THE KNITTING CRAFTS IN EUROPE FROM THE THIRTEENTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Early knitted fabrics have been described elsewhere in a paper on the spread of knitting in medieval Europe, and also in my Polish book on European knitting history. This paper presents primarily a summary of the history of the knitting handicrafts in Europe. The formation of guilds is related to the increasing demand for knitted fabrics which could not be satisfied by domestic workers. The diffusion of the guilds was not simultaneous nor identical in the various parts of Europe. Artisan production was organized in guilds mainly in France, Germany and the countries of central Europe. In France the medieval guilds appeared quite early. The first known mention of the craft of knitting in Paris goes back to the year 1268. Later confirmations of the new guild bear the dates 1366, 1380 and 1467. Knitters had also been working outside of Paris. There is evidence of knitter's journeymen visiting towns of northern France. Later, similar guilds appear: in Tournai in the southern Netherlands in 1429, and in Barcelona in 1496. Small groups of knitters may have also been working in many other towns. The beginning of the sixteenth century saw many confirmations of guild statutes in France, Alsace and south Germany.

"Chapeliers de gants et de bonnets", mentioned by Etienne Boileau in 1268 did not, however, stand high in the hierarchy of medieval crafts. They worked not only with woolen yarn, and are found protesting against the use of spinning wheels to process cotton. During the following two centuries their importance grew considerably. By the year 1514 they were one of the six most important Paris guilds. The beginning of the craft in England has not yet been studied. London "cappers", mentioned in the years 1300-11, produced felt rather than knitted caps. "Hosiers" existed at least since 1328; they may have produced leggings sewn out of cloth, but knitted gaiters are mentioned in 1320.5 K.G. Ponting wrote about the most important of all references, the Coventry Leet Book. This volume constitutes our best source of information concerning the cappers in the fifteenth century. The references prove that the knitting of caps in Coventry was a well established industry. Ponting has made suggestive hypothesis that the English cappers purchased knit fabrics from domestic workers and only did the felting. 6

Scattered information about the initial confirmations of guild statutes, and the use of various knitted fabrics in western Europe in the late Middle Ages show the continuing diffusion of hand-knitting. Some guild organizations worked in France, Catalonia, south Netherlands and England. The existence of numerous knitter guilds in west and central Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century does not evidence the start of a new branch of production, but rather shows the increasing demand for knit garments. This is related to the growing fashion for knitted stockings and other clothing that became indispensable elements of Italian and Spanish Renaissance male attire. Among various items in a knitted wardrobe, like children's frocks, jackets and gloves, there were also knit berets which became more fashionable than caps. The fancy forms of the latter required elastic material. Thus as early

as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the production of items of clothing knit on two to five needles spread through Italy, Spain, France, the British Isles and in certain German speaking areas. The late medieval-period activity prepared the ground in western Europe for the technical revolution in knitting which occurred in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Until recently the history of European knitting was a matter of interest chiefly relating to the early development of the then most complicated machine known in the textile industry - the knitting frame of William Lee from Calverton, patented in 1589. This invention, however, developed after a long period of skilled hand-knitting, to which little careful attention has been paid.

The history of knitting guilds from the early sixteenth century began with production in the south and west of Europe. No major research has been made on Italian and Spanish knitting history. One is able to find only a rare mention of such production in books on the economic history of these countries. I wrote about Arabian knit fabrics from Los Huelgas near Burgos in another paper. 7 In the sixteenth century, the guild of knitters in Barcelona, established in 1496, was active. There were also knitters working in Seville and Toledo. The latter centre produced mainly stockings. They were sold in several European countries, such as England, West Pomerania and Poland (Plate 5) 8. The stockings of Toledo were worn at the French court in Paris. There is a document from 1586 telling about the stockings which were in fashion: "3 paires de vert marin, 3 argentées, 3 rouges. 3 bleu céleste, 3 gris foncé, 3 châtain, 3 couleur de pigeon, 1 jaune, 1 blanche, 1 violette, 12 noires. En 1590, Diego del Campo demande 4 paires fauves, 3 gris cendrés, 3 bleu ciel, 2 jaunes, 2 vertes et 2 cramoisies. Le prix d'une paire s'establisait en 1584-1587 a 66 reaux en noir et 68 en couleur." 9 This trade information concerns expensive silk stockings in a large range of fashionable colours. So we have some idea of the export production of Spanish knitting in the sixteenth century. It probably was organized in guilds.

