piece with the flap, except when the flap has been stitched on separately. On the back, many loops are of one piece with the rear panel (fig. 17). In other purses the rear panel is separate, with a seam across the back of the loops, as in a purse from Haarlem (fig. 18). The flap may vary in length, covering the front from a quarter or halfway to three-quarters down or indeed fully, irrespective of where the compartment apertures are. Some purses have flaps with 'ears' (figs 17 and 21). If the purse is decorated, this will be mainly on the flap (figs 11 and 42), or, in the case of a flapless purse, on the front of the front compartment (fig. 36).

Fig. 16. Purse flap with a buckle-strap attachment; parts of a purse from Hoorn.

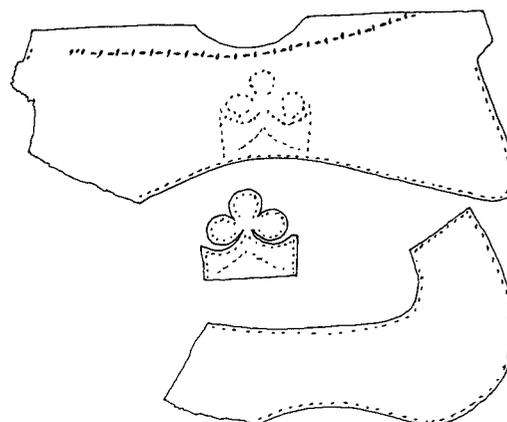


Fig. 17. Purse with its opening below the flap. Rear panel, loops and flap cut in one piece. From Dordrecht. 25 x 25 cm.

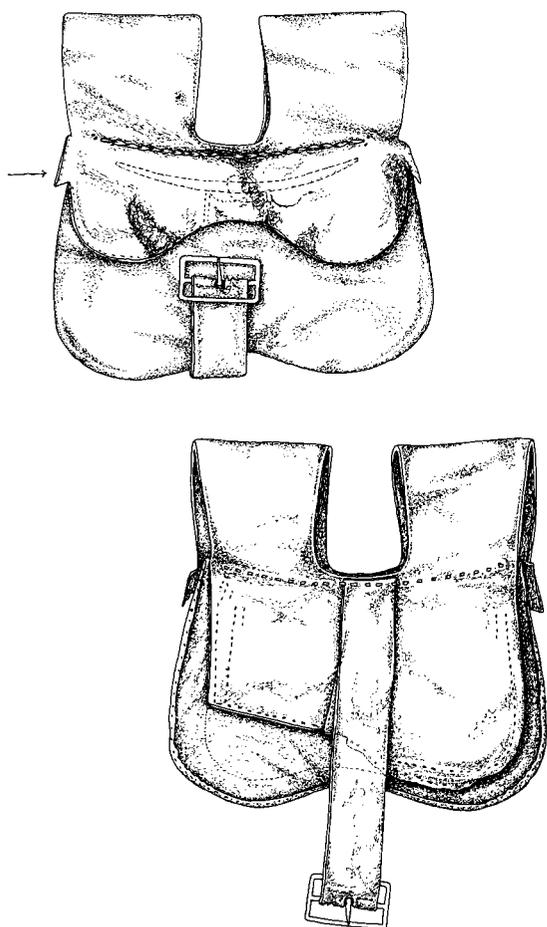
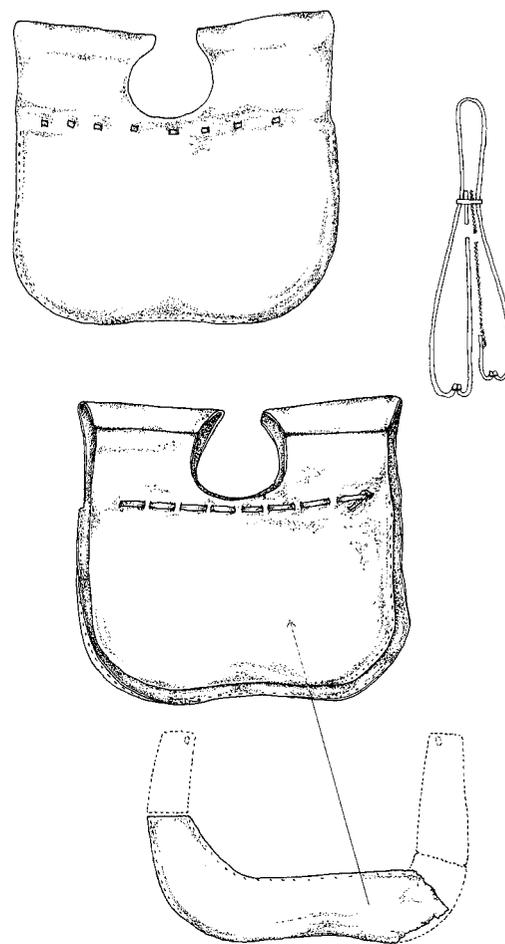


Fig. 18. Flapless purse from Haarlem, with the rear panel stitched on with seams across the back of the loops. The inner panel of the rear compartment, shown below, had a textile complement as illustrated in the cross-section. 22 x 19 cm.



The binding

Where towards the top of the purse its compartments join with the suspension loops, we find a device that ties together the compartments, flap, loops and closing strap. This joining is done with a leather binding which at this spot is threaded through all of the layers of leather. For this threading, various methods might be used. On the basis of the recovered purses and fragments, four methods have been distinguished (fig. 19). In figure 19 the front and the back of the binding are shown, as well as the perforation marks that may be observed on purses where the binding itself has decayed. Beside it is shown the method of threading. The aperture of the front compartment of a purse will be 3-5 cm below this binding.

