

I Love Tilling the Fields: A Late 13th Century English Working-Woman's Shift and Gown

Presented by Lady Eulalia de Ravenfeld, October AS XXXXIII

General Remarks

This entry consists of a linen shift (also called a chemise or a smock) and a wool gown (or tunic) meant to recreate a typical outfit of a late 13th century English peasant woman.

This outfit was inspired by looking at images online from the Maciejowski Bible, a French manuscript dating from about the year 1250. In this manuscript, many women are shown wearing dresses that seem to have partially detached sleeves:



A birth scene



Detail



Ruth threshing.



Bathsheba bathing. Note how the servant has tied her sleeves behind her back.

I've also recently developed an intense interest in the lives of female peasants and workers during the medieval period. In the Maciejowski, the "hanging sleeve" style is most often shown on women who are *doing* something: assisting with a birth, working the fields, and drawing bath water. I was struck by how nifty and practical this design would be for my own SCA activities, and that it seems very likely to have been a peasant style. I set out to research not

only how to construct this gown but also how lower-class women in general would have approached clothing.

My primary interest has always been late 13th century England. However, the English manuscript record from this period has nothing (to my knowledge) comparable to the Maciejowski in terms of scope and detail of depiction of every day life. I used English sources wherever possible, but eventually had to accept that I would have to draw from other sources as well. I have included some English manuscript images at the end of this document, including what may be an indication of something similar to the "hanging sleeve" style.

Fabrics

Fabric and clothing would have been considerably expensive for a medieval peasant or wage-earner. In the early 14th century, a "wealthy peasant" would have had a yearly income of £2-5 (40-100s); a laborer at the same period would have made around 8p per day, and a weaver 5p per day (Hodges). A woolen garment would have cost 3s, and a linen smock 8p (ibid). (Another appeal, besides ease of washing, of linen underthings: it's cheaper to replace them when they wear out.) These prices are, presumably, for a professionally made, finished garment, and include labor costs from every step of the process. By contrast, a tunic for a landless serf in the mid 14th century would have cost only 1-6p (ibid).

Although not specified, there is little doubt that the income and wages listed above are for men. Women were highly restricted in their ability to own property independently, and were even more limited in their options for work. In cases where women were not barred from guilds outright, they earned substantially less than their male counterparts, and rarely progressed beyond the lowest levels of membership (Kowalesky and Bennet). This knowledge influenced the kinds of choices I made when selecting my fabric; I was especially interested in what steps of the complete garment making process could have been done by a woman at home. My fabric choices were also heavily influenced by the London archeological finds and costume research detailed by Crowfoot et al. in *Textiles and Clothing*.

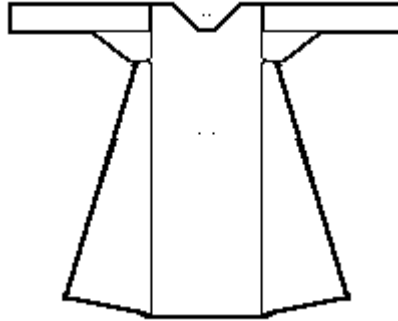
For the shift, I used unbleached linen¹. Period images of women's shifts universally show this as a white garment. The archeological record also shows evidence of bleached linen, however, Crowfoot et al do note that unbleached linen was "widely used." The cost of bleached linen would have been greater than unbleached. Additionally unbleached and undyed linen could have been a largely homemade product, further reducing the cost.

For the gown, I chose a dark brown wool for which I have simulated light fulling by washing and drying it by machine. Wool could have been spun and even woven at home, however, fulling was a costly process that would have added considerably to the price of fabric. Light fulling of the fabric for one garment could probably have been done by a non-professional, and would have some practical benefits (warmer and slightly waterproof), but heavily fulled fabric was highly fashionable and likely only accessible to the wealthy. Bright colors were also out of reach for peasants. A dark brown could be achieved through relatively cheap means, either by using brown wool or by means of tannin dyes such as oak galls or acorns (especially combined with iron).

¹ Actually, I suspect that this linen was bleached and then dyed to look like unbleached linen.

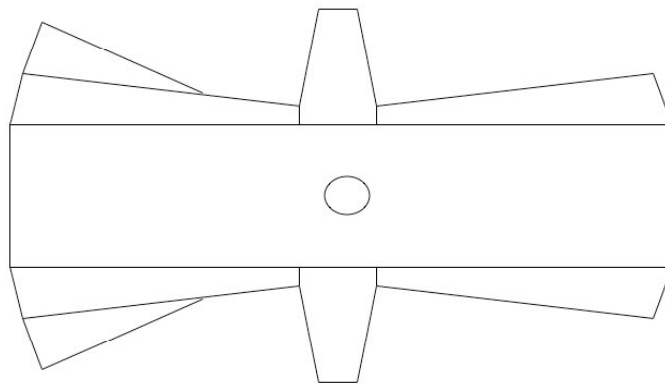
Cut

For both the shift and the gown, I used a cut very similar to "Nockert Type 5", a cut generalized from several extant garments (including at least two from the 13th century):



