

The Gothic Fitted Dress: Observations and Explanations

A collection of posts by Robin Netherton

Author's Note:

I compiled this collection of posts in August 2000 in response to requests on the Historic Costume email list. These posts, made at various times in 1999, include comments and observations regarding the Gothic fitted dress style worn by women in Western Europe in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. I have edited them very slightly for clarity.

This collection is by no means intended to serve as a comprehensive article or a definitive set of directions. In my experience, the fitting technique described here can be taught **only** with hands-on instruction; no written description can be sufficient in itself to teach this method to a beginner. However, I have found that people who already know something about this style have been able to use my posted comments to improve their own methods or direct their own research. These tips will be most useful to people who:

- are familiar with the look of the fitted Gothic gown in artwork from the late 14th and early 15th centuries;
- have already experimented with, or have at least seen, various approaches to reproducing this look; and
- have some understanding of the difference between medieval and modern sewing techniques.

The sorts of things I don't explain here are the basic how-tos: how to construct a lining; how to compensate for the differences between machine-stitching and hand-sewing; how to allow for an overlap at the laced or buttoned sections; how to make lacing holes; how to insert a gore; how to lay out the shapes on the fabric; etc. Those are the sorts of things that experienced individuals are likely to anticipate and address as they go.

The method described here is not definitively "documentable" to medieval practice, for the simple reason that there are no extant garments or records sufficient to document any one particular approach. This method, however, is consistent with what we do know of medieval clothing construction methods, and does not presuppose the development of any techniques or require any equipment not already known to be used at this time.

I also wish to stress that these tips reflect the system that works for **me,** which I've developed with much practice and trial-and-error over more than 20 years. Many people have used this same method and found it works for them. However, other people have other theories. We may never know for certain what method -- or methods -- were actually used.

The information here is accurate to the best of my knowledge as of the dates on the posts, but I cannot predict whether any of these statements will reflect my ideas or practice for the indefinite future. This is a constant learning process for me, as each person's body is different and presents different fitting problems -- some of which may need new solutions/methods that I haven't had to develop myself yet. I am continually adapting and refining my method as I learn more.

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--Robin Netherton
July 2001

Date: Thu, 23 Sep 1999 12:56:22 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

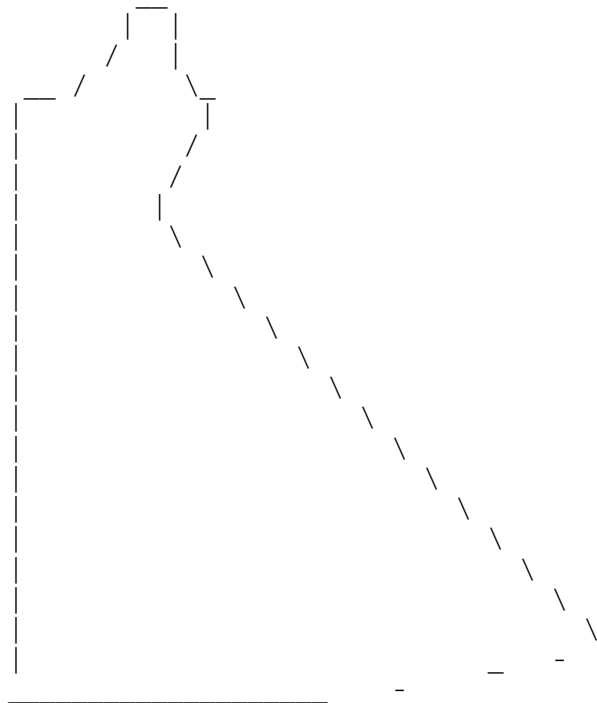
I wrote:

> > I use a plain four-piece construction with gores. I've actually
> > found a picture or two that show those seam lines, too -- front, back,
> > and two sides, nothing else. There's a bit of a trick to cutting the
> > neck and the armholes so you have flexibility in certain directions,
> > and the result is that the dress raises the breasts high up.

Someone asked:

> Can you elaborate on this cut?

Roughly, it's four pieces that look something like this:



....with gores as needed at the side seams (top point goes between waist and hip, where the curve of the hip requires it), plus sometimes gores in the front and/or back seams, depending on the body shape of the wearer. There are many ways to do sleeves; currently I like a two-piece cut with a seam just above the elbow. [later note, 7/01: Now I'm using two pieces, angled at the elbow, creating seams down the length of the arm on inside and outside. You can cut them completely separate, or cut as one piece joined on the straight part of the outside seam that's above the elbow. Buttons/holes go down the outside seam.]

The exact shape of the pieces varies tremendously according to the person and the fabric. I cut only a rough shape to start, then drape and fit on the body before doing more cutting. I fit the lining first, wrong side out of course, then use it as a guide to cutting the main fabric; I put that all together and then check the fit on the body. When fitting, sew the back seam first to match the curve of the spine so it lies perfectly flat. Rough in your other seams, then start fitting from the waist and work up and down from there. See my other post of today for more musings. Much more than that would take me about eight hours to explain properly, in person.

--Robin

Date: Thu, 23 Sep 1999 01:23:47 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Thu, 23 Sep 1999, Elizabeth Cummins wrote:

> I'd be interested in seeing a well made 4-piece cotehardie gown. Does
> anyone have some pictures on a webpage? I've seen some other folks
> attempt to do this dress and the bustline either comes out squashed,
> or the front center seam does this unattractive S curve thing at the
> bustline. Until I see one done well, I'm inclined to stick with my
> controversial princess line seams (they give me the look I want
> without the problems mentioned above).