The fastening strap (fig. 20)

The usual form consists of a strap end and a buckle end. The strap end will be on the front, hanging down over the flap. The buckle end drops down behind the purse, its length being such that the buckle when fastened sits just below the flap on the front compartment. A buckle strap is found on about one in fifteen purses. Buckle straps are threaded with the binding just below the gap separating the two suspension loops (fig. 21), although strap ends may be fastened onto the flap a little lower down, with a few plain stitches or with ornate stitching (figs 16 and 17). Very rarely the strap end passes through a slit in a long flap (fig. 20). Apart from the prong holes for the buckle, this end of the strap may have a metal-covered strap end. The leather of the fastening strap may have stitching along the edges. The buckles usually are of iron and simple in execution. Buckles of pewter or precious metal will have been used as well, but these would have been removed before the purse was written off, or got rid of by a thief.

Fig. 19. Four methods for joining the purse parts by means of a strip of leather. For each of the methods, the appearance of both sides of the purse is shown, as well as the pattern of perforations.

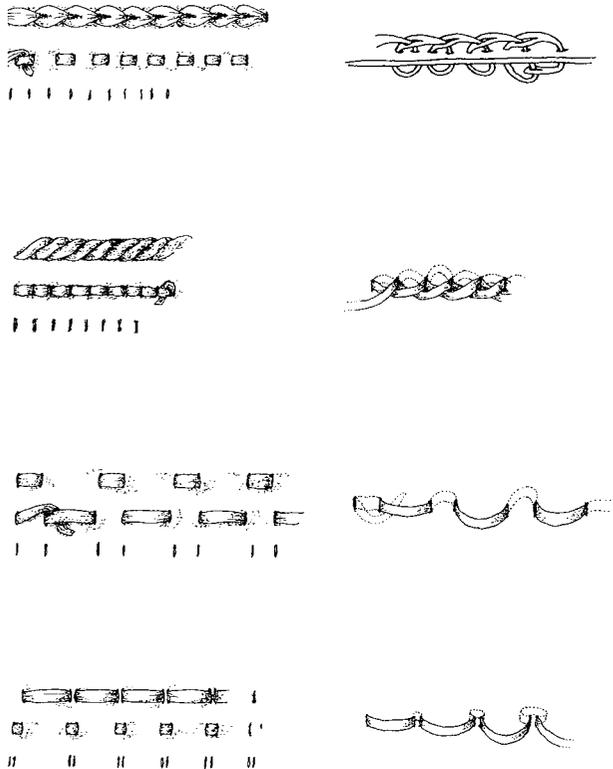


Fig. 20. Sections across girdle purses with a flap and buckle strap. In the example on the right, the strap end first passes through the flap.

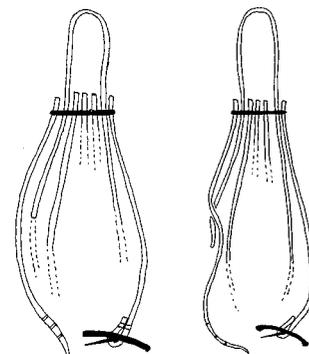


Fig. 21a. Girdle purse with a flap with 'ears' (cf. figs 17 and 26) and remnant of a buckle strap; front (reconstructed) and back views. (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; nr. F 5673).

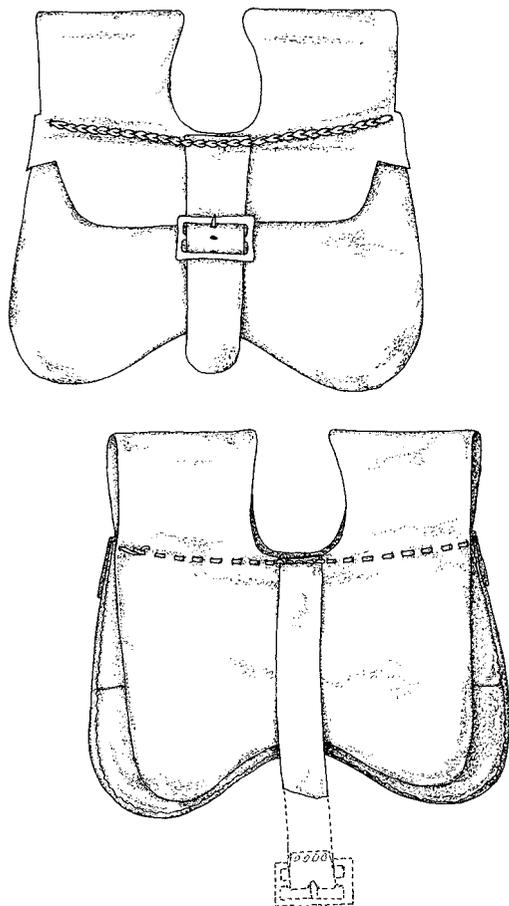
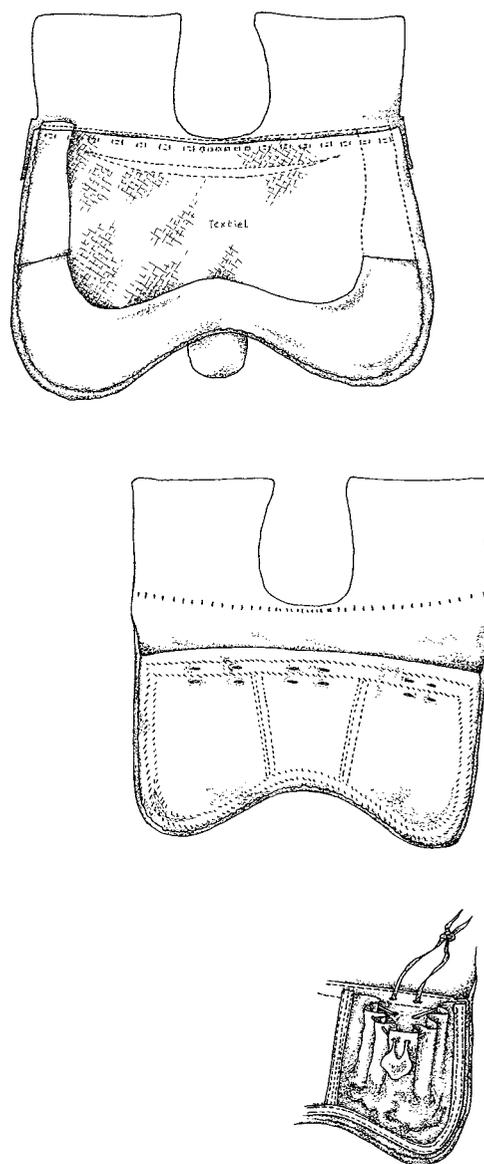


Fig. 21b. The same purse as in fig. 21. The remnant of the inner panel of the front compartment; its textile complement with the aperture has decayed. Below, the recovered inner panel of the rear compartment with stitch holes of three pouchlets; one of the pouchlets reconstructed.



