

WALLET, SCRIP OR SATCHEL



If a native speaker of Middle English or Renaissance English were to be shown this bag he would probably call it a wallet. Quotations in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) show that by the 14th Century "wallet," "satchel," and "scrip" were all common names for bags large enough to carry books, lunch, and other supplies.

The period references in the dictionary show "satchel" to have been used primarily for book bags, and "scrip" to have been more often used for a bag a pilgrim carried, but in many cases they are used together or interchangeably. Wallets were not the tiny things Americans call wallets, but big enough for clothing sometimes, or in one case "two goslings."

The word "purse" wouldn't have been used for this type of bag, but for what we now call a drawstring bag. "Pursed" meaning "drawn into close folds or wrinkles; drawn together; puckered" can refer to various things, such as "pursed bags." In period usage, then, these bags aren't purses.

Noticing I was using "bag" quite a bit, I looked that up too, and found a couple of period phrases of note: When hunters went out they would put their game in a bag; the day's kill was referred to as "the bag," and so when someone "bags" a deer nowadays, it refers back to those times. "Bagged it" means it's as good as in my bag. "To turn to bag and wallet" meant to become a beggar. Since both were used perhaps they meant different things, or perhaps one's the Saxon word and one's the Norman, and both were used as often happened (such as "each and every," "will and testament," null and void" etc.) "To give the bag" to someone meant to fire him from a job. (Whence came "sacked," I guess.)

A 1483 quote from Caxton said ". . . a scrippe on his shoulder and a pylgrim's staff in his right honde." If you prefer to transform your wallet into a belt pouch, there is documentation for that (including Joan of Arc's, below), but you might consider leaving it as a shoulderbag. There are period illustrations of people carrying the bags on the outside shoulder (see above) or from the opposite shoulder, with the strap across the chest.

A scrip didn't have to be of a flexible material. A description of the progress of Elizabeth I, written in 1572, described "a scrippe of mother-of-pearl, hanging at three little chains."

Sometimes details come from unexpected sources. "Wallet envelope" is described in an older quote in the dictionary as an envelope "with a broad flap like that of a wallet." OED cited three early 17th century references to lawyers carrying buckram wallets. This must have been the briefcase of the day, then, and may have been of linen treated to be heavier and somewhat waterproof.

Enjoy this whatever-you-choose-to-call-it, and thank you for buying from Honest Ælfælð's Used Treasures.

The top illustration is from The World of the Crusaders by Joshua Praver. He doesn't credit the source except to say that the picture is from Musée des Monuments Français. "Musée" is "museum," so that doesn't say where the carving is.

The caption which went with the illustration at right was "A damaged statue of Joan as a shepherdess is part of the bas-relief in a Norman church. It was placed there long after Joan had been formally rehabilitated." It's from the Horizon Caravel Book Joan of Arc. (1963)