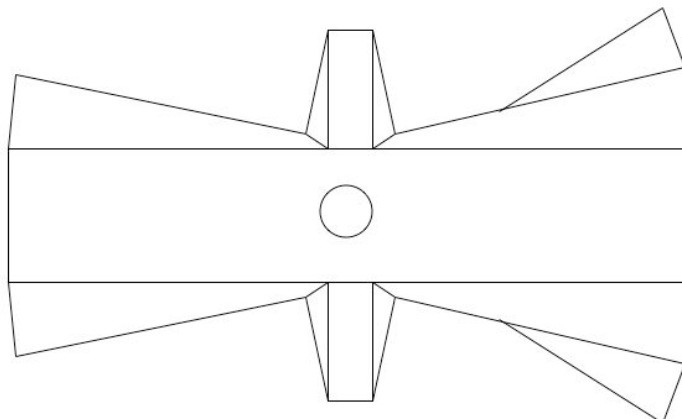
©2005 I Marc Carlson

For my shift, I used this layout:



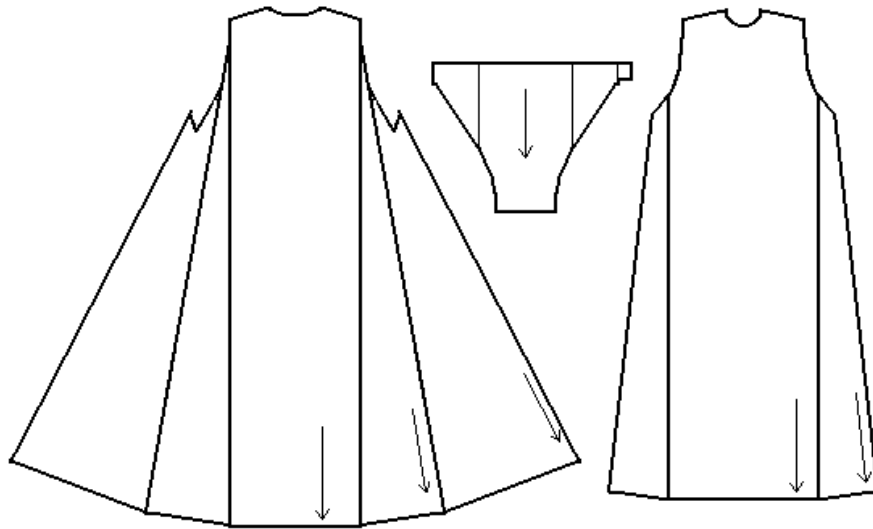
I originally got the idea for this construction from another SCAdian's website, Hefdharfru Vigdís Vestfirzka's "Viking / Norse Underdress" (see sources), although my version has been modified. I have not found any extant garments that exactly match this, however it is similar to "Nockert Type 5" and very easy to cut out; I also like the way it fits.

For my gown, I used this layout:



I started with the shift pattern and replaced the sleeves with ones more similar to the archeological record (that is, with triangular gores inserted). I had a lot of trouble getting these sleeves to work, and in fact I am still not certain that I have perfected the "hanging sleeve." I attached the sleeves at the top and back, leaving the front open. I ended up having to make the armhole much larger than I would have expected to make this work.

Since completing my tunic, I spent more time staring at a particular surviving garment, St Claire of Assisi's gown:



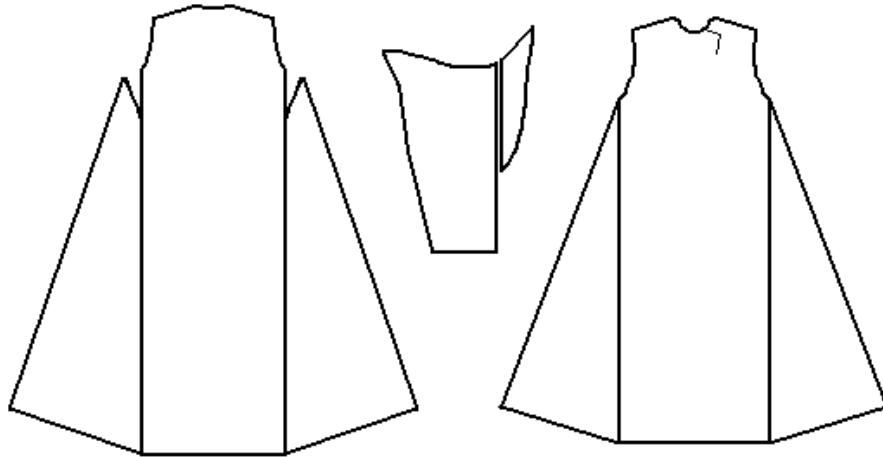
Dated ca. 1253, wool. ©I Marc Carlson, 2005. This is a "Nockert Type 5" cut.