The suspension loops

The suspension loops usually allowed for a sturdy belt, 4 to 6 cm wide. The space between the binding and the top of the loops is 6 to 8 cm. This means that the purse would not impede the movements of the wearer's body, and left space for lifting up the front compartment to reach the compartment openings or money pouchlets. The shape of the gap between the two loops varies from purse to purse (fig. 22).

Apart from the distinctive shape of the gap, there may also be small decorative incisions or stitching around the edges (fig. 23). As mentioned earlier, there are purses whose flap, loops and rear panel are cut in one piece. In other purses, the rear panel is a separate piece of leather with a transverse seam running across the back of the loops (fig. 18). As figure 23 shows, the loop part may even be a plain piece with just an isolated hole in the middle.

Fig. 22. Some examples of girdle loops found on purses and variously shaped interspaces

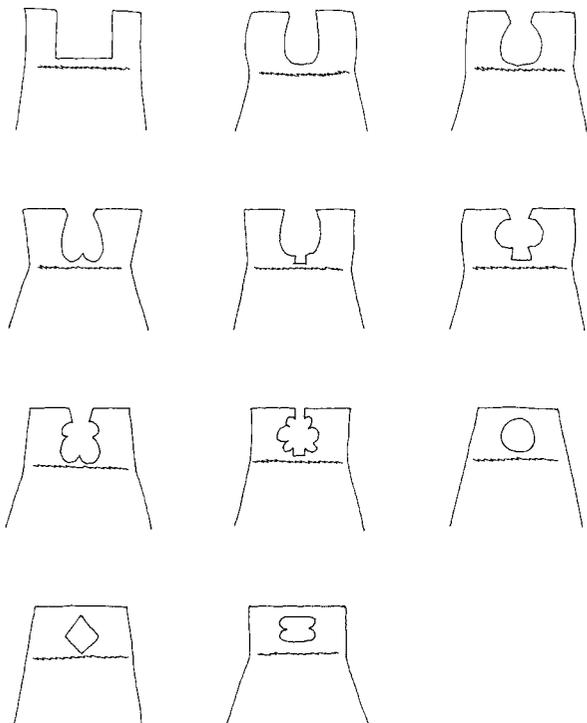


Fig. 23. Purse (front and back) with stabbed decoration around the interspace between the loops and along the loops' edges. The interspace has here become an isolated gap. From Dordrecht. 22 x 22 cm.

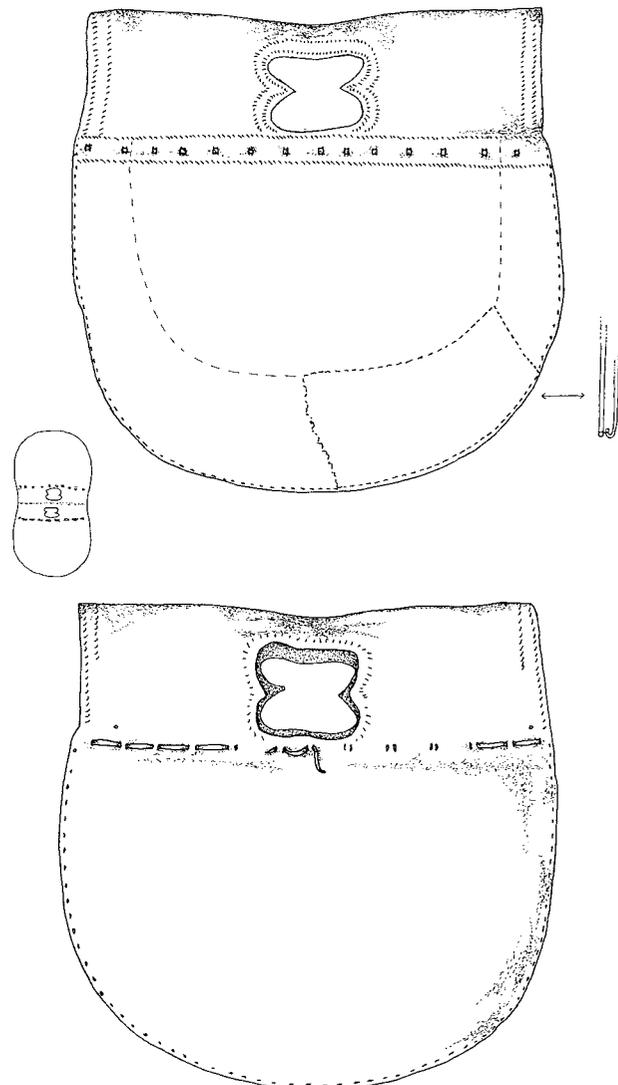


Fig. 24. Purse with stabbed decoration on the loops. Front panel (behind it, part of the front compartment's inner panel); cross-section of the surviving fragments; and rear panel which was joined to the front panel at the back of the loops. From Dordrecht. 22 x 22 cm.

