

Period Patterning & Construction Made Easy: Tunics & Gowns for Every Body

Lady Tat'iana Negoshka Danilova

ladytatd@gmail.com

&

Lady Nastasiia Ivanova Medvedeva

tasha@duchytarragon.org

Period patterning is easier than one might think. Gowns and tunics made with rectangles, triangles, and occasional parallelograms and trapezoids occur in cultures and times throughout the purview of the SCA. The basic construction morphed over time into cotehardies, Gothic Fitted Gowns, houppelandes, chemises and shirts of all types, and can still be seen in today's shirts, blouses, sweaters and t-shirts.

The Body

The basic t-tunic begins with the body of the tunic. Most period tunics did not have shoulder seams, but were constructed out of one long piece of fabric with a head hole in the middle. These pieces were usually wide enough to fit around the wearer, with the armhole, or armhole, cut to accommodate the contours of the shoulder, creating a curve requiring a set-in sleeve. Some northern European versions have the body panel wide enough to accommodate the width of the shoulders, but not the girth of the body, so panels of fabric are set in under the arms to add width to the body panel. The latter version is the type covered in this class.

Cut the body panel wide enough to accommodate the shoulders of the wearer, plus 1 to 1.5 inches. This extra fabric is there for seam allowance. Cut the piece long enough to be twice the desired length from shoulder to hem, plus 1 to 1.5 inches for the hem. Sometimes the width of the fabric or the body will dictate that the body be cut in two pieces. If you must cut the body in two pieces, remember to add not only an allowance for a hem, but leave a seam allowance for the shoulders.

Sleeves

Sleeves are simple rectangles. The width of a sleeve can be determined by measuring the sleeve of a shirt that fits well and doubling that width. The length is determined by measuring from the back of the shoulder, just below the point, down the back of the arm and around the bent elbow, to the point on the wrist between the wristbones and the hand. Don't forget to add seam allowance for the shoulder seam and hem allowance to finish the wristband. The sleeve can be tapered to suit the wearer after the tunic is assembled.

Side Panels

Since the body of the tunic is cut only to the width of the wearer's shoulders, it will not reach around the body – we need to put panels under the arms to add width. For this pattern, there will be four panels, two under each arm, each shaped like right triangle with the tip cut off. This is how you figure the top width of the triangle, where C=chest measurement, B=width of the body panel, and S=seam allowance:

$((C - 2B)/4) + 2S$ = minimum width of the body panel. This does not include ease, which is the extra width that allows you to do such important things as get in and out of your clothes, move, and breathe. Two to four inches is usually enough.

Example: $C = 54''$, $B = 22''$, $S = \frac{1}{2}''$ $((54-44)/4) + 2(\frac{1}{2}) = (10/4)+1 = 2.5+1 = 3.5$ at the top of each triangle. Adding 4" total for ease adds 1" per triangle, giving us a top edge measurement of 4.5".

The length of the vertical side of the triangle is determined by subtracting the width of the folded sleeve from the length of the body panel. Don't forget to add seam allowance at the top for sewing to the sleeve and hem allowance to finish the bottom edge.

The width of the triangle at the bottom is up to the maker, but a good rule of thumb is that the combined width of the side panels should equal or exceed the combined width of the body panels.

Gussets

With this tunic, we are adding panels under the arms for width, as well as square gussets (small pieces of fabric let into seams to provide fullness) in the armpits for freedom of movement. Without the gussets, there is a great deal of stress on the junction of the armhole seam and the side seam, and it is very easy to rip out the underarm of a tunic just by reaching for something overhead. With the gussets, there is a bit of give in the underarm, and the tunic is both more comfortable and more durable.

Gussets can be inserted into a slit in a solid side panel, and usually were. For ease and speed of construction, we are going to split the side seams and cut the square gussets into triangles, which means that the gussets need to be a bit larger than normal to accommodate the seam down the middle. Six to seven inches on a side is usually big enough for gussets.

Gores

A gore is a triangular piece of fabric let into the edge of a tube to provide fullness. Without gores, the wearer will find it terribly difficult to walk. Gores are usually equilateral triangles, with the height of the triangle the same as that from the top of the hip to the bottom of the garment, including seam and hem allowance. The width is personal preference, but for a tunic should be a minimum of ten inches. Historically, these gores are placed at center front and center back (CF and CB) and on the left and right sides. Some people prefer to place my gores to the left and right sides of the front and back ("at the corners," so to speak), because they find that placing gores at the CF and CB of their physique is unflattering.