Are these really "problems," or is it that the "look" you want is one that is considered attractive in the modern view? How are you defining "one done well"?

I can't be exactly sure what you're describing, of course, but fitted dresses from 1350-80 often had a "squashed" bustline. (Look at the Guillaume de Machaut manuscripts; there are a couple reprinted in Avril's book on Manuscript Painting at the Court of France. Also look at the brass of Joan de la Pole and other brasses/effigies of this period -- Margaret Scott's Visual History of Costume has a good collection of these.) Later, as necklines dropped and bustlines rose, an "S" curve along the front center seam was quite typical; you can see these in manuscripts too numerous to count, including the Tres Riches Heures. There are other shapes too -- the breasts do a slow creep skyward over the course of 50 years, and the silhouette goes through several distinct shifts. I've achieved this whole range with a succession of minor fitting changes on a basic 4-piece cut.

I figured that I had the c. 1400-1415 construction down pat when I found that it put the wearer automatically into a "Gothic slouch" -- that "pregnant" posture you see in the Limbourg Brothers manuscripts and others of that time. This may seem ugly in theory to modern viewers, but it's actually quite attractive in life, even as you're shaking your head wondering why. I remember dressing one woman this way, and she was very upset when she looked in the mirror -- "I look pregnant!" she cried. Her boyfriend came into the room, took one look at her new curves, and said, "I want to make you pregnant!"

From what I've seen, any woman who owns a waist can look good in this style -- but she might not look good in the way she was expecting to. Many people assume that the attraction of that style must be because of the high, prominent mounds of breast. But I watch where the men's eyes go. They're almost always drawn to the hips, and to the curve at the small of the back -- not exactly the places we think of showing off today.

On the other hand, it is possible to have an inappropriately "squashed" bust (if I cut the armholes wrong, I sometimes get a bad horizontal pulling right across the middle of the breasts). And the proper S-curve should have the bosom lifted, not dropping. So you may indeed have been seeing a bad fit.

--Robin

Date: Thu, 23 Sep 1999 12:25:25 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

I wrote:

> > On the other hand, it is possible to have an inappropriately
> > "squashed" bust (if I cut the armholes wrong, I sometimes get a bad
> > horizontal pulling right across the middle of the breasts). And the
> > proper S-curve should have the bosom lifted, not dropping.

Linda Yordy asked:

> Could you give more detail about the "right" and "wrong" ways to
> cut the armhole? What specifically caused the horizontal pulling?
> Armhole cut too deep, not deep enough?

Oh, yeesh. This is why I have never been able to write an article about this. It's better explained with fabric and a person in front of you! I've made more than 100 of these dresses and I'm still learning tricks of fit, as different bodies pose different problems.

But a few random thoughts:

First: A lot of my fitting problems disappeared when (1) I lined everything fully, fitting the lining first and then using it as a guide to cutting the main fabric, and (2) I stopped using cotton and moved strictly to linen, wool, or silk, which are more flexible. It should go without

saying that you only use woven cloth of natural fibers, and that you fit over a properly made chemise (NOT a tent with raglan sleeves gathered into a huge lumpy drawstring at the neckline).

Other tips: Fit from the waist (which is relatively unchangeable) going both up and down from there. Cut your seam allowances huge at shoulders and armholes, because everything will change in those areas after you start pulling the fabric. Fit in increments, a little tighter each time, and allow the dress to warm up a few minutes each time the person puts it on; the fibers will relax with body heat and moisture. Cut your neckline in a U-shape or a gentle scoop and pull it open into a wider scoop, and pull the excess fabric diagonally across the bust. The exact steepness of the U and the form of the curve you cut varies immensely depending on fullness and location of the bust, and also on the inherent stretch of the fabric; I'm afraid only experience will help you on judging that. (And this is why I CANNOT give anyone a pattern.)

A horizontal pulling across the bust sometimes means that there is too much tension focused on a grain line going across the bust to the bottom of the armhole. Getting a bit more of an angle on the upper part of the front pieces can help; sometimes I'd find I'd pull the front pieces sideways under the arms and chop off a vertical wedge of fabric (this would be a triangle, an inch or two wide at the armhole edge and three or four inches in depth along the side seam) and resew the side seam. That would change the angle of the grain slightly and add a little flexibility for the lower swell of the bust.

The crease might mean your armhole was cut too deep. It should be right against the body, all the way around the arm, at the point at which your arm bends. Clip your seam allowances so you can see how the fabric will bend right at the natural seamline of the arm. In fact, I prefer to just cut off the seam allowance on the lining and fit with the raw edge, which I later bind with a strip of silk. I do leave seam allowance on the main fabric, though, to attach the sleeve.

Or the crease could simply mean there was not enough fitting through the ribcage, which allowed the bust to drop a bit. If so, you need more tension on the bottom of the bust, to push the interior of the breast skyward in a smooth line. You should have the person lie down while lacing up and fitting, so you're not fighting gravity. Then pull your side seams in to fit the ribcage. The breasts have nowhere to drop.

I found much less problem with that horizontal crease once I stopped using cotton, though.

> On the S-curve, does this mean the front seam from the waist up is not
> straight? Would the center front have a curve at the bust line?

Rarely. I sometimes work in a slight swell or a funnel shape to accommodate a large-busted woman, particularly in the earlier fitted styles c. 1350-80 (the ones like those in the Machaut manuscripts, with the higher neck and the squashed "monobosom"). But the low-necked, high-bosomed, Gothic slouch has most of the fitting on the side and back seams. For this style, it's crucial to cut the neckline low -- the thing that makes that bust push up so high is that there's a lot of pressure from the bottom and very little on the top. Don't cut the neckline lower than the nipples, of course, and make sure the breasts are completely

pushed up when you cut -- if they're already at their maximum height, they can't then "fall out" of your neckline. Again, lying down helps in getting the internal mass of the breasts in the right place.