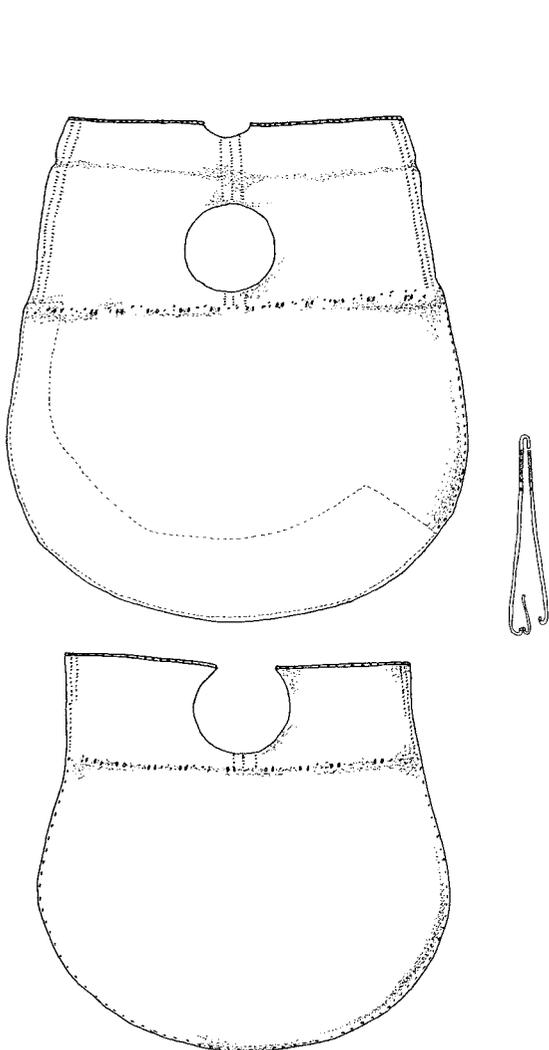
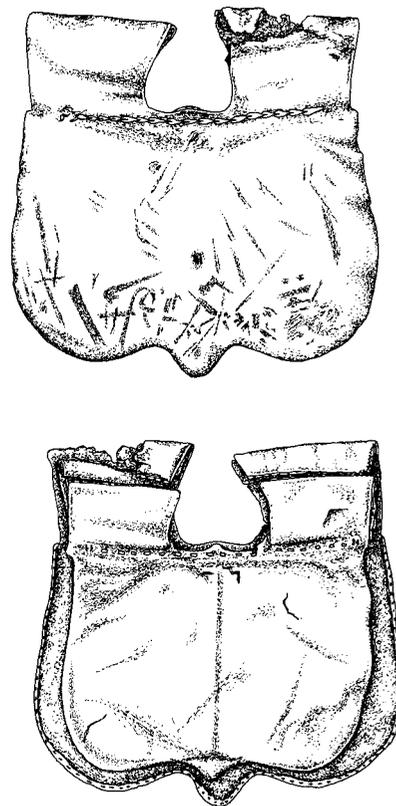


Fig. 25. Purse from Dordrecht (front and back) with a separately cut rear panel joined by a seam across the loops. The patterns on the front are stained imprints of straw. 24 x 24 cm.



The compartments

In purses with a single compartment, this will consist of cowhide front and back panels, which is sturdy leather. In purses with two or more compartments, the inner panels are mostly of thinner and more flexible calf- or goatskin. For the rear panel leather would be used; for the front compartment, leather with a chamois or textile complement (figs 26a, 26b and 27). Chamois and textile usually decay in the soil, which is why such complements have never been recovered. Yet impressions and stitch holes are evidence of their existence. Of the woven complements, textile imprints are sometimes found on the leather of the front panel or in the mud adhering to it. Sometimes these are so clear that one can still tell whether the weave was plain or twill. Chamois and textile may have been used because of their greater stretching capacity, allowing the compartment to bulge. Most of the purses have two compartments; the aperture of the front

Fig. 26a. Purse from Dordrecht. Rear panel, loops and flap in one piece; piping and pouchlet panel to complete the rear compartment. 22 x 20 cm.

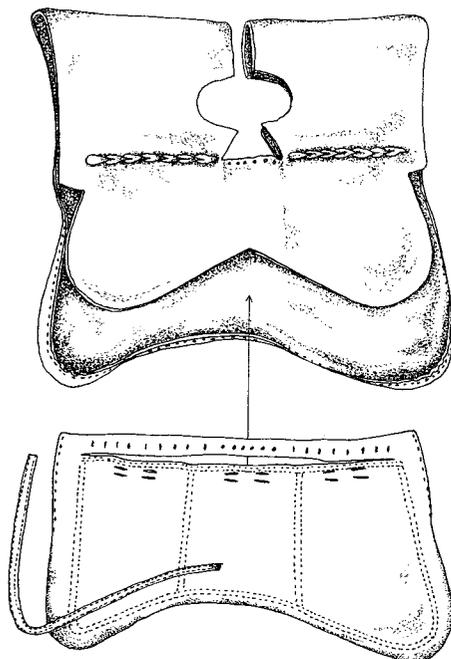


Fig. 26b. Inside view of the front panel bearing an imprint of the inner panel with its textile complement; below: the inner panel, whose textile complement has decayed.

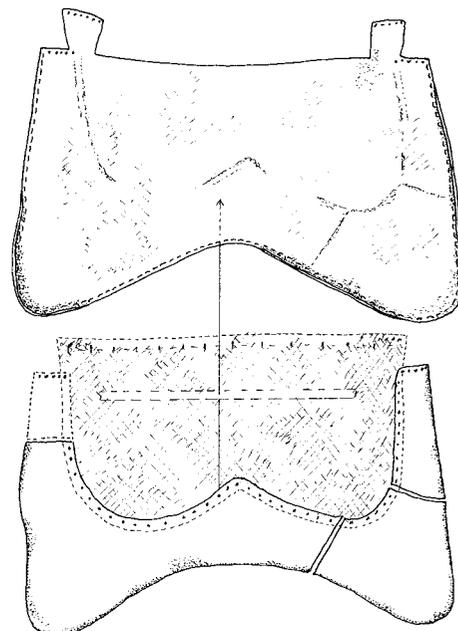


Fig. 27a. The inside of an inner panel of a front compartment with its textile complement, inside and outside view. The textile extends all the way to the side seams.

