An Irish etymology for *kjafal* ‘hooded cloak’ in *Þorfinns Saga*

The account of the discovery of America in *Þorfinns Saga Karlsefnis*, sometimes called the *Saga of Eric the Red*, is found in the fourteenth-century Hauksbók and another, fifteenth-century manuscript (respectively Copenhagen, University Library, MSS 371, 544, and 675; and MS 557).¹ It describes how a Scottish man and woman, called Haki and Hekja, who had been given to Leifr Eiriksson by Óláfr Tryggvason, are taken on the voyage. They can run very fast and return with grapes and wheat when sent to explore.

Haki and Hekja wore a garment described as follows. “Þau váru svá búin at þau hðfðu þat klæði er þau køllðu kjafal; þat var svá górt at hðtrinn var á upp, ok opit at hliðum ok engar ermar á, ok knept á milli fóta. Helt þar saman knaprpr ok nezla, en ber váru þau annars staðar.”² (‘They were dressed in the garment they called a *kjafal*; it was made with a hood at the top, and was open at the sides and without sleeves, but fastened between the legs with a toggle and loop; they wore nothing on the rest of the body.’)

Gordon notes *kjafal* of Hauksbók appears as *bjafal* in AM 577. He comments that both may be corrupt, and that Gaelic *cabhail* ‘the body of a shirt’ and *giobal* ‘garment’ have been compared, but that direct connection with either is difficult.³

It is not difficult to eliminate *cabhail* and *giobal* here. The first of these means ‘trunk, torso; frame (of a structure, vessel); body (of garment), bodice’. Poorly attested in early texts, it can be ruled out as the

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³ Gordon, 215.
source of *kjafal* on semantic grounds. It seems better to take Gordon at his word on the corruption of *kjafal* (still more *bjafal*). There are strong reasons for deriving *kjafal* from early Irish *cochall* 'cowl, hood, hooded cloak'. Deriving from Latin *cucullus*, this is well attested at all periods of Irish. The tenth-century scriptural poem *Saltair na Rann* refers to the *cochall* of the priest Aaron. The heroic tale “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” in the twelfth-century Book of the Dun Cow describes how Da Derga’s warriors wore “short cloaks (*gerrchochaill*) to their buttocks”. In modern Irish, *cochall* means ‘hood; mantle; pod; landing net; muffler’, etc., while *cochall gaoithce* is a ‘windsock’.

There are three reasons for taking *kjafal* as a corruption of Middle Irish *cochall*. The words are tolerably close, the Norse labial fricative [f] presumably being substituted for the Irish unvoiced velar fricative [x], since in Norse of this period [x] no longer existed except internally before s or t, or at the beginning of words. Second, *cochall* is a common word, which might easily be come across. Third, the description of the *kjafal* as having a hood, but going down to leg-height, corresponds to descriptions of the *cochall* (it will be seen that Haki and Hekja’s *cochall* was longer than the “short” ones worn by Da Derga’s men, which went down just to their buttocks).

If this explanation is correct, we solve a crux in an important Old Norse text, as well as revealing some rare evidence for the clothing of ordinary Scottish people a thousand years ago.

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9 Ó Dónaill, 259.
10 Gordon, 269, 279.