But even though the front seam (or laced-up opening) itself is usually straight or close to straight, by the time you're done fitting, the profile of the breast itself is an S (including the upper part of the bosom, above the neckline). But not a saggy one! If the breasts are sagging -- if you have a definite crease under the bosom where they're dropping over the ribcage -- that means you aren't pushing against the bottom enough, and pulling the bulk up high enough. About the last thing I do when I'm done fitting the body is to give the shoulders a good pull up and out. I usually end up chopping off an inch or two from the shoulder "strap," where the front and back pieces meet. This shoulder area is the part that varies most from one dress/person to another, so I can't give you any guidance on exactly the angle and size it will have -- you can tell that only on the person, and only when the fitting is finished.

Oh, dear, I'm afraid this has just gotten more confusing. The only way I've ever been able to teach this dress has been in person. And I'm sure that some people who make the same sort of four-piece dress have different ways of accomplishing it. But it IS possible -- anyone who's seen my models at my lectures, or any of the dresses I've made that are still being worn by various people, will tell you that it does work on different figure types. A few years ago at Kalamazoo, I had three models in this dress -- one thin, one tall and curvy, one short and plump. The dresses were in linen, silk, and wool, respectively. They all worked, and they were all clearly the same construction. Sorry I didn't get photos!

--Robin

Date: Thu, 23 Sep 1999 14:40:49 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Thu, 23 Sep 1999, Linda Yordy wrote:

> I followed all but one point:
>
> > Getting a bit more of an angle on the upper part of the
> > front pieces can help
>
> Do you mean to cut the side seam at more of an angle out and up
> from the waist?

No, I mean that in the course of your fitting, you may need to "tilt" or distort the front pieces as they lie on the body, so that you don't end up with a single grain line slicing directly across the breast to the underarm. The fabric won't stretch much on the grain line, so if the grain falls exactly straight across from center to underarm, you can see a pulling or indentation in the fabric along that line. This crease typically aligns with the top end of the side seam, where it enters the armhole; above that, the armhole provides some "release" from the crosswise tension. The best solution (if anatomy allows) is actually to

try to push the bulk of the breast higher than that point, so you can use the pressure to good advantage in pressing the underside of the breast rather than slicing into the front of it.

The issue of stretch on the grain is one reason I found the fit improved when I stopped using woven cottons. Cottons usually are less flexible than wool or linen, which have a little "give" even on the grain, and loads more on the bias. Wool can be very bouncy, and is wonderful for this dress. I've found that linen is a dream to fit, but hell to cut and sew -- every time I lay a cut piece of linen out flat, it crawls; it's never the same shape twice. But that same property enables it to mold to the figure. Silk is less flexible than wool or linen, but very strong. The weave makes a difference, too -- I look at stretch and flexibility when I shop.

Of course these very attributes can cause problems in certain other periods, when you **don't** want the fabric to stretch, mutate, or mold. (Please, no jokes about moldy fabric -- I've had my share...)

--Robin

Date: Thu, 23 Sep 1999 17:46:54 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Thu, 23 Sep 1999, Elizabeth Cummins wrote:

<descriptions of awkward-looking fitted dresses>

Yes, I think you are seeing bad fit. I've run into some of those problems myself, and here's what I've done...

> I prefer to call that a "firmly contained" bustline <grin>. I see
> your point, and have to tell you that I have not seen anything that
> looked like a firmly contained bustline on the people that have done
> it. They were definitely in the "squashed" (ie, small breasts
> completely flattened, large breasts straining the fabric) category.

Fully lining the garment really helps here. Two substantial layers share the pressure and smooth out the fit. Also, remember that the images from the period typically show someone wearing two dresses -- the inner one takes all the strain, and the outer one just sits on top of that.

> full frontal view of person
>
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>
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>
>
> The front seam is pulling toward one breast.

OH, yeah. This is common, as most women are at least a little lopsided.

I've found it helps to actually tighten the fit a bit more on the *larger* breast. That may seem counterintuitive (most people would think you need more room on the larger side) but it actually helps even things out.

To keep the front seam from shifting to one side, it also helps to put your lacing in the front. You're using a full lining, so the front edges are finished with seams that have the seam allowances folded inside, between the outer fabric and the lining. When you fit, allow enough room to overlap the edges, and put the lacing holes no more than 3/4" apart and no more than 3/4" from the edge of the fabric. I offset the lacing holes, too. Then -- this is important -- overlap the edges and lace up with a single cord, tied off at the bottom and going up in a spiral. What you end up with is a cord wrapped around a skinny stack of no less than eight layers of fabric (on each side, that's main fabric, lining, and two seam allowances). It's as strong as a bone, and it doesn't shift. Or gap.

> I read your random thoughts on fitting this type of dress in
> subsequent posts, and I'm despairing of ever being able to do one of
> these dresses myself. I can't experiment on myself with this type of
> dress - laying face down on a bed and trying to fit a back seam is
> simply not possible for me, I'm afraid. I'm just not that double
> jointed <grin>. And if you find it nearly impossible to describe it to
> someone, I have no chance in seven hells of trying to explain to my
> less experienced fellow sewing buddies what I'd like for them to do.
> Sigh.

Oh, yes. I do not myself own one of my fitted dresses, for the same reason. When I was 19 and first working this out, I was able to fit myself -- but I was skinny, small-busted, and flexible. None of that is true today, 20 years later!