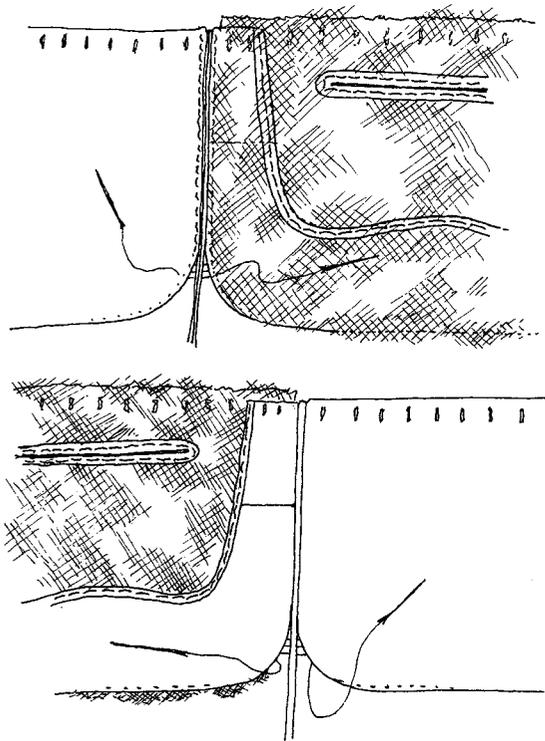
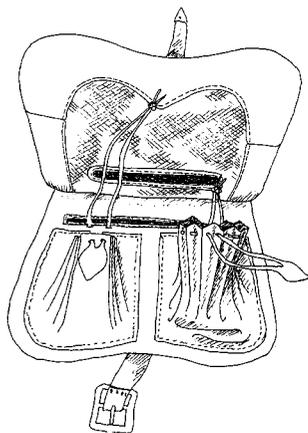


Fig. 27b. The purse folded open shows how the apertures of the front and rear compartments are located opposite each other.



compartment being either under the flap (fig. 28d), or in its rear panel (fig. 28e). The opening of the rear compartment is towards the front, i.e. opposite the rear panel of the front compartment (fig. 28e). If the aperture of the front compartment is in its rear panel, the purse's wearer must reach down into the front compartment by pushing both hands in between the two compartments - a rather complicated manoeuvre which at any rate will discourage pick-pockets. If one did not keep small change in this compartment, one could fold the front compartment upwards so as to reach into it from below. The compartment openings have no closure device. The rear panel of the front compartment would be of leather around its contours, with its centre made of chamois or textile. The aperture of the front compartment (if not under the flap) will be in this area of soft material (fig. 26b).

The front panel of the rear compartment is of thin leather, with its opening a few centimetres below the binding. If a purse has special money pouchlets, these will have been stitched onto this panel (figs 28h, 28i and 29b).

Fig. 28. Various purse constructions with the positions of apertures and pouchlets.

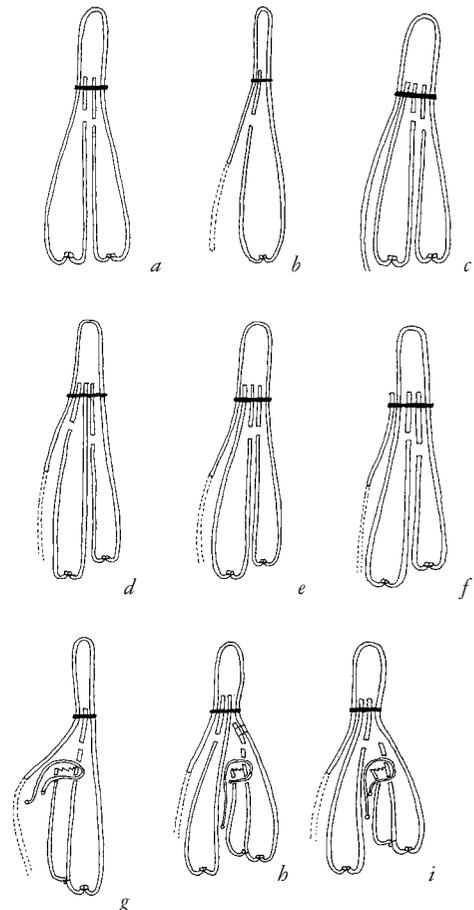


Fig. 29a. Front compartment, front and back, with part of the inner panel, which originally had a complement of chamois or textile. From Dordrecht. 20 x 20 cm.

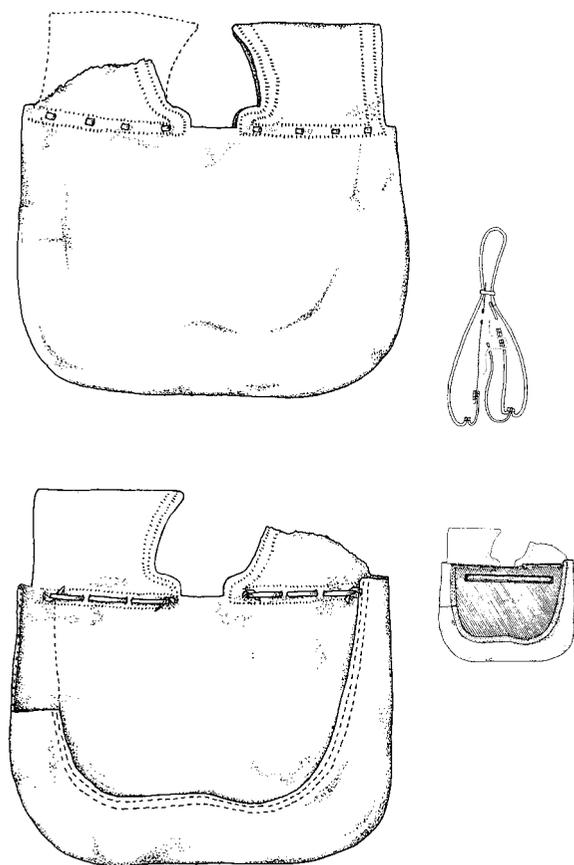
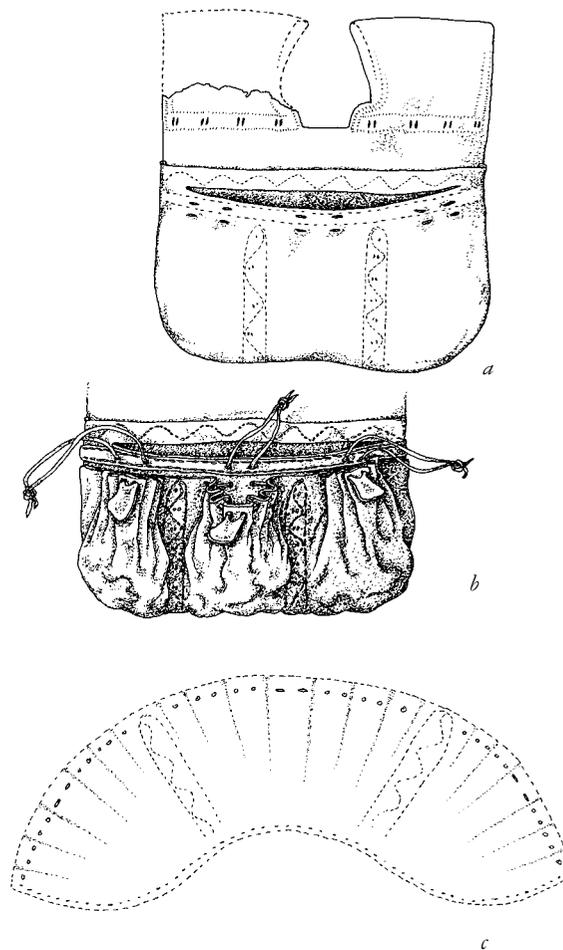