The export centres for knitting in Italy were Naples, Milan, Genoa and Mantua. But so far it has only been possible to find mention of the knitted fabrics from these towns, with nothing concerning guild organization. ¹⁰ Italian knitting history has not been thoroughly studied. It seems necessary to make further research. There is an interesting iconographic source, in which an Italian itinerant knitter from the late sixteenth century appears. (Plate 1). He is shown making stockings from two coloured threads. The itinerant Spanish knitter from the eighteenth century was making stockings too, and also carried on his back a stocking tree. (Plate 2). Not only archive notes from other nations, but iconography as well show the spread of knitting in Italy and Spain. The progress of this production needs study by historians.

In the sixteenth century France was a most important centre of European knitting. (Plate 3). In 1514 the Parisian knitters had one of the leading guilds, one of the "Six Corps". ¹¹ The knitters of Troyes in Champagne received the guild statute in 1505. Eight workshops were in production there, making woolen caps and stockings. An apprentice worked three years before obtaining the rights of journeymen. The assortment of production is given in the archive sources dating from 1698: there were not only caps and stockings but also socks, gloves, mitts and

overcoats. Partly it was export production for the Middle East and north Africa. ¹² In the fifteenth century the knitters of Compiègne still worked together with the clothiers, but in 1527 they received their own statute. They made mainly woollen caps and stockings dyed in blue and heavily fulled. ¹³ The knitters' guild in Rennes got its statute in 1513, and in Orleans in 1575. ¹⁴ At that time there were some knitters in Dourdan, but this town is known more for machine production in the seventeenth century. ¹⁵ In the early seventeenth century hand-knitting spread to the south of France. Usually the Huguenots in Sevennes were involved. But it was not the main occupation in that area. That part of France later was noted for the hosiery industry, at Nimes and lower Languedoc, in the eighteenth century. ¹⁶

Normandy traded heavily in English knit goods, mainly from Jersey and Guernsey. For instance, in 1663-240,000 pairs of stockings were imported officially. In addition, there was a major smuggling trade. ¹⁷ In the years 1610-1614 the first manufacture with the machines invented by William Lee began in Rouen ¹⁸. This town shows an interesting example of two co-existing knitting guilds. The hand-knitters — "Marchands bonnetiers", were separately commercially active in Rouen till 1778, alongside the knitters working on the mechanical frame. The hand-knitted fabrics were worse but cheaper than those from the machines. In 1747 the guild had 50 workshops. Numerous hand-knitters also worked in Caen and other towns of Normandy. ¹⁹

A long coexistence of hand and machine-frame knitters appeared not only in France but in England as well. As the historians have been mainly interested in the spread of the machine frame, references to hand-knitting are only found scattered in several papers and histories of certain towns. ²⁰ In spite of the book of F.A. Wells and important studies in Pasold Fund editions, ²¹ the detailed history of hand-knitter guilds is still waiting its author. The hand-knitters of London and from other big towns were opposed to labor-saving machines. The frame was always suspect as likely to cause unemployment among hand-knitters. The volume of production in numerous towns and villages in England and on the adjacent isles during the seventeenth century was possible in good part because of the hand-knitters. We hardly know anything about the organization of hand-knitting in Scotland at that time. ²²

The guilds of hand-knitting spread to all the borderlands of France. Production developed early in the southern Netherlands. The guild of knitters in Tournai existed from 1429. About 1680 there were approximately 2000 workshops which produced woollen stockings, partly for export to Spain. But this area in 1667-1708 became a part of France, and perhaps some workshops used the mechanical stocking frame. ²³ The Dutch were certainly known for their knitting. In the sixteenth century England imported knitted gloves from the Low Countries and, according to one authority, it was from Holland that the art of knitting was carried to Scandinavia. ²⁴ But we know nothing about the-organization of this hand-knitting in guilds.