I have some burgundy silk and some black wool I'm hoping to use to make myself some fitted dresses someday, but only if some of my past students actually make good on their promises to fly out some weekend and help me!

--Robin

Date: Fri, 24 Sep 1999 08:33:40 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Fri, 24 Sep 1999, teddy1 wrote:

> It was clear to me, and I suspect a lot of others. Diagrams would
> make it a bit clearer (of course, not really possible in this form of
> communication) but on the whole I'd say you explained it extremely
> clearly.

Thanks! There are just SO many factors to describe in this fitting that I really feel reluctant to try to explain it, for fear people will then try it based on my incomplete description and blame me if it doesn't work because I didn't give the ALL the information. But the people on the h-cost list are more experienced than most :-)) and I think are more likely to have their own experience and judgment to add to my discussion.

> > And I'm sure that some people who make the same sort of four-piece
> > dress have different ways of accomplishing it.
>
> I've done this on several people but on some (particularly the bysty
> ones) I end up with the "S" shaped centre front seam. It looks
> horribly lumpy on the unworn garment but gives the "right" shape
> when worn.

I do find I need to curve the front seam on some people -- as you said,
the busty, and also more necessary with the earlier versions that have
higher necks (and thus more acreage to navigate).

> I must try your method of fitting, however. Getting the model to lie
> down so her bits aren't fightling gravity sounds like a hoot....<g>!

Particularly when I straddle her to lace her up. Always makes for an
amusing time when I'm demonstrating for a crowd. Was even funnier when I
was eight months pregnant.

Might be a more delicate matter for Teddy, though ;-)

--Robin

Date: Fri, 24 Sep 1999 15:01:05 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Fri, 24 Sep 1999, teddy1 wrote:

> That's the ones (I've never tried one of the *really* low-cut ones for
> fear of it slipping off the shoulders and then the bodice sliding down
> under the weight of the breasts...<g>)

I've never had that problem. I've found the close-to-the-body armhole and
the tension on the neckline (which is a curve pulled wider) hug the dress
right to the body. It sure *looks* precarious, though! Remember to make
sure the breasts are in their maximum highest position while you're
fitting, so they can't bounce out in wear -- doing some fitting while
lying down is essential. (Hmm, maybe gravity boots ... ;-D)

--Robin

Date: Sun, 26 Sep 1999 00:10:36 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

On Sat, 25 Sep 1999 sustre@pixelations.com wrote:

> I was thinking of making an attempt at the 4-panel dress Robin
> described, and was contemplating wearing a sports bra for fitting-

> it's the one-piece kind that flatten one's breasts against the chest
> wall, making "mounds". It's supportive because the breasts are against
> the chest, not because of any cantilevering.
>
> Would using this for fitting be a bad idea? I was hoping it would give
> me a plausible silhouette. I'm a D cup, if that affects anything.

I know different people have different methods, so I can speak only for myself. If it were me, I would avoid the bra altogether. I figure I need to make the dress do the work, and part of that task is determining where to introduce pressure. If anything is supporting the bosom, it's changing the effect -- and I'm not getting a clear view of what will happen without the bra.

I also need to play with the degree of molding of the breast, particularly how much I let the dress "push" the internal mass up from the underside, and how much I let "drop." If someone's wearing a bra, the breasts aren't as malleable -- the whole point of a bra is to keep the breasts from shifting.

This is a very different approach from fitting modern clothing, which assumes you're working with a fixed shape (defined by a foundation garment) and then making the clothing fit that defined shape. With the 14th-century dress, at least as I make it, the clothing works directly *with* the body. It's really more like fitting a corset, or a bra.

There's also a question of the thickness of the extra layer. A difference of as little as one-eighth inch on a seam can affect the fit, so fitting over a bra and then removing the bra would certainly introduce a significant amount of space.

I could see an argument for wearing a sports bra for the very first steps of the fitting, when you're just getting in the ballpark of where things will be cut, and where you might not want to be fighting with the breasts. But for any of the meaty stuff, I'd get rid of the bra entirely.

--Robin

Date: Thu, 30 Sep 1999 00:58:40 -0500 (CDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: re: H-COST: 14th century Dress

Rebecca wrote:

> > Is there a pattern for this sort of dress anywhere? Or is this one of
> > those "do it yourself" type things? As I am trying to do this sort of
> > thing on my own with no real experience, without any helpers (my hubby
> > will do hems, but that's about it!) a pattern really helps!

I have never found a pattern successful for this, if by "pattern" you mean a piece of paper (or specific measurements) that you use to guide your cutting of the shape of the fabric pieces. This construction (at least as I do it) relies heavily on stretch and distortion of the fabric under pressure -- something paper doesn't do. What with all the manipulation,

I've found the final shapes of the pieces are too idiosyncratic to predict with a pattern. You can't draft something up just from measurements, as the act of wearing the dress will change the body's angles (and some of the distances) substantially. There's also a lot of variation in the behavior of different fabrics, so even two dresses for the same person can end up having different angles and proportions on the pieces.

However, if you mean just a rough guide to the number and shapes of the cut pieces, to be refined and fitted on the person, that's easy enough. I sketched the body piece in ASCII in an earlier post. You'll have four of those, plus gores (sides, plus back or front as your figure and the fabric require) and sleeves. I don't *cut* the body pieces in that shape to begin with, however. I cut them very roughly to start, leaving at least three inches of seam allowance from the hips up, and do the rest on the body. I always start by shaping the back seam to match the spine -- something I can only do on the person.