I had looked at this gown previously for inspiration for cutting out tunics, but only after attempting the hanging sleeves did I realize that following the St Claire pattern might fix some of the issues I had with my sleeves. I was especially interested in how much the shape of the arm hole looks like an odd little triangle that shows in some of the illuminations in the Maciejowski:



Jacob and his mother. Note the triangle under her armpit.

If I make another hanging sleeve tunic, I would like to try to actually copy the St Claire pattern. There's another surviving 13th century garment (also classified as "Nockert Type 5") that I may also experiment with, as it too has an "armpit triangle":



St Elizabeth of Thuringia's gown, before 1230. Wool lined with linen.

Sewing

I had almost no experience with hand sewing before undertaking this project. I decided to do the major joining seams by machine and all the finishing by hand. I used unbleached linen thread for all the hand sewing. Linen was the standard fiber used for sewing thread (Crowfoot et al), and I again reasoned that unbleached linen would be within the reach of a peasant.

All seams have what's most often called "reinforced" seams – the raw edges are folded down and a line of running stitch sewn along each edge parallel to the joining stitches (shown in Crowfoot et al). For the linen, I folded edges over twice; for the wool, only once. I used hemstitch on the sleeves and hem of the chemise and running stitch on the sleeves and hem of the gown (both stitches are shown for these applications in archeological finds from medieval London in Crowfoot et al, although not from the 13th century). For the neck openings, I narrow facings of linen sewn down with a row of running stitch on each edge. This treatment is shown in Crowfoot et al on a late 14th century garment.

Final Comments: Field Testing

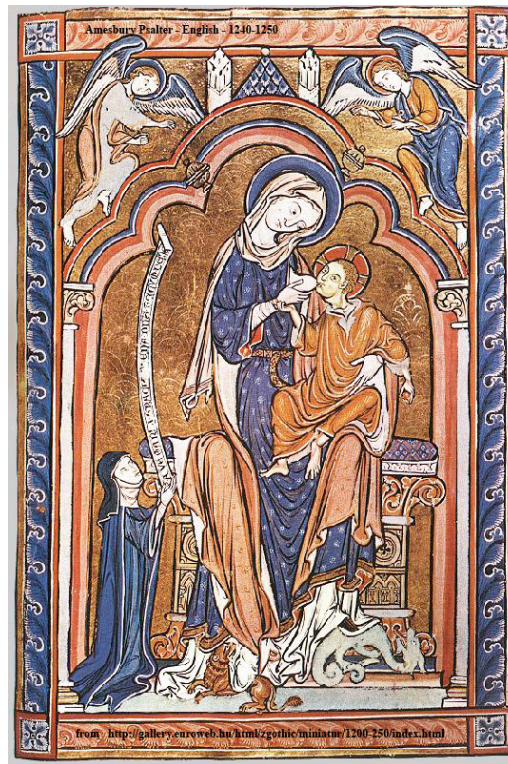
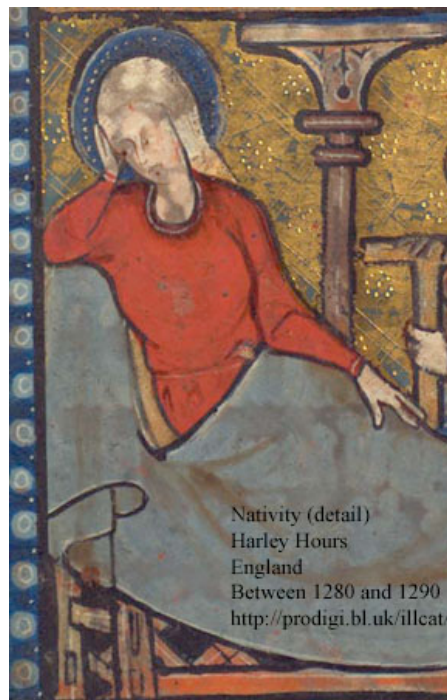
To my unending delight, I had a chance to test the practicality of my new outfit at the Beaverton Farmers Market demo. I spent the day cooking over the fire and I found that the hanging sleeves were as practical as I had hoped. It took a little practice to learn not to drag them through the coals, but they never got in my way. I could put them on when I got cold, take them off when I got too hot or was doing something messy, and I even tried tying them behind my back (I decided my arm length to chest width ratio is not right for this to work).

Overall, although I have a few quibbles (the sleeves aren't perfect and I need more practice at hand sewing), I am pleased with how this outfit turned out.

Works Cited

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<http://www.silverdor.org/viking/underdress.html>

Appendix: English Manuscript Images



Both images show the Virgin Mary. On the left, note how the cut of this gown is very similar overall to those shown in the Maciejowski. On the right, the way the Virgin's breast issues from her gown could indicate something similar to the "hanging sleeve" tunic.