From the late sixteenth century, the upper Rhine area was one of the main centers of European hand-knitting; guild statutes in Sundgau and Brisgau date from 1596. They show the spread of production. Important debate concerning statutes was held in Brisach in 1598. Delegates of 25 guilds from towns in Alsace, Switzerland

and Baden were there. Questions of technique and guild organization were discussed. The guilds were from the towns: Basel, Ferrete, Altkirch, Belfort, Giromagny, Mulhouse, Thann, Soultz, Guebwiller, Colmar, Memmerschwihr, Kayserberg, Algosheim, Selestadt, Saint-Marie-aux-Mines, Strasbourg, Molsheim, Phalsbourg, Offenbourg, Lahr, Freiburg, Brisach, Soultzbourg, Neuenbourg and Rheinfelden. These knitters decided to send a master from Strasbourg, Simon Marcutha, to Prague to Rudolph II, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. 25 A new statute dated 1605 was issued for all the upper Rhineland towns. In a long list of knitted fabrics is a mention of a knitted carpet: "Selon la coutume de Prague et d'autres lieux, un tapis a fleurs, long et large de quatre aunes". 26 The production of a knitted carpet was the most important and most complicated of all the tasks that the aspiring master craftsman had to accomplish before receiving full master status in a guild. An exemption could be obtained but it was costly. In their master-work carpet manufacture, up to twenty different colors of wool were used. The largest carpets measure about three metres long and two metres wide. 27 The production of these knitted masterworks in the upper Rhineland shows the technical and artistic level of that area.

In 1599 there were 210-220 workshops altogether working in the towns of the upper Rhineland. The guilds of knitters competed with the domestic village production. A new statute of 1653 noted about 28 towns at that time in Alsace alone. The town knitters turned out an assortment of goods, such as woollen jackets, caps, stockings and gloves. The patterned carpet always remained the most difficult thing for them, so the statute allowed the possibility of making trousers instead. Hand-knitting spread also into another part of Switzerland. There is an ordinance from 1591 referring to the journeymen in Fribourg. ²⁸ There were also guilds in Bern in 1672, and in Unieraargau, Aarwangen, Wagen and Bipp. In 1687 about 1000 hand-knitters were working in Aargau. They were organized partly in a cottage industry system. ²⁹ In this mountainous country, many knitted parts of woollen costumes were produced. Not all of this production was organized by guilds.

Bohemian knitting was the most important in central Europe. The oldest relics of hand-knitting here are two pairs of silk liturgical gloves from the fourteenth century. The knitter-artisans worked in Prague in the sixteenth century. In 1570 they left the cloth guild, although their statutes were confirmed only in 1612. The guild of hand-knitters worked also in Kutna Hora, and from 1660, in Strakonice. In the statutes of 1612, confirmed in 1716, the masterworks are the fulled carpet, a pair of gloves of black and coloured wool, and the beret. ³⁰ Bohemian knitting had a direct connection with North Italy. Italian patterned knits, utilized mainly for making woollen carpets, had been adapted to Bohemian art. The hand-knitter guild worked in Prague at least to the end of the eighteenth century. A bowl belonging to this handicraft guild from 1792 shows the stockings, a ball of wool with four needles and a brush of fuller's thistle. ³¹ (Pl. 6).

Austria also adopted textile techniques from Italy. Large herds of sheep in the mountains provided much rough wool for cloth. The oldest of Austrian knitter guilds is found in Vienna. The two oldest statutes of this guild date from 1609 and 1614. The hand-knitter guilds are registered also in Hallein in the province of Salzburg about 1620, in Linz from 1655 and in Styria from 1699. The 1614 statute

from Vienna refered to the patterned carpet with flowers, the beret, the woolen shirt and a pair of gloves made as masterpieces. 32

Hand-knitting spread into Hungary and Slovakia later than into Bohemia. One of the reasons for the retardation was the weakness of textile production in these countries. The most important reason was a slower demand for stockings, and also the berets and waistcoats worn with the west European costumes. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men in Hungary and Slovakia wore long national costumes with boots and without stockings. Only those men and women who favored west European fashion, wore knit fabrics.

