

SIMPLE CLOTHING FOR THE SARTORIALLY IMPAIRED

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**Making medieval-looking clothing isn't hard.
Here are some very basic instructions to get
yourself started with style!**

For most of the early Middle Ages, almost everyone in Europe and the Middle East wore a variation on what we often call a 'T-tunic'. These are loose-fitting, so no exact measurements are required for success, and since all the fabric pieces are either square or triangular, no fussy tailoring is needed. A perfectly adequate outfit can be made in one day using some modern methods, or (with a few changes and working by hand) a really authentic medieval version isn't much more difficult, just a bit more time-consuming. There are many variations and refinements, but we will keep it simple for now!

We'll begin by making a basic long-sleeved tunic with a spiffy contrast neckline and cuffs:

Style: Men's tunics could be short or long, but women's styles were always longer. A tunic could be worn by itself, or with an overtunic. Short overtunics are common for both men and women – usually calf-length for ladies, and anywhere from calf-length up to mid-thigh-length for men. Overtunics could have short or long sleeves. Often, the cuffs and hem had contrast-color facings. A fabric sash makes a good belt!

Fabric: Early medieval clothes were usually made of linen or wool. Any plain solid-color fabric will do, though, in any color that's not 'neon'. Avoid knits and prints! Velvet and brocades are mostly for later periods, so skip those for now. Don't spend lots of money on your first garment. Even if it's not wonderful, you can still use it as an undertunic later on, and as a pattern for your future efforts. Thrift-store bedsheets are an economical option, and good for summer, but look for heavier fabrics when you can. Natural fibers are definitely best in any season.

For contrast facings, you will want a half-yard of some nice, bright fabric that doesn't coordinate with the main fabric at all! You don't need much for facings, so get something nice: maybe wool or even silk, or look for thrift-store skirts or tablecloths to cut up.

Quantity: If you buy fabric by the yard, get twice your own height in fabric for a long tunic. (Yes, that's a little extra, but it's a handy margin of error.) For a shorter style, estimate from hem to top of head, and get twice that length. If it's wide, (54" or more) that's enough. (Long tunics, usually 4 yards; short tunics, 3.) If it is narrower, get an extra yard. If you are XXL, get an extra yard. A king- or queen-size sheet or duvet cover will make a long tunic, but save the twin-size sheets or tablecloths for short styles.

Supplies: You will need a piece of string several feet long, some sewing pins, and a needle and thread for hand sewing. A sewing machine is very handy, but not essential. An iron is helpful.

Let's get started!

Fold your fabric in half crosswise, then in half lengthwise, so it's four layers thick. Now, find a piece of string. Wrap it around your torso at the widest point (waist, chest – wherever you are biggest). Keep a hold of the string to mark the length, then add about two hand-widths. Now, double it over twice, so it's four layers of string (just like the fabric!) Lay it across the fabric from the fold toward the open/edge side. Put a pin in that spot. That's your tunic torso width! Extend that measurement up and down with pins or chalk. (*fig. 1, 2*)

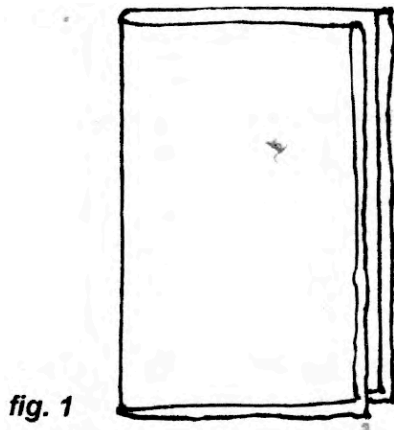


fig. 1

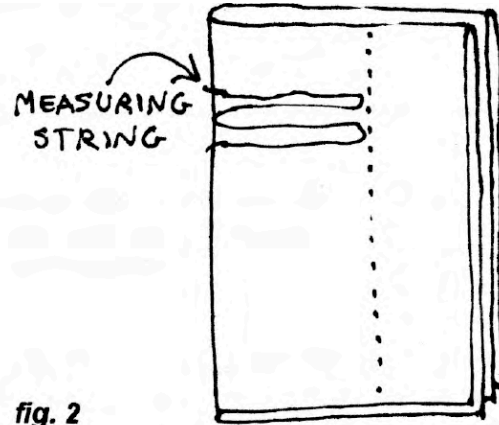


fig. 2

Now, hold your string end at one shoulder. Take the loose end in your other hand and hold it at your waist. Now lay that string-length on the fabric, extending down the marked line from the top fold. Mark that spot! Now, mark a diagonal line from that spot or higher, to just above the bottom outer corner. Cut that line now! (*fig. 3*) (Period **Option A**: see footnote!)