When people ask me for patterns, I like to point out that there's no evidence of pattern use in the 14th century. Working patternless is fundamentally different from working with a pattern. As a friend of mine put it (after I made her a dress), "With patterns, we cut it out, sew it together, then fit it. Before patterns, they fit it, then sewed it together, then cut it out." That's slightly oversimplified, but that's pretty close to the mark.

The results of working this way are substantially different. I think I'm getting closer results to what was done then by using a technique that's more likely similar to theirs.

> I'm not using a pattern; I plan to make it up first in some hideous
> and cheap fabric, then use that for a pattern. Or maybe as a base for
> some of the adjustments Robin referred to, to get other silhouettes.

Mockups are a good idea, but you should try to find a fabric that matches the weight and stretch (on bias and grain) of your final fabric. A mockup in cotton bedsheet won't give you much to go on for a dress in wool.

I don't do mockups anymore; I just fit the lining first and then use that as my guide to cutting the outer layer. In a sense, the lining is my "mockup." I've been known to hack the shoulder or armhole or something off a lining piece and replace it with fresh fabric so I could recut the problem part. It won't show when you're done! Just be sure to make your cut on the grain, and match the grain angle of the replacement piece exactly to the grain of the lining. Instead of a regular seam, overlap the new piece about 1/4 inch and sew the raw edges flat with zigzag. This won't interfere with stretch.

All this is just my own approach, and I'm putting it out here for whatever help it can be to others, not to dictate how I think things ought to be done. I'm sure every person on this list who tries this dress will find a slightly different way to accomplish what s/he wants. We're all experimenting.

--Robin

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2000 10:27:18 -0600 (CST)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: Re: 10 Gore Gown/Cotehardie Construction

On Sun, 26 Mar 2000, Marc Carlson wrote:

> If I may ask, why do you need a fitted waist? I mean, if you are
> wearing accurate medieval clothing, that is.

Late 14th-century stylish fashion was tightly fitted through the torso, including the waist. That doesn't mean a waistline seam -- there were none that I know of -- and I don't think the previous writers were referring to a waistline *seam*, just the narrowness below the bust. Perhaps that is what confused you.

The fitted look can be immensely flattering on both rail-thin women (it can create cleavage out of practically nothing) and heavy women. Done properly, it raises the bosom to the top of the ribcage and pushes the belly below the ribcage, which tends to create a longer "waist" (somewhat higher than the natural waistline) and intensify the in-and-out curvature. Some body fat on the belly and hips is advantageous, as it intensifies the effect -- that "pregnant" posture is actually an achievable shape that makes use of a woman's natural curves more so than the flat stomach prized today.

The shape of the dress is especially effective at the back, where it shows off the dip in the spine and the outward curve at the hips, even on very heavy women. Many people assume that the visual attraction of the dress lies in the low neckline and cleavage. But I've watched men watching women in this dress, and then talked with them about what they notice, and almost universally their eye is drawn to the waist curve and hip curve, particularly in the back.

People use different methods to achieve this. I personally do not use princess seams. The earliest sign of these I've seen is in the 1440s (Agnes Sorel). I would be most happy for definitive examples from an earlier era -- but in my experience, a princess seam is better for fitting *around* a bustline, rather than lifting a bosom the way a flat piece can when it is pulled and angled properly. My preferred construction has four body pieces, with center back and front seams roughly on the vertical grain (some curvature to match the spine in the back, and a little in the front), and side seams accounting for most of the fitting. I add gores somewhere between waist and hip, at sides and sometimes in back and front. Number of gores and positioning depend on the model's shape.

One fitting trick: The goal is to lift the bosom much higher than bra level. I find this easiest to do if I do most of the fittings while the model is lying down. This redistributes the breast mass higher on the body, and flatter. Once I've fit the dress tightly to the ribcage below the bosom and to the very gentle swell of the lower half of the breasts while she is lying down, the breasts drop very little when she stands up. The bosom is then held in place by pulling the fabric up and out at the shoulders. It is important to cut the neckline in something close to a U shape to begin with, and then opening that shape to form the wide neck of the final look. Excess fabric at the outside of the breasts is taken out at the side seam [later note: it often works best to take that excess

pinch out of the front piece only, so the top few inches of the side seam end up slanting toward the front of the body]. This action stretches the entire top part of the front pieces into a sort of warped angle. Woven fabric is essential, because the tension and elasticity are created by the various angles of bias and grain. I have also found that fitting a lining first, and then adding the outer layer of fabric to match, evens out the distribution of stress and smooths out some of the wrinkles you get when you try fitting just with a single layer.

I also have had more success with wool and linen than with cotton. Cotton has an inherent stiffness; wool and linen "warp" and mold more easily. I also make sure, at each fitting, to let the model keep the dress on for 10 minutes or so, and then I re-tighten the fabric, because the heat and moisture of the body relaxes and loosens the dress. The flip side of this is that when she puts on the finished dress, it won't lace closed at first. (I warn people about this so they don't panic.) She has to wear it laced with a slight gap for 10 minutes or so, and then pull the lacings tight again.

There are many more tricks, but I've found those to be useful.

--Robin

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2000 22:51:12 -0600 (CST)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@shell.nightowl.net>
To: h-costume@indra.com
Subject: Re: H-COST: Re: 10 Gore Gown/Cotehardie Construction

On Mon, 27 Mar 2000, "R.M. Koske" wrote:

<snip my ramblings on making Gothic fitted dresses>

> What kind of undergarments go with this? I'm not terribly familiar
> with the period, but it sounds like you're describing all this being
> done by the fabric of the dress alone (or the "fashion fabric" and a
> sturdy lining.) Are there any kind of stays that should go under?