The oldest hand-knitter guild worked in Bratislava, probably by the first half of the seventeenth century. Its statutes were confirmed in 1651. The masterworks were "like in all the Roman Empire" a knitted patterned carpet with flower ornaments, "two elles long and large", a beret, a woolen shirt and a pair of "reiter" (or cavalier) socks. The masterworks had to be made in thirteen weeks. The statutes also limited the productivity of one workshop. Only three journeymen and one apprentice could be employed. If the master works were not accepted by the senior of the guild, the candidate for master was obliged to wander a year longer (and the obligatory travel was already four years). The statutes contained much information attesting to the demand for workers and for knit goods in Slovakia. In this country all hand-knitters were organized into one common guild from Bratislava and its suburbs: Komarno from 1698, Trbava from 1714, Trencin from 1723, Samorin from 1728, Nove Mesto from 1729, Stupava from 1747, Devin from 1751, Dunajska Streda from 1756 and lastly Nitra from 1771. In a charter from 1770 there is also a mention of the knitter guilds in eastern Slovakia: Sobotiste, Holica and Sastin. The Bratisavian statutes from 1767 give information only about the assortment of knitted fabrics. 33

The Hungarian handknitter guilds were organized comparatively recently, only in the eighteenth century. The textile production of this country was retarded, owing to the Turkish conquest. 34 In 1715 the statutes of the oldest knitter guild in Buda were confirmed. An interesting mark of that guild, a pair of stockings, a pair of scissors and a brush of fuller's thistle, dates from 1725. (Pl. 7) The mark shows the main product of the guild. The scissors served for shearing the fulled stockings which were previously napped. Other woollen fabrics were also napped before shearing. The mark shows the type of product from the Buda knitters. They made the simplest woollen articles, mainly stockings. These were then fulled in small handfulling presses. The guild of knitters in Sopron confirmed its privilege in 1774. From at least 1776 there are hand-knitters in Gyor and from 1781 there is a dated statute and mark of a guild in Veszprem. In 1782 there is information about the handknitter production in the district of Tolna. 35 The mark from Vesprem dated 1781 has been published. 36 It shows stockings and gloves as the main fabricated articles, also a brush made from fullers' thistle and a large pair of scissors. The production of Veszprem knitters was like that of Buda and Slovakia. They too made the simplest woollen stockings and gloves and fulled them with combing and shearing. They were all shaped by drying on wooden forms, sewn together and sometimes embroidered.

The registration of numerous hand-knitter guilds in Hungary in the eighteenth

century shows clearly the growing demand for stockings and other types of knit clothing. The hand-knitters worked for the Hungarian middle class, mainly townspeople. The requirements of the wealthiest Hungarians were met by goods imported from Austria, Bohemia and Western Europe. Machines came to Hungary rather late, only at the end of the eighteenth century, and the mechanical knitting frames were widely used only later. (Pl. 8).

From the sixteenth century, hand-knitting came into prominence in trade for Italy, Switzerland, and other parts of Germany. Perhaps hand-knitters had workshops in Cologne, but no mention of guild organization has been found so far. Only one guild of hand-knitters worked in Frankfurt-Am-Main from the late sixteenth century. "Hosenstricker, Teppich und Barettmacher" obtained the confirmation of their statutes in 1640, 1646 and 1649. The master-works from 1659 were: "Erstlich einen Teppich drey ehlen lang und dritthalb ehlen bret mit Blumenwerck versetzet. Zwytens ein Baretlein, drittens ein wullen Hembd, und viertens ein Paar Strumpff mit Spanischen Zwickelen, zum langsten innerhalb dreyzehn Wochen". 38 This information indicates a high technical level for hand-knitting as well as a large assortment of patterned carpets and fashionable costume.

Hand-knitting spread rather early into northern Germany. The guild in Lubeck existed from 1613, and Hamburg early became a center both of trade in English fabrics and for the production of woollen stockings. 39 Saxony had also some knitting guilds. In Dresden "Barettmacher und Strumfstricker" were registered in 1563. At Apolda in Thuringia "David der Sttrickermann" was a founder of handknitting in 1593. Various Saxon towns differed in their assortments of production. The Dresden statute from 1653 noted fabric made for the master work requirement: Spanish men's berets, women's caps, woollen shirts, men's trousers, and gloves. Stockings were mentioned only in the statute from 1687. (Pl. 4) The guild in Leipzig in 1674 had different master works: A woollen beret and shirt, and a patterned carpet. The guild in Zittau was organized early in 1574. The hand-knitters in Berlin had the statute from 1697 with the typical variety consisting of woollen beret, shirt, stockings and carpet. (Pl. 10) Only in 1710 was a knitting frame used in this guild. Lussatia formed the borderland between Saxony and Lower Silesia. In Zgorzelec (Gorlitz) the guild of knitters worked from the early seventeenth century, and the statute of 1683 described the following masterworks: "Ein Spanisch Bareth, ein Weiber Bareth, ein wollen Hembde und ein Paar lange Mannes Strumpfe gestrickt, gewalckt und aussgebrei - in 5 Wochen Anfertigen". 40 The knitters of this town were able to make patterned carpets as well. (Pl. 11).