Fig. 29b. a. The front of the rear compartment of this purse, with a pouchlet panel; b. reconstruction of the three pouchlets on the panel; c. reconstructed shape of the leather for the three pouchlets, which was cut in one piece.



Such panels are often recovered as separate finds, and are recognisable by their double rows of stitch holes (fig. 30). Many of these purse panels are quite short, and have not been threaded on with the binding. These short panels are either open at the top or have been stitched onto the rear panel all around, with an aperture below the top seam. The front and rear panels of each compartment are generally stitched together around their entire circumference. Sometimes a piping would be sewn into such a seam. In most purses this seam is internal, i.e. the compartments were sewn inside-out and then turned before being attached by the binding to the flap and loop leather. For the front compartment, this means that its composite rear panel, made up of leather-and-textile or leather-and-chamois, was first assembled before being attached to the front panel. The chamois or textile complement will have been of the same size as the leather part of the panel (fig. 27), and sewn onto it along the side and bottom seams. The complement was also stitched to the leather around the edge of the gap in the latter, together with a reinforcing edging. The compartment's aperture in the stretching complement material will definitely have been reinforced as well.

The rear compartment too was assembled in advance. In the case of pouchlets, these would be first stitched onto the front panel (the pouchlet panel), after which the entire compartment was sewn inside out, incorporating the rear panel, and then turned. The so-called pouchlet panel can be recognised by the stitch holes which, mostly in double rows, indicate the position and outline of the pouchlets. Every pouchlet location moreover has four lace holes for the draw-string closure device.

On the basis of the recovered purse fragments, three methods have been identified for integrating the top rim of the pouchlet panel with the rear panel.

A. Along its top edge, the pouchlet panel is strung together with the binding. The compartment aperture will be just above the pouchlets (fig. 28g);

B. The pouchlet panel is a little shorter; along its top edge it is stitched onto the rear panel, with the compartment aperture just above the pouchlets (fig. 28h);

C. The pouchlet panel is open along its top edge, which forms its aperture. Probably this top edge was provided with a reinforcement (fig. 28i).

The pouchlets (fig. 31)

If a girdle purse has pouchlets, these, made of supple calfskin or goatskin, will be found on the front of the purse's front compartment or on the front panel of its rear compartment. The shape of the pouchlets is cut so that when they are sewn onto the panel, the panel forms the back of the pouchlets (fig. 32). The stitch holes in recovered pouchlet panels (figs 30 and 32), reveal that pouchlets may have a round, angular or tapering outline; by their distinctive basic shape they can be distinguished from parts of regular money pouches (fig. 33). Irrespective of shape, the pouchlets all function in the same way.

Fig. 30. Three examples of excavated pouchlet panels, showing the stitch holes and drawstring holes. Amersfoort, 14th century.

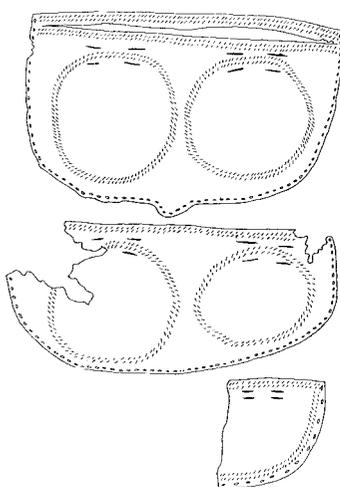
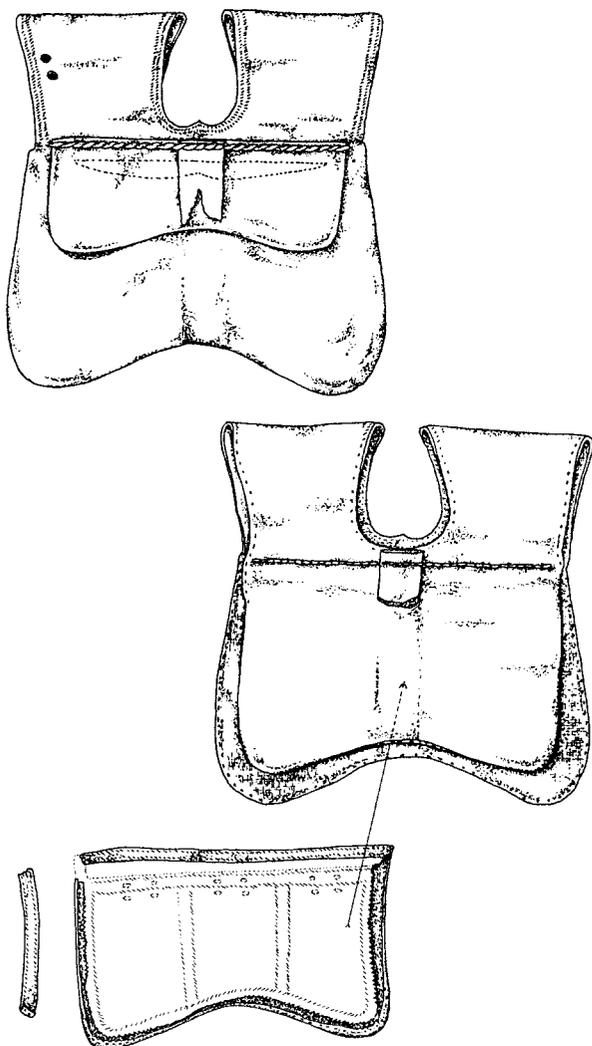