The only undergarment is a shift. And that's correct -- the fabric and lining together do all the work. There are no stays, boning, corsets, etc; they were not invented yet.

I did a presentation a few years ago at the Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo showing how this style was essentially a precursor to real foundation garments. The fitted dress is really its own foundation -- it manipulates the body to alter the body's shape significantly. After that, you can trace the subsequent styles through the 15th century, step by step, to show how separate foundation garments developed. First you get the innovation of a waistline seam, and that lets you treat the bodice as a separate entity with additional interlinings and structure. Then come various stiffeners. Eventually someone got the bright idea that instead of building all this stuff into each and every dress, it made more sense to build it into a separate garment, which could be worn under different dresses. And thus you get bodies, or what people today call corsets or stays or the like.

The invention of a separate foundation garment, which would reliably produce a specific shape and set of proportions, made possible many other things, such as the ability to make dresses from measurements (instead of directly on an individual's body) -- because you knew what the woman's measurements would be once you had a corset to measure from.

That's not quite true with the Gothic fitted dress, which works *with* the body to achieve a shape. While the fitted dress does manipulate the figure into a specific non-natural shape, it does not have a shape of its own. Without a body in it, it falls in a formless heap. Its action comes not from stiff components, but from the interaction of the fabric with the individual's body -- you get support and strength along grainlines, and flexibility along bias angles, and these pressures push and pull the body into the desired angles.

It's also worth noting that the "desired" shape didn't spring up overnight. The fitted fashion developed from a relatively loose dress in small incremental steps. With each slight change in cut, the figure changed a bit more. The progression continued until it could continue no further, and at that point you've got the extreme swayback and high bosom of the "Gothic slouch." Along the way, there are a few points of sudden change, each signifying the development of a new cutting technique -- for instance: the set-in sleeve (which eliminated looseness and bulk under the arms); the long laced/buttoned center opening (which allowed for the body of the garment to be narrower than ever before); the lowering of the neckline (which changed a flattened bosom to a raised one simply by removing the pressure on the top of the breasts while maintaining pressure on the bottom). So the ultimate Gothic fitted shape was not the result of some designers sitting down and saying, "Here's a new shape we'd like women to have, now how do we achieve it," but rather the logical endpoint of a long series of technical innovations that each produced a slightly more extreme shape.

> How heavy is the fabric you usually use for this? It sounds much
> heavier than what I had planned on using when I finally make my dress
> of this style.

Strong is more important than "heavy," as it must be flexible. But it does need some substance and integrity. Remember, this dress might be worn nearly every day, for many years. You need a significant amount of stretch on the bias, and a very slight amount of give on the grain (which is typical with natural fibers). I have managed to do this out of strong cottons -- say, the weight of duck -- but I get much better results from, say, a suit-weight linen or a medium-weight wool. Cotton tends to be too stiff. When I used cotton routinely, I used to really fight with certain creases and wrinkles at various points of the body, but when I switched to linen and wool those fitting problems magically disappeared. Silk is a little more difficult, but worth it.

> >I also make sure, at each fitting, to let the model keep the dress on
> >for 10 minutes or so, and then I re-tighten the fabric, because the
> >heat and moisture of the body relaxes and loosens the dress. The flip
> >side of this is that when she puts on the finished dress, it won't lace
> >closed at first. (I warn people about this so they don't panic.) She
> >has to wear it laced with a slight gap for 10 minutes or so, and then
> >pull the lacings tight again.
>

> Does this mean she must do this every time the dress is worn?

Yes. It's still faster than getting into Elizabethan ;-) I usually get into the dress, and then do up my hair, then tighten the dress.

> Great description and tips--my sister has been trying to fit a dress
> of this style to her satisfaction, and I think this will help
> immensely.

I would suggest she do a mockup first, so she has room to experiment and make mistakes. Cut the pieces with a LOT of leeway around the shoulders and neck -- 3-5 inches of extra fabric in all directions -- because you can't be sure till you do it how much you have to pull, angle, and stretch it.

I usually start by fitting the back seam to match the curve of the spine exactly. Then I fit the width around the waist; once you have the waist fixed, the dress cannot shift up or down.

It is almost impossible to do this on oneself, I'm afraid. This is why I actually no longer have a dress of this style of my own. I had quite a few, and then I had babies, and now my ribcage is bigger and the dresses don't fit.

I'm afraid it would take me a day to type out all the tips I've learned over the years. Ultimately you will find ways that work for you, and they may well be different than what works for me.

--Robin

[This is an older post that repeats some of the information that appears in various posts above, but it presents a more coherent summary of the historical context for this style, so I'm including it.]

Date: Tue, 6 Jul 1999 11:22:04 -0600 (MDT)
From: Robin Netherton <robin@dgsys.com>
To: Historic Costume List <h-costume@indra.com>
Subject: Re: H-COST: Cotehardie Conundrum/Bohemian Bath Attendants

I have been traveling and came back to (1) a pile of work and (2) a pile of H-COST messages I would like to reply to but haven't yet had the chance. But since this one popped up just now, and Astrida asked for my thoughts, here goes.

On Sat, 3 Jul 1999, Astrida Schaeffer wrote:

> Why is everyone so sure there is no body-shaping foundation garment
> beneath the cotehardie?

The short answer, from my perspective, is that you don't need it to accomplish the task, and there's no evidence it existed, so there's no reason to assume it. The simplest solutions that require the fewest assumptions are generally the best.

The rest of this message is the long answer.