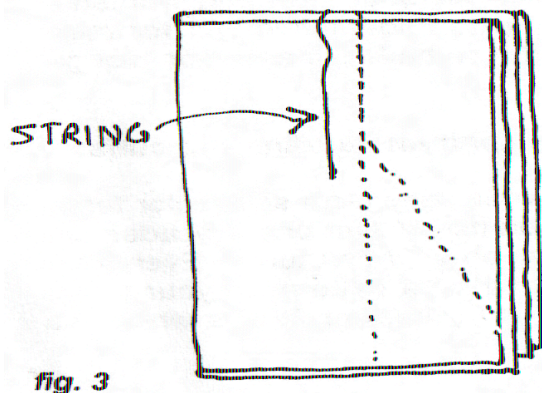


fig. 3

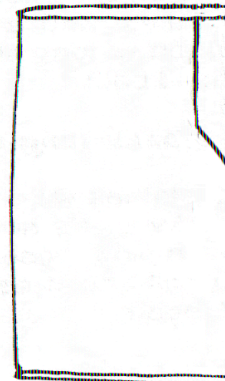


fig. 4

Now, take your string and wrap it around your upper arm, then add one hand-width to that length. Fold it in half once. Lay it on the fabric along the top fold. Put a pin there: that's your upper sleeve width. (Style **Option B**: see footnote) Take the string again, holding the end with one outstretched arm in the crook of your thumb and forefinger, and running it up to the nape of your neck. Subtract $\frac{1}{4}$ of the tunic width (the measurement in fig. 2), then lay the length of string along the open edge of the fabric, and mark the end. This is your sleeve length. (Style **Option C**, see footnote) Now, take the string and run it around your knuckles. Add two inches, and transfer that measurement to the fabric, from the open fabric edge at the end of the sleeve length. This is the cuff width. (*fig. 4*)

Now, pin or mark a line from the upper sleeve pin down to the wrist pin. Cut this out now. If making a short sleeve instead, measure length to elbow, and make the whole sleeve as wide as the upper sleeve width. (Handy and period layout **Option E**: see footnote) (Style **Option D**, see footnote)

Let's cut the contrast facing now. Cut one 16"-18" square (or longer for **Option G**) and two strips 4 or 5 inches wide and as long as your sleeve cuff circumference.

Now that you have all your parts cut out, let's construct!

Take the main body piece of your fabric, and mark the spot where the folds come together. Open the fabric out flat. (If the fabric has a 'good' and a 'bad' side, lay it out with the 'bad' side (the future inside) up.)

First, let's deal with the only really confusing bit: the neckline:

People's necks do not sit right on top of their shoulders, so we can't just cut a hole right in the middle! Instead, pick one side of your tunic to be the front, and snip a little hole two inches forward of the center fold mark. Take your square of facing fabric and draw a circle on it about 8" in diameter (look for a round salad plate, bowl, or plasticware to trace), then snip a little hole in the middle of the facing, too. (**Options F** and **G**: see footnote) Place the facing square onto the tunic body, 'good' side down, lining up the center holes. Pin it down really, really well. (**fig. 5, 6**)