Fig. 31. Purse reconstructed in new leather, which shows the sewn-on pouchlets with their drawstrings, closed and opened. Just above them is the aperture of the rear compartment.

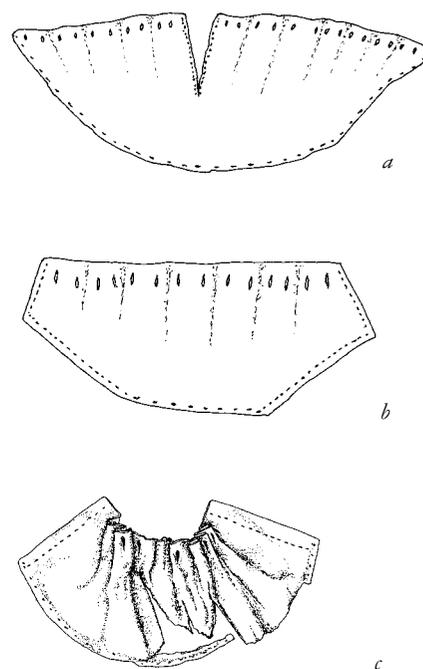


Fig. 32. Purse from Den Briel
with fragment of a pouchlet panel.
Photo and reconstructive drawings.
20 x 20 cm. (Collection J. Bol)



The pouchlets are closed by means of laces that pass through several round holes or slits below their top edge, then through holes in the panel leather into the compartment, and, a little higher up, out again through two more holes in the panel (fig. 31). Above each line of stitch holes outlining such a pouchlet on the panel leather will also be four lace holes - or traces of them, as they often became ripped through use. This means that usually it is quite easy to tell the top and bottom of even a small piece of such panel leather. The pouchlet was closed by pulling the knotted lace ends protruding from the panel. In closing, the pouchlet leather would fold up in accordion fashion (fig. 29b). Tying the lace was unnecessary, owing to the friction of the laceholes and the pressure exerted by the purse. Most of the pouchlets were of pliable goatskin. To open the pouchlet, one would simply pull the middle of the lace running through the pouch's edge. Conveniently, the lace had a protruding lip here, or the purse maker would have strung a bead onto the lace (fig. 31). Around the outline of where the pouchlet was stitched onto the panel, an edging has usually been sewn in to strengthen this seam (fig. 31). Consequently the outlines of these pouchlets will have stitch holes but lack thread impressions. Such a reinforcement was certainly necessary, given the intensive use of the pouchlets and the weight of the coins.

Fig. 33. a. Half of a simple money pouch
from Oudeschans; b. flattened leather of
a pouchlet from Reimerswaal; c. the same
pouchlet.



Although many pouchlet panels have been recovered as well as many pouchlets, they are not found in combination; as the sewing threads decayed, the purses came apart in the soil.

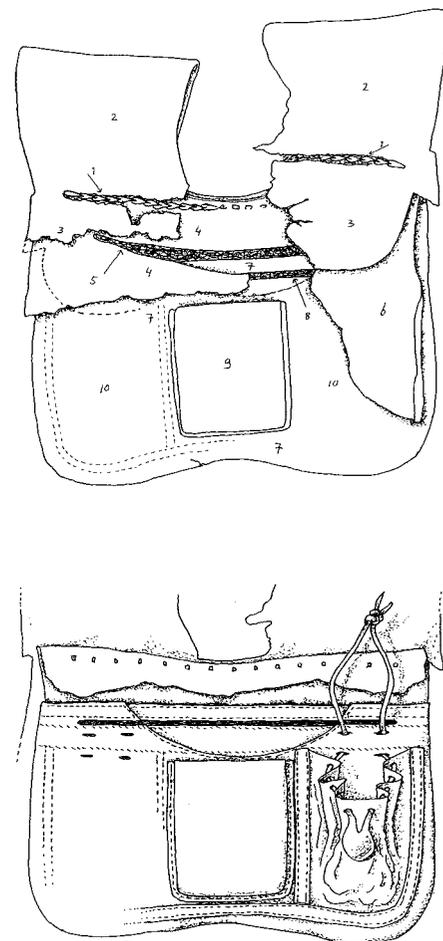
A small hand purse from Bourtange is an exception. Owing to special preservation conditions, its sewing thread was still intact (see under Hand purse). Although it is a 17th-century purse, the pouchlets and their method of attachment are still the same as those of the 15th century.

The purse from Dordrecht (fig. 34) is an example of a large, presumably de-luxe purse; between two pouchlets (witness the stitch holes) it incorporated a case for writing tablets (thin boards with a wax layer to inscribe). When the purse was still intact, this case was hidden behind the front compartment, but yet it was decorated. Remains of the decayed front compartment indicate that this was made entirely of leather, not with a textile or chamois complement.

Fig. 34a. Purse from Dordrecht with a decorated writing-tablet holder on the front of the rear compartment. The flap and both panels of the front compartment were ripped off. Below: a separately sewn-on compartment on the back of the purse. 26 x 27 cm.