(By cotehardie, I'm guessing you mean the fitted dress worn by Western European noblewomen in the late 14th and early 15th century. I don't use the term quite so generally myself, but that seems to be what people mean nowadays.)

> If you look at the relatively loose garments that come before, and the
> correspondingly low-level seamstress skills required to create those
> dresses, and compare them to the rather highly skilled techniques
> required for the "pin it till it shapes you" dress, how could so many
> women suddenly make that jump in skill?

Actually, the jump wasn't that sudden. The relatively loose garments begin changing around 1320, first with attempts at fitting by bringing in the width of the torso. That method has a limit -- you can't fit beyond the point at which you can't get the garment on over your head and shoulders. Enter two major innovations, both simple and logical in form but wide-ranging in what they allowed people to do: The center front opening (meaning an opening from the neckline down past the waist that is closed after the garment is on you), and the set-in sleeve (which integrates some concepts of the square underarm gore, but with additional shaping and flexibility). The center opening let you tighten further around the torso, and the set-in sleeve let you eliminate the bulk around shoulders and underarms without sacrificing range of motion.

After these two changes, you see a gradual series of developments in fitting. First the tightening is just done sideways, giving us the columnar figures and smashed "monobosom" of, say, the Machaut manuscripts of the 1350s (French) or the English brass of Joan de la Pole (c. 1380). Nothing here requires any great development in skill level, just the addition of a couple more techniques to the repertoire over the course of several decades. And at the same time we've got a lot of social and economic upheaval, due to the Black Death and other social and economic shifts, that eventually serve to get a lot of money (and fabric) in circulation and increase motivation for fashion change and complexity.

Fashion tends toward extremes, so fitting became tighter and tighter -- but that happened gradually, over decades. Then necklines began to inch wider and lower. If you take the columnar fitted dress of mid-century, with its relatively high jewel-neck, and cut that neckline progressively lower, you find that this releases pressure on the upper bosom, so the continuing pressure of the fabric on the lower bosom pushes the breasts higher. (Interestingly, the Wonderbra operates on the same principle.) Continue this trend, and eventually the whole figure shifts in form. By the turn of the century you reach the most extreme form of this fashion -- with the S-curved spine, high bust, tiny waist, generous belly. But that look didn't spring up overnight; you can track its development slowly and gradually. (I did this by making a series of dresses covering the range of these developments, and learning how small changes in neckline cut yielded progressively more extreme overall figure shaping.)

By the end of the century, there is obviously quite a bit of additional *effort* required to achieve this look, but it's not really a question of skill; it's a question of time and money. Note that lower-class garments do not reach nearly so extreme a form -- they do become fitted, but not to the same extent. That meant they required less labor, and also it meant

they'd have a longer life, as there was less cutting and pressure on the garment (which cause faster wear) and because they could be passed from one person to another with a minimum of alteration. Meanwhile, rich women did not have as much concern over the longevity of their garments, and if they did not want to take the time to create the extreme fit in their own households, they could hire dressmakers who would have the experience to produce the highly fitted garments. Others who were willing to invest the time to do it themselves could manage, still, at home -- because the actual techniques did not require any special equipment or proprietary knowledge. I have actually managed to make these dresses for myself, though it's no picnic -- still, few of these women lived alone; they lived in extended households, and each household would have had members who did the sewing for the whole household.

> And what about the Bohemian Bath Attendants in illuminations, who are
> shown in spaghetti-strap shifts and nothing else, but who are already
> sporting the correct body shape? Is this just artistic license? (i.e.,
> this is how bodies are supposed to look, so that's how I'll draw
> them?)

First, I do hate to generalize from Bohemian bath attendants to the English and French and Flemish courts. But even if you wish to, the explanation of artistic convention to justify these women's figures has plenty of precedent -- starting with the multitude of nudes who are painted as though they are wearing fitted garments that elevate their bust and bend their spine. One obvious example is Eve in the Eden scene from the Tres Riches Heures; there are many others.

Alternatively, I've seen no illustrations suggesting a separate foundation garment or body shaper under a 14th-century fitted dress. And that's after examining many dozens of illustrations of women half-unlaced, or in the process of dressing, or nursing. Over and over, you see the fitted gown unlaced to show a plain unfitted chemise underneath, and nothing else. Nor is there any evidence I know of in written records that names or suggests such a garment. I can't of course say that nothing of the sort ever existed, but I feel pretty confident in saying it certainly was not in routine wear.

> Furthermore, if the snug and body-shaping fit of the dress is so
> dependent on the fabric, that would mean each dress made would have to
> be individually draped to allow for differences in the textile itself;
> no creation of patterns, or of getting the pattern for a new dress off
> of an old one. This does not strike me as terribly practical.

Actually, if you look at how clothing was made at this point, it's patterns that don't seem terribly practical. I see no evidence that patterns had been invented by this time at all. The earlier garments certainly did not need any; patterns are acutally counterintuitive if you're coming from a history of loose tunics that are geometrically cut based on dimensions that reflect the width of the fabric and the size of the person. For clothing made in the home, a pattern-less approach makes more sense because it requires no written record and no physical pattern. What's vital is the construction *method.* People would most likely have learned from watching how to measure fabric by holding it up to the body, cutting specific rough shapes (usually geometric in form), basting them into place, then fitting the rough garment on the body, sewing truer seams, and cutting away the excess.

This is a simple and logical means of sewing, but it does not come naturally to people who are used to thinking in terms of patterns. A student of mine once phrased it this way -- "With patterns, you cut it out, sew it, then fit it. Before patterns, you fit it, then sew it, then cut it out." A generalization, but pretty close to the mark.

