

Making a supportive smock

or "Lady, have pity of breast!"

*In this workshop, we will cut out and fit a shirt that will look very simple, just like the plain shirts seen in medieval manuscripts, **but** fit and cut in a way that will provide comfort by supporting the breasts and also help create a correct silhouette for your medieval outfit.*

Medieval underwear

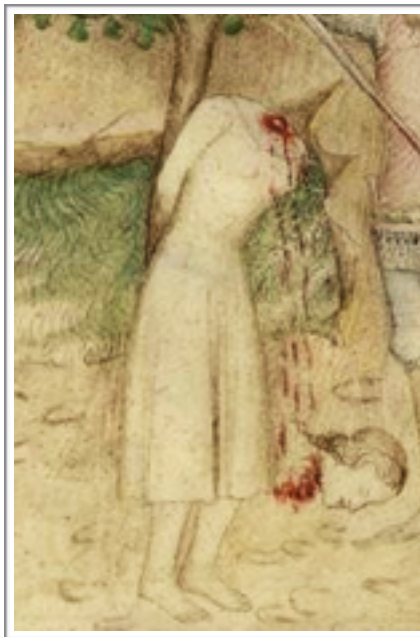
The undermost and thus the most intimate layer of clothing was the linen smock/shirt (swe: särk). This layer should be kept well concealed.

A washable layer of linen (also hemp) is necessary to protect the other layers.

For the medieval person it was also a matter of health. According to the health manual *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, linen clothing is a perfect companion for wool: wool protects the body from cold and holds warmth, but its dangers are that it causes skin irritation. These dangers were best neutralized with thin linen clothing.

Very few linen clothes have been preserved, but illustrations often show a simple shirt-like garment or a sleeveless, high-waisted smock, the latter of which would also have provided some support for breasts.

The sensational discovery of medieval bra-like in garments in *Lengberg* date into the 15th century and are thus too 'modern' for 14th century and earlier ladies.



Guiron le
Courtois (BNF
NAF 5243,
fol. 90r), c.
1370-1380.

The Hague, MMW, 10 B 23, fol.
260v, 1372

Materials

Fabric: A piece of pre-washed and ironed 150 cm wide tabby-woven white or natural colored linen. To estimate how much you need: bust circumference + add a little extra for seams etc + 50 cm for sleeves and gores)

Sewing supplies: sewing pins, a sturdy needle, sewing thread (preferably linen), a measuring tape, a pencil or fabric chalk and scissors.

Measuring

A Shoulder width

B Bust circumference (divide in 2)

C Desired length of smock (shoulder to hemline)

D Shoulder - wrist (sleeve length)

E Wrist circumference

F Armscye

G Gore length

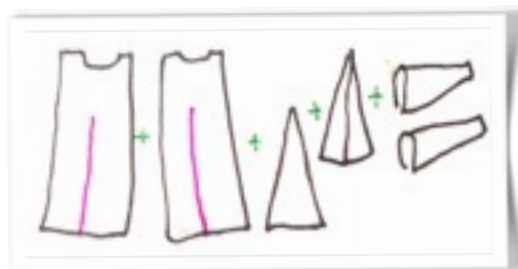
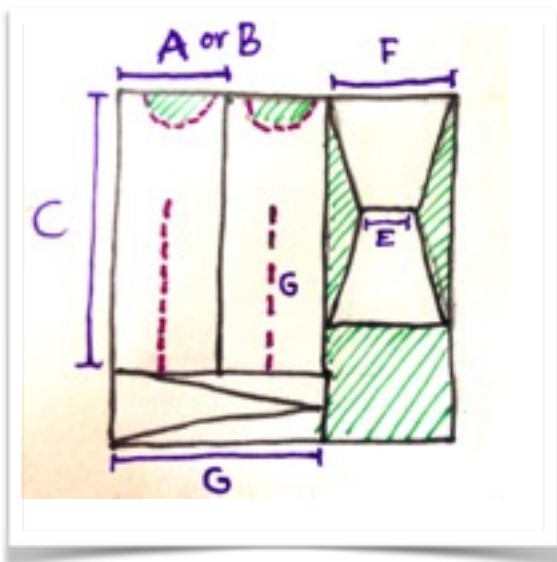
Cutting it out

You will need: Back piece, front piece, front and back gores and sleeves.

Cut all the pieces on the grain!

A good length for the dress is mid-calf - it will not get in your way or train on the ground sucking up dirt and moisture.

The sleeves are best kept as simple as possible and not cut too long so that they remain out of sight.



Preparations

Cut out the back and front piece. You can also cut out the sleeves.

The gores will be cut out only after we will know how long they need to be after the fitting.

Mark the centre on each piece in chalk, pencil or with stitches.

Pin the shoulders and the sides, leave space for your head and arms to pass through! If necessary, you can cut out the neckline a little bit already.

Fitting

Start by adjusting the shoulder seam so that it sits either just on the shoulder or little below.

Then, start pinning the dress below the breasts. It has to fit snugly! Move up towards the armpits, pinning on both sides as you go to keep things even. Take pauses to admire our handiwork and to check that everything is even. If necessary, adjust the shoulder seam. You will need to adjust the breasts on the person being fitted. Lift upwards and together, for the gothic mono-boob effect.

** Think of the desired silhouette you are going after. Altering the fit, you can just provide support OR create a push-up effect.*

** The dress has to fit tightly since the fit becomes looser when the dress is sewn up and in wear as the linen stretches.*

** Keep an eye on the centre back and centre front (marked in chalk or pencil) so they both remain straight.*

When both you and your model are happy with how it fits, it's good to mark where the seams are in either chalk or pencil. Then, using sturdy thread (or double up) and a sturdy needle - you will then sew/baste the seams on the model. It's safe! I will show you how!

Now it's time to find a place for the front and back gores. A good place is a few centimetres above your bellybutton, but it varies from person to person. You can see if this is a good fit by cutting the front and back along the marked line, or you can just mark it with a pencil/chalk.

Draw the neckline and the armholes. Resist the temptation to cut the neckline too low so that you will not spill out.

Now the fitting is done and it's time to wiggle out of the dress! Remember, it is tighter now than the finished dress will be!

Sewing

Because the dress was fitted with the inside out, you will need to carefully mark where the seams are and then pick out the basted seams and then (adjusting any weird bits) re-pin it and sew it now with the inside in and outside out. Choose your favourite way of sewing, but I recommend using a very sturdy seam type and a sturdy thread for sewing up the sides, because they will take a lot of strain. Then, attach the gores.

** It is good to try on the dress while working on the seams so that you can keep an eye on the fit.*

Attach the sleeves, so that the centre of the sleeve sits on your shoulder (i.e. not necessarily where the shoulder seam is). If the sleeves feel too wide, narrow them down so that they fit under your dress.

When finishing the neckline, reinforce it with a piece of linen cut on the grain, or a piece of linen narrow ware. This helps the neckline keep its shape.

Because those who in this point take it

Is for youth only;

Round, petite, firm, then being that,

Without display so publicly;

Then will abandon folly,

Many become, though, ungracious,

And for that, have taken and put in two

sewn sacks upon the chest,

Squeezing with cords and knots:

Lady, have pity of breast!

*- Eustache Deschamps: Balade sur Les Femmes Qui
Troussent Leur Tétins trans. Katherine Knudsen*