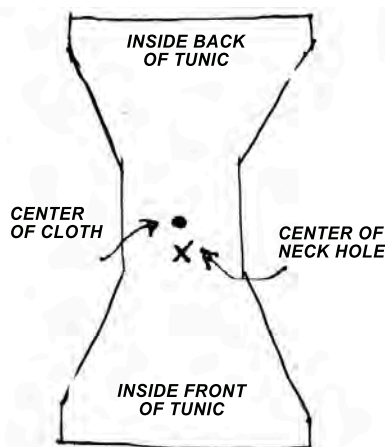


fig. 5

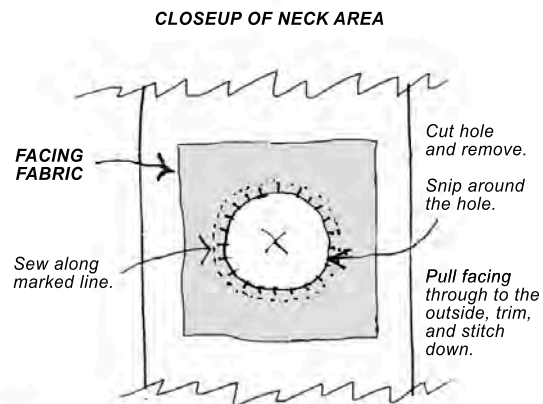


fig. 6

Now, we sew!

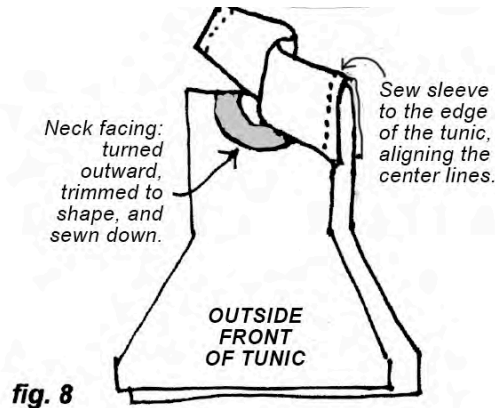
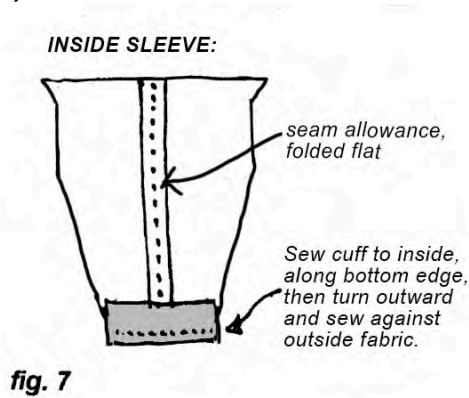
It's OK to use a sewing machine, though hand-sewing is often easier for this part, and is more medieval, too.

Start at the back of your neck-circle, and sew along the line until you get back to the starting point. Cut out the fabric, about 1/2" inside the sewn circle. (This margin is called the 'seam allowance'.) Then, snip little cuts into the seam allowance about a 1/2" apart, perpendicular to the circle like the rays of the sun. (Careful, don't cut through the thread you just sewed!) Now, pull it over your head. A hole this size usually fits everyone, but if it doesn't, sew around the hole a 1/2" further out, extend your snip-cuts to the new circle, and try again. Then, pull the facing through to the outside of the tunic and pin it in place.

It's time to trim the facing to size, now. Your facing can stay square, or you can trim it into a circle, 2"-4" wider than the neckhole. Iron it flat if you can, then sew the edges down. Be sure to turn the raw edges of the facings under, so they won't ravel. Consider doing it by hand - it's not that much work, and it looks so much better than machine top-stitching!

Find the sleeve pieces and sew the two halves of each sleeve together (if they were cut out in two pieces). Iron the seam allowances flat. Pin the cuff facings to the cuffs, with the 'good' side of the cuffs against the 'bad' side of the sleeve, and sew the facings along the cuff edge. (**fig. 7**)