It's important to remember that for patterns to work, you need to first have a stable body. The 14th-century fitted body is anything but stable; the dynamic of the silhouette derives from the mobility and manipulation of the bosom, the shoulders, the floating ribs, etc. The dress itself -- through its pressure along grain lines and stretch on bias lines -- works with the individual body to mold it into a shape whose exact angles and dimensions are unique to that body and that dress. Any attempt to make a pattern would be pretty useless, because there are too many factors involved that affect the angles, proportions, and sizes of the finished pieces. (You can, however, use an existing garment as a rough guide to a new one, as long as it comes close to fitting the individual -- you can't use it as an exact pattern, but it gives you a nice place to start, and then you complete the fitting on the person.)

On the other hand, once you do have foundation garments, you have a stable body, from which you can take measurements -- and you can assume that those measurements will be the same when you return to that body, because the foundation garment dictates the proportions and structure. My research partner, who specializes in Elizabethan, often notes that an Elizabethan corset stands up by itself -- you can see the shape of the body even when no one is wearing it, and you can put it on a dress dummy and fit around it; but my fitted dresses fall in a shapeless heap when they're removed from the body -- they have no independent form of their own.

I would guess that the development of foundation garments helped make possible the regular use of patterns, and also the expansion of tailoring as a profession. Certainly by the 1500s, tailors could routinely work independently of their clients, from measurements only. (Certainly certain garments could be done this way earlier, too, but not the 14th-century fitted gown we're discussing here.) And many new techniques were developed that were indeed more complex than the average housewife could learn easily -- so tailoring became a proprietary profession. But note that later garments typically do not use the fluidity and stretch of the fabric to mold a shape -- often the clothing is essentially upholstered around a set foundation, and stretch in the overlying garment would be a very bad thing indeed. So, there are significant changes in approach, technique, and economics between the fitted Gothic dress of 1400 (cut from long pieces falling from shoulder to floor, plus triangular gores) and the highly complex Elizabethan or French gowns of 1600 (cut with a multitude of small, oddly shaped pieces that are assembled to create a set silhouette).

> Whereas if there were a shaping foundation garment of some kind, at
> least some of the pressure would be off the cotehardie itself and it
> would be an easier dress for seamstresses to create.

Bingo. This is what happened in that in-between time. Look carefully at fashion changes over the 1400s and 1500s. More and more structure is built into the gowns, producing more stable silhouettes and firmer and flatter

surfaces. Eventually someone (or many people) realized it made more sense to separate some of the layers of structural support from the gown itself to make inner garments that could be used under many gowns, relieving the pressure from the finer fabrics, simplifying outer-garment construction, and adding versatility. Once you have those foundation garments, there's room to develop such concepts as standard sizes, ready-to-wear, and a host of other ideas that we take for granted now -- but that didn't really exist in the 14th century.

Perhaps it would help if you considered that 14th-century fitted dress to **be** the foundation garment. After all, it was typically covered by a second gown; that may have been a fitted overgown (what I would call a cotehardie, as distinct from a fitted dress worn directly over a shift), or it may have been a fuller garment like a houppelande. Either way, the dress on the inside would be doing all the hard work of molding and holding the figure. That dress would have been worn as an everyday basic garment, and subject to intensive daily wear and perspiration. The outer gown would have been more formal, and more likely to use expensive fabric, fur, and embellishment. A noblewoman might therefore be more likely to have her fitted dress made within the household, but hire a dressmaker to make the better outer gown. And if you have a decent-fitting undergown, you can indeed use it as a rough guide for the cutting of a fitted overgown; a houppelande can be fit with even less effort (once you get the neck and shoulders just right).

> Opinions? Thoughts? (To Robin Netherton, especially, if you don't
> mind--how did you reach your conclusions? I've gotten myself quite
> befuddled.)

How did I reach these conclusions? First, intuitively, starting more than 20 years ago, when I began draping fabric to create medieval costumes for fun. I realize now that it helped that I had very little modern sewing knowledge. I went directly to the sources and worked from those. One of the things I teach my students now is to forget everything they know about modern methods, and start from the absolute bare basics. Essentially, what I did is start with the universal loose tunic of the early Middle Ages (geometric shapes, straight seams) and worked my way forward, adding new techniques only as absolutely necessary and as the evidence suggested. So, no set-in sleeves till the early 1300s. No princess seams till maybe 1440 (and rare even then). No significant use of the waistline seam till the mid-1400s (you get a few outliers before then, but the seam wasn't an integral element of the clothing construction for a long time). No darts. And certainly no boning, stay-stitching, dozens of other small things that today's seamstresses learn in their first sewing classes. Over the years, I've worked my way up through about 1480, figuring out where they added one more cut here, one more seam there, to generate each new style.

At the same time, I went to college, learned how to do real research, traveled, photographed, burrowed into books, talked with other researchers in many areas, etc. And in this time, I haven't found anything to indicate that either patterns or foundation garments were used in the 14th century, so I'm maintaining the hypothesis that they were not.

What convinces me, though, is that if I can take a hunk of natural-fiber woven fabric, sew it using a minimum number of techniques, no patterns, no foundation garments, no boning, etc. and produce a garment that, on the body, generates the same silhouette I see in the artwork -- and if I can

do this over and over using the identical method, and if I can teach this to other people, and they can accomplish the same thing -- then logic would dictate that there is no need to assume the existence of more complicated methods or elements. If I can do this, there's no reason to think that the average medieval seamstress could not do as well or better.

If someone does have evidence for pattern use or foundation garments in the 14th century, I do want to see it. It would throw a large part of my work out the window, but I'd still like to know.

--Robin