Fig. 34b. Explanation of the various panels and compartments of the purse in fig. 34a. The writing-tablet holder was flanked by pouchlets. 1. binding; 2. girdle loops; 3. flap; 4. front panel of front compartment, featuring 5. aperture; 6. inner panel of front compartment; 7. inner panel of rear compartment, featuring 8. aperture; 9. writing-tablet holder; 10. pouchlet spaces. Below: reconstruction of pouchlet with draw-string closure.



The decorations

Decorated purses are fairly rare. The finest example was found near Nieuwlande in the province of Zeeland (fig. 36). It is the front panel of a small purse, 16 cm wide and 13 cm high at the loops. The medallions on the loops were made with a relief stamp. Yet the lettering was made by lightly cutting the letters' outline into the leather and then pressing down the leather around them with a pointed stylus to create a background. The inscription is somewhat cryptic; however, the repeated word 'AMOURS' is clear to read.

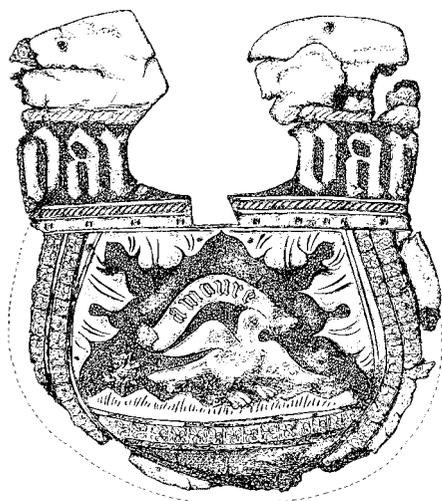
A purse panel with fine decorations from Dordrecht shows the image of a banner, also reading 'AMOURE'. The banner is held in the beak of a bird. The bird is surrounded by foliage and the whole is framed in a double row of fleur-de-lys stamps. The girdle loops also display some lettering (fig. 35).

The waxed-tablet holder inside the purse from Dordrecht (fig. 34a) also sports a bird design. The figure was pressed deep into the leather with a sharp, pointed object and without doubt represents a bird of prey as used in contemporary falconry, but here may be meant to symbolise dauntlessness. The missing front panel of this purse was probably also decorated.

Fig. 36. The splendidly decorated front panel of a small girdle purse from Nieuwlande. 17 x 15 cm. The lettering is hand-made; the eagles were stamp-impresed. Photo and drawing. (Collection N. Peerdeman)



Fig. 35. Purse front from Dordrecht with a hand-made bird design and a banner reading AMOURE. The fleurs-de-lys are stamped. 20 x 22 cm.



From Sluis, where the purse fragment in figure 42 was found, we also have a purse panel with a cable design. This design clearly stands out in relief. To this end, the moistened leather was laid over the motif cut in wood and forced down, the leatherworker pushing it down around the moulding with pointed implements. The finishing touch was to emphasise the twist of the cable and to work the background leather with stippled rows using a stylus (fig. 37). The use of such a wooden mould suggests that serial production of such purses was at least intended.

Not so much an ornament as a reference to a trade, are the three shears carved into the front panel of a different item (fig. 38). Yet another decorative technique is to pierce the leather with an awl (fig. 39). This type of decoration is not unlike that on the footstraps of wooden pattens, which too was done with an awl.

Also lines in low relief were used for ornamentation (fig. 40). To achieve this, the moistened leather would be laid on a mould made of strips of leather, wood, cord or metal wire, and pressed down with bone moulding tools, so that after drying the figure would stand out in relief and moreover be permanent. Not only at Dordrecht but also at Naaldwijk a purse fragment decorated in this way was recovered (fig. 41). It is only vegetable-tanned leather that will retain a decoration made in this way.

Fig. 37. Purse front with a cable motif in relief, from Sluis. The centre had been cut away. The connection to the rear panel (some stitching survives) was located just above the horizontal 'cable'. 17 x 16 cm. (Collection Schoutens)

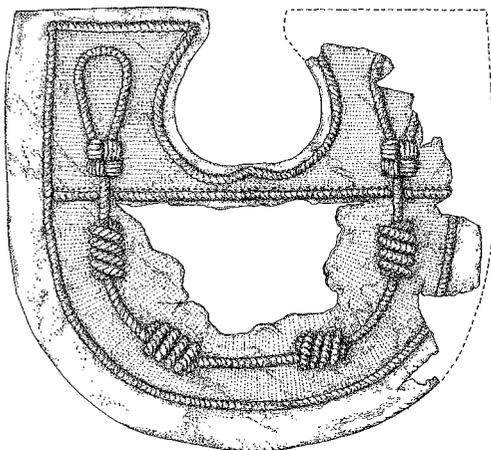


Fig. 38. Purse panel with three pairs of shears scratched into the leather - possibly an indication of the owner's trade. From Dordrecht. 16x 14 cm.

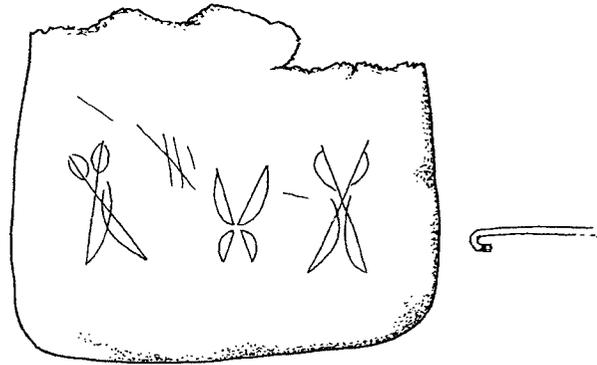


Fig. 39. Front compartment (front and back) of a girdle purse with stabbed decoration. On the inside is part of the inner panel, with stitch holes for its textile or chamois complement. From Dordrecht. 22 x 22 cm. For the rear compartment, see fig. 29a.