Measurements

Take the following measurements:

Code	Location	Measurement
A	Neck (at base) (diameter=C/3.14)	
B	Shoulders (across back, slightly hunched forward)	
C	Arm Length (from point of shoulder around elbow to wrist, between bones and hand, arm bent 90°)	
D	Arm width (circumference of largest part of arm)	
E	Chest/Girth (circumference of largest body width)	
F	Length (from top of shoulder over front to desired hem length)	
G	"Skirt" length (top of hip to hem edge)	
H	Seam Allowance	
I	Hem Allowance	

Layout

<i>Tunic Piece</i>	<i>How To Figure</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Length</i>
Body Panel (two pieces)	$L=(F+I)$ $W=(B+2H)$		
Body Panel (one piece)	$L=2(F+I)$ $W=(B+2H)$		
Sleeve (cut two)	$L=C+H+I$ $W=D+I+(4''=6'' \text{ for ease})$		
Side Panels (cut four)	Top $W=((E-B)/4)+2H$ Bottom Width as desired + H $L=F-(1/2 \text{ sleeve width})$		
Gores (cut two)	$L=G+H+I$ $W=\text{as desired} +H+2I$		
Gussets (cut two)	6"-7" square		
Facing (cut one)	$L=\text{neck diameter} + \text{slit length} + (4''-6'')$ $W=\text{neck diameter} + (4''-6'')$		

Lay out the pieces on the fabric to best minimize fabric waste. Fabric is sold folded lengthwise – don't forget that you can fold it in the other direction if necessary (assuming a non-directionally patterned fabric). Keep the straight edges of the pieces aligned with the grain of the fabric.

Assembly

1. Body

- a. Two Pieces: Sew shoulder seam.
- b. One Piece: Fold in half widthwise; mark shoulder line with chalk.

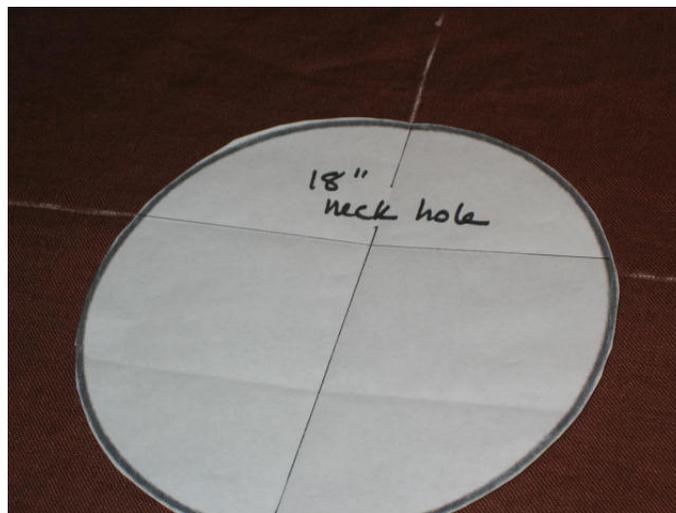
2. Facing:

The neckline must be finished in order to keep the fabric from fraying. There are several methods to achieve this end. Facing the neckline is the most common in the SCA, but one could also stitch a rolled hem. A period method would be to stitch the neckline to a piece of silk ribbon, but that is more commonly found in later period.

A facing is “the area of a garment or sewn item that turns to the inside, giving a finished appearance to what would otherwise just be a raw edge of fabric.”¹ This is best achieved by stitching down the facing fabric before the neckhole is cut. This way the fabric cannot skew or stretch out of shape before it is reinforced.

Make a pattern for the neckhole by tracing the neck of a well-fitting t-shirt, or by measuring the wearer’s neck. (The t-shirt method is easier, as it doesn’t require math.) If you go with the measurement method, you must divide the circumference of the neck by π (3.14) to determine the diameter, divide by 2 to get the radius, and then draw a circle to the correct size. Remember, on necklines it’s better to go too small than too big. You can always make a bigger neckline, but trying to fix one that’s falling off your shoulders is almost more trouble than it’s worth. Divide your neckline pattern into thirds horizontally, and in half vertically.

Take your facing fabric and trace around the pattern, being sure to leave length for a slit if you want one. Mark the top third of the pattern and the vertical center.



Find the shoulder line of the body panel and mark it across the width of the fabric (if there is no shoulder seam). Then find the center of this line and mark it perpendicular to the shoulder line. Place the facing fabric on the

tunic body, aligning the 1/3d mark with the horizontal shoulder line and the center mark with the center line. (For a hidden facing, place the facing on the right side of the fabric, right sides together. For a contrasting or visible facing, place it on the wrong side of the body, wrong sides together. If you're using a solid fabric, you need not be concerned with right sides and wrong sides.) Pin the facing to the body of the tunic and stitch down.

When stitching a slit, begin slightly to the outside of the line, taper in gently, and stitch one stitch across the bottom.