Silesia was a very important center of hand-knitting in Europe, like Alsace and Bohemia. The fulling mill for the knitter guild worked in Wrockaw (Breslau) from 1534. (Pl. 9) That is certainly a sign of significant production. The statute from 1573 noted the Spanish beret, women's caps and shirts as the masterworks. In 1550-1577 the guild in Wroclaw had only 26 workshops, but in 1649 there were already 67. In the statute of 1675 the patterned carpet is included as a master work. It also mentions the Spanish or Jewish beret, English summer stockings with Spanish gussets, berets and stockings for women, and woollen shirts or jackets. The knitter guild from Legnica had a statute from 1576. Berets, socks and gloves

were made there. The statute from Nysa (Neisse) of 1602 included the patterned "carpet" for a table or for a bed, besides other fabrics. In the statute of 1611 from Brzeg (Brieg) the carpet was considered to be the most complicated of the master works. In Silesia other knitters also existed such as one in Kowary founded in 1619, and in Lwowek Slaski with a statute from 1791. ⁴¹ In the seventeenth century in Upper Silesia the guilds of hand-knitters worked in Glubczyce and in Raciborz. The latter had an official mark from 1685. But as the knitters were organized in a common guild with haberdashers, the mark shows only the tools of the latter. ⁴² The strong hand-knitter guilds in Silesia, maintained until the late eighteenth century, retarded the spread of the mechanical knitting frame.

Gdansk (Danzig) had a craftmen guild in the early seventeenth century with the statute dated 1620. Soon afterwards guilds were registered in Cracow, Poznan, Lublin, Opole Lubelskie, Strzyzow and Opatow. Up to the early nineteenth century, the hand-knitters worked independently of the mechanical frame goods manufactures. The latter were established mainly near Warsaw. Some hand-knitter guilds worked also in towns now a part of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. In the seventeenth century the guilds were registered in Wilno, Kowek, and Sluck. 43

In spite of the inadequacy of sources and their fragmentary nature, one can deduce that from the seventeenth century onwards, in certain Russian towns, there were a number of professional knitters producing handmade goods. They were probably organized into trade-guilds, but some may also have been independent of organizations, or may have been women. By about 1630-40 stockings were an indispensable part of the uniform of certain military detachements. In the autumn of 1633, for instance, a considerable order was placed for long stockings coming above the knee. These were for regiments newly organized and fitted out on West European lines. The small number of Muscovite knitters could not cope with such a large order in a short time, so the authorities turned to the workers in towns from the Vladimir and Galic districts. 44 This brief reference to the fulfillment of a very large order is of great significance. It proves the existence of a hand-knitting industry, not very developed, but still somewhat organized in many Russian towns. Further research in the archives would probably reveal its extent and the manner of its organization. There was a cheapness of labor which made it possible to produce luxury items, needing a great deal of handwork, according to changed fashion or economic conditions.

Hand-knitting spread early in all Scandinavian and Baltic countries. Scandinavian museums have collected knitted parts of different costumes from as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it was rather a popular knitting diffused in the villages and in the small towns without any guild organization. Latvian and Estonian knitting was classified as one of the most archaic and with the most varied patterns in Europe. Jutland in Denmark was one of the biggest export production centers in European knitting. But the results of current research indicate a cottage-industry system of production. It is difficult to find information about guilds of Danish hand-knitters. In the late seventeenth century some manufacturers with mechanical knitting frames began to work in Denmark. 45

Knitting is believed to have been introduced into Iceland by English or German

merchants, and the practice spread quickly. The oldest information dates from the sixteenth century. The first mention of export of knitted goods is from 1624. 46 The knitting was done by men as well as women or children and not in town guild organizations. In Sweden also, hand-knitting was not organized in guilds. The main center for stocking production was southern Holland. 47 In Norway and Finland, hand knitting was a popular art. 48 In Rumania and the Balkans, only popular household knitting was known. Italy influenced the hand-knitting which developed in Dalmatia.