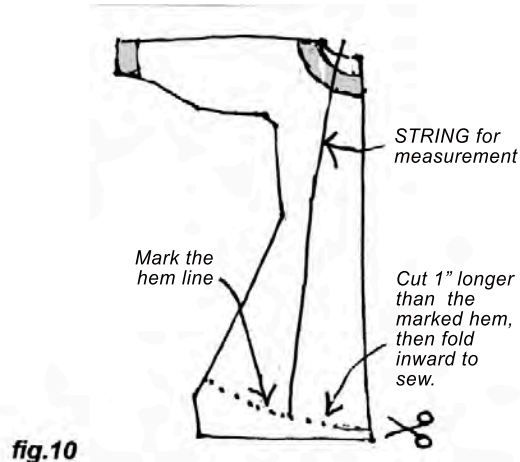
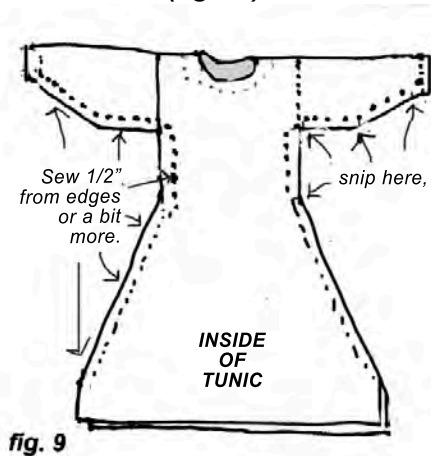
Now, fold the tunic body back in half across the shoulder, to find the middle. Line up the center line of the sleeve with the fold of the tunic, and pin the 'good' sides together. Sew that seam. (**fig. 8**)



Turn the tunic inside-out, with the 'good' sides together. Pin the side seams, starting with where the cuff facing attaches, then sew the side seams. At the armpit, don't make a sharp right-angle turn, but curve it a bit, to reduce stress on the seam. (Very Useful! Period **Option H**: see footnote) Snip cuts into the seam allowance everywhere the seam curves or bends, like under the armpit. Iron the seam allowances flat. (**fig. 9**)

Fold the cuff facings to the outside of the sleeve and iron them flat. Turn the raw edges of the facings under and sew the facings down by hand.

Turn the tunic right-side-out and try it on with a belt! Mark it one inch longer than you want. Fold the tunic in half lengthwise. Take your string and stretch it from the top corner of the fold down to the hem-mark. Pivot it outward to mark the arc of the hem. (Curved, not straight!) Cut on the line. Fold the edge of the hem upward to the inside twice, 1/2" at a time, so the raw edge is folded inside, then sew in place. It probably won't show much if you machine-stitch the hem, but it will look nicer hand-stitched. (**fig. 10**)



Narrow trim or bias tape can be applied to the edges of the contrast facings. Consider embroidering the facings for an even spiffier period look! (You can always do that later on.)

Footnotes:

Option A: Period fabrics were narrow – only the width of the body - so mark and cut your torso width line straight down, all the way to the bottom edge. Cut the remaining triangle you just marked (from waist to corner) as a separate piece, creating four 'gores' (triangles of cloth). When you start your sewing, sew each gore to the side of the tunic starting at the bottom, with the diagonal edge of each gore against the tunic (reverse of the way you cut it.) ('Good' sides of the fabric together!) Then sew the main side seam together starting at each cuff, as described in the text above.

Option B: For a more draped style (13th c.) add an extra two hands to the upper sleeve width. Use a wider (oval) neckline without the contrast facings, and for ladies, extra width in the skirt would be suitable. This can be added using gores (triangles of cloth).

Option C: for a short-sleeved tunic, measure length to the elbow or mid-forearm instead, and make the cuff the same width as the upper sleeve.

Option D: for a 'bliaud' (a very wide-sleeved tunic for any gender), choose elbow-length instructions (option C), and cut the lower sleeve separately from an extra amount of the same fabric. Cut the extra in a trapezoid, as wide as the upper sleeve at the top, as wide as you like at the bottom cuff, and anything from 8" to 24" as lower-sleeve length between them. Sew the trapezoid top to the end of the short sleeve, then proceed with the directions in the main text above.

Option E: In period, the sleeve would have had no lengthwise middle seam like this. Instead, each sleeve would have been cut from the width of the fabric in one piece. If you have enough fabric length, try it: fold the remaining fabric in half, and then again in the same direction, so the folds are all on the same edge, and the fabric is four layers thick. Lay out the sleeve using the folded edge in place of the open edge. More authentic, and less sewing later! This is great if your width is too narrow but the length is ample – just like period cloth!

Option F: If you don't want contrast facings, make your facing out of the same fabric as the rest of the tunic. Sew the facing to the front side of the tunic, then fold in to the inside and tack down, so it will not show later. You won't need any facings for the cuffs. This is typical, 1300-1500 a.d.