Once the facing is stitched down, carefully cut away the neckhole. If you have a slit, cut it open very carefully, clipping as close as possible to the end stitch. Flip the facing to the opposite side of the fabric and try it on the wearer. If it fits, press the facing and topstitch around the neckhole, very close to the edge. A top stitch is a "...sometimes decorative, sometimes functional stitch that is usually ¼" from the edge of a seam. For instance, once a vest is turned or a facing to a jacket is turned and pressed, one may stitch ¼" from the edge on the top of the garment to provide a bit of stabilization."² If desired, this machine stitching can be covered with embroidery or trim. The facing can be tacked to the shoulder seam in order to keep it in place, or clipped close to the topstitching.

3. Side Panels: Sew a gusset triangle to top of a side panel, along the angled edge, so the right angle of the triangle is at the top edge. [*insert drawing*]
4. Sleeve Assembly: Sew side panels to long edge of sleeve, aligning straight edge of side panel with shoulder edge of sleeve. [*insert drawing*]
5. Gores: We are indebted to Mistress Mathilde Bourette from whose website we cheerfully and unabashedly stole borrowed the following quotation from the book *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, Singman and McLean, Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 121-122:

A Note on Gussets

Since medieval tailoring often involved inserting a gusset into a slit, we have included the following set of instructions for dealing with them.

Assume you are using a 1/2" seam allowance, and want to insert a gusset in the front of a kirtle³. The same technique was also used on hoods and sleeves (as in the cases of the side-gore hoods and the Charles of Blois doublet).

Find the spot near the tip of the gusset where it is 1" wide, and put a dot in the middle of that inch (i.e. 1/2" from either edge). Mark the wrong side at the corresponding point. Still on the wrong side, draw a chalk line on the gusset seamline (1/2" from the right edge). This line will pass through the point you just marked. Draw another chalk line on the fabric you want to set the gusset into, at the place you want the gusset to go. Don't cut yet.

Pin the gusset to the kirtle, right sides together. The bottom right corner of the gusset should line up with the bottom of the kirtle and the line you drew on it. The gusset itself will be off centre with respect to the line. Now sew along the line you drew on the gusset from the dot near the point to the bottom. Be sure to fasten your stitching with a knot or backstitch at the point. Cut along the line drawn on the kirtle until about 3" away from the point. Move the gusset seam allowance out of the way and carefully cut along the line right up to, but not through, the point where you started. Be careful not to cut the stitching at that point. You will see that while the seam allowance on the gusset is 1/2" throughout, on the kirtle it will taper towards the point.

Open out the gusset, flip over the kirtle, and match the unsewn side of the gusset to the other side of the cut line, right sides together. Line up the bottom corners as before, and you will see that once again the kirtle side of the seam allowance tapers towards the point, with the kirtle side on top. You want this seam to look like a mirror image of the last one. Pin in place, and stitch 1/2" from the side of the gusset, sewing from the dot to the bottom, again anchoring your stitching securely at the dot. Be careful not to stitch over the rest of the kirtle or gusset, or anything but the seam.

6. Sew sleeve assemblies to body panel, aligning top of sleeve with shoulder seam/shoulder mark.
7. Hem sleeves and bottom edge.

Embellish to your heart's content.

Footnotes

1. About.com. Definition of “facing.” <http://sewing.about.com/od/sewingglossaryfj/g/facing.htm>
Retrieved 24 Feb 2009.
2. Sewingweb.com. Definition of “top stitching.” <http://www.sewingweb.com/dictionary/#t> Retrieved 24 Feb 2009.
3. For purposes of this class, substitute the word “tunic” for “kirtle.” They’re pretty much the same thing, anyway.

Useful Websites

Lady Tasha’s Flickr set on facing a neckline: <http://tinyurl.com/crmqzi>

I. Marc Carlson, *Some Clothing Of The Middle Ages: Historical Clothing From Archaeological Finds*:
<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html>

I. Marc Carlson, *Kyrtles/Cotes/Tunics/Gowns*: <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/tunics.html>

Mistress Mathilde Bourette, Herjolfsnes No. 61, a Gown for a Small Child:
<http://www.mathildegirlgenius.com/Documentation/G61Directions.pdf>

This handout will be available as a .pdf at <http://tasha.gallowglass.org/sca/handouts/periodpatterns.pdf>

Suggested Reading

Dress In Anglo-Saxon England, Gale Owen-Crocker. Revised edition, 2004, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk, United Kingdom.

Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450-700, Penelope Walton Rogers. 2007, Council for British Archaeology, Bootham, York, United Kingdom.

Viking Clothing, Thor Ewing. 2006, Tempus Publishing Limited, Stroud, Gloucestershire, United Kingdom.

Woven Into The Earth, Else Østergård. 2004, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, Denmark