In this paper I wish to show the major spread of hand-knitting as a branch of guild production in different towns. In another paper, I have written about European popular knitting. Other details of the spread of the mechanical knitting frame and of manufacturing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were described in my European knitting history. I gave there also more detailed information about the spread of hand-knitting in Europe. ⁴⁹ The history of the knitting craft is important. The hand-knitters in each town worked mainly for the local market, but sometimes also for the entire country. The biggest export centers preferred using the farming-out system together with guild production. There are some archive sources, mainly the statutes, referring to guild activity and organization. It seems possible to gather full and particular information about the assortment and technical level of knit production by further research in all European countries. In this short article I was only able to present the more important information concerning the spread of knitting guilds in western central and eastern Europe.

Finally, a few conclusions. Guild hand-knitting in Europe involved mainly woolen fabrics. Cotton, silk, and linen yarns were as widely diffused as wool. The use of the latter in fabric production usually demanded final dressing, fulling, raising with a teasel and shearing. Woollen fabrics had to be fulled either in small handfulling mills, by being walked on, or beaten with a club, and while in the wet condition. The hand-fulling effaced mistakes of hasty knitting, the use of uneven and rough thread, and prevented dropped stitches. The fulled knit fabrics did not have closed surfaces like woven cloths. The stitch was always visible. As previously noted, caps and gloves were shaped by drying on wooden forms, sewn and at times embroidered. Coloured fabrics were often produced from dyed yarns. Finally, fabrics had to be ironed, arranged in sets and packed for sale. In the assortment of items produced, the patterned knit carpets were technically the most complex products of hand knitting generally known. The art of knitting masterworks for full guild status was concentrated in the territory within the German-speaking world, and was common throughout the Holy Roman Empire. The most important centers were Alsace, Silesia, Bohemia, Slovakia, and Austria.

Knitting craft history in Europe from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries shows clearly the development of that branch of guild production. It shows as well that of cottage industry and also the popular and the mechanical manufacturing development. The numerous statutes and a rich iconography indicate the large variety of fabrics and the high level of technique in the production of patterned parts of costumes and carpets. I have been concerned with knitting only as one of the purely textile fiber techniques. The papers of Braham Norwick show earlier wire

worked pieces. They introduce an interesting question but should be considered in relation to the details of European knitting history information given in my book. 50 This short article shows the major spread of handknitting in the greater part of Europe since the sixteenth century. Machine-knitting then spread during the seventeenth century, but some of these enterprises were unsuccessful due to opposition and competition from strong group of handknitters organized into guilds.

Studies of European knitting show a close relationship between production and consumption. The manufacture of knitted clothing had the advantage of delivering ready-made products. Therefore that branch of the textile industry was particularly linked with actual fashion requirements. The slow development of knitting in Russia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldavia and Wallachia was due to the fact that the national male costume did not require stockings. The spread of West European dress certainly increased demand for knits. As the small guilds of knitters were not able to meet this demand, manufacturers with the mechanical knitting frames of William Lee were able to expand.

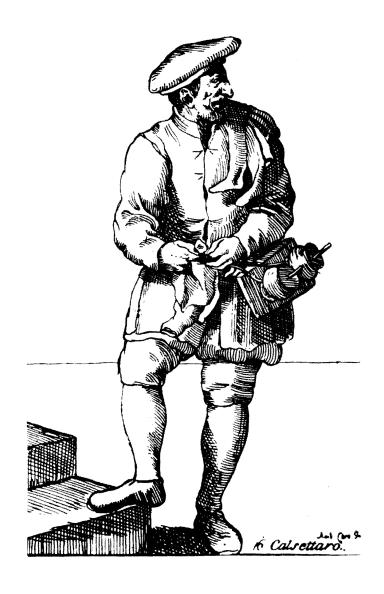
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