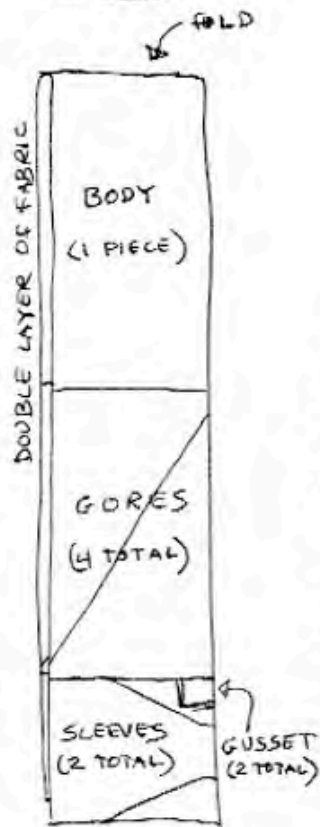
Option G: If you want a smaller neckhole, it will need a 'keyhole' notch in front, to be able to pull it on. Draw a smaller circle (around 6" diameter, but measure your own neck to be sure), and mark a straight line about 4-5" long straight down from the circle in front. You may need a more elongated piece of facing fabric to make it fit. When sewing the neckhole seam, sew down each side of the front cut, leaving a small seam allowance in the middle between the seams! The facing can be trimmed parallel to the neckhole, or may be round, diagonal, or square.

Option H: Period tunics had a clever way of preventing stress on the armpit area: they had an added piece of fabric – a gusset - set into the underarm corner of the tunic. It is a little more complicated than doing without, but well worth trying! Cut two 4" squares of tunic fabric. Sew one to the side edge of each sleeve, level with the top edge. Sew the sleeves to the tunic as described above, sewing the adjacent 90° side of the gore to the other side of the sleeve. This is actually easier to do by hand than by machine, at least around the area of the gore! You will end up with one square in each armpit, with the 'bias' (the stretchy diagonal direction) of the folded square gusset in place of the non-stretchy and right-angled seam described above. A modern compromise: cut the gusset into two triangles and attach to each side of the sleeves, then just sew the side seam straight on down: less stretchy, but easier to sew with a machine. Or, if you have enough modern fabric, cut a bit of flare into the shape of the upper sleeve width, as though the triangles were already there. Sew it with a zigzag, for stretch!



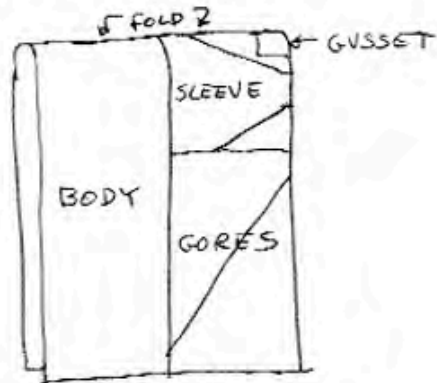
SOME LONG TUNIC LAYOUTS:

A PERIOD NARROW
FABRIC LAYOUT:
FOR THIS STYLE:



FACING + CUFFS

A MODERN WIDE
FABRIC EQUIVALENT:

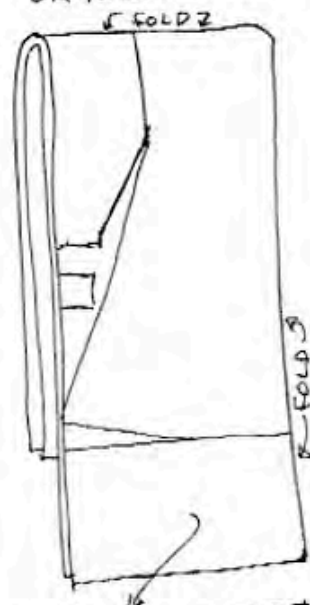


MODERN QUICKIE VERSIONS:

SMALL PEOPLE
OR WIDE CLOTH:



LARGE FOLK
OR NARROW CLOTH:



UN-FOLD EXTRA LENGTH
TO MAKE GORES
(IF DESIRED)