

Intro to Basic Garb Making

By Elizabeth Wren (mka Kristine Anderson)

Everyone needs to wear something to events, but if you're new, or if the only sewing you've done was that bag way back in middle school home-ec, then the task of filling your SCA-wardrobe can seem a bit daunting. Maybe you don't have a whole lot of money to spend on fancy clothes. Maybe you don't really know anyone yet that can explain to you about "period" clothing. For whatever reason, you (or someone you know and love – thanks mom!) have decided to try their hand at sewing garb. But, where to start?

Well, two things you'll want to start with are fabric and sewing techniques. Fabric being, of course, the stuff you're going to put on your body, and sewing, how it's going to get there. Then you'll want to explore what form that fabric is going to take.

There are four main fabrics that I recommend for making garb: linen, wool, silk, and cotton. They are by no means the only fabrics out there, but all four are made from natural fibers and 'breathes' well. Most man made fabrics have been created to wash and wear well, but a person can become overheated when wearing lots of polyesters, etc. This is especially the case with some of the pretty decorator fabrics that come with the plastic coating on the back. Solid colors are probably the best to go with, but take a look at a few examples of medieval art to get a feel for some of the colors used. You're probably not as limited as you think.

Linen is made from the flax plant, and is one of two of probably the longest used fibers in history. It seems to have been very widely used throughout the Middle Ages, especially by the lower through middle classes. This was probably because it was something that could be grown locally in many areas, and thus was more easily accessible to the lower classes for making clothing. Flax is also a fairly strong fiber, even more so when it's wet. So, linen can be boiled a lot with out being hurt, taking out some of the worry when dyeing and washing. Linen is very absorbent, but lets the moisture evaporate quickly. It was used for the layers next to the skin, like in chemises and shirts, because it 'wicks' away sweat. Very nice for when it's hot out, or you're doing lots of work. Unfortunately, linen wrinkles very easily. Also, can be harder to get a hold of now a-days, and can be expensive.

Wool was the second of the longest used fibers and comes from sheep. Sheep were kept all over, but England was especially known for their wool production during the later Middle Ages. Wool fibers are strong and elastic, and wrinkle resistant. They also absorb moisture, but retain it, instead of letting it evaporate. Even so, the crimps in the fiber create a natural insulation. This makes it good and warm for outer layers. Unfortunately, if it gets hot and damp, and/or agitated, the wool fibers will felt down and can become even one third of its previous size. So you need to be careful if you want to wash wool.

Silk was more expensive, since it came from the cocoons of silk 'worms' and was originally only obtainable from China. It wasn't until around the mid-6th century that silk worms were smuggled out to Constantinople, starting silk production in Europe. Silk is a very strong fiber, but becomes weaker when wet. Never the less, it takes dye well and can act as an insulator to both keep you warm or cool.

Cotton was hardly a widely used fabric in the Middle Ages, since it was only really grown in India, but does deserve mentioning since it is more available today. For those wishing to pursue authenticity, it is not a good choice, but, because of its availability and its usefulness, it can be an acceptable substitute. Cotton is stronger when wet, it can withstand repeated washings in hot water, and not only does it dye well, it can take the high temperatures needed for many darker dye colors.

To actually create your garments, one of the best places to learn about sewing (other than from someone who has sewing experience) is from one of the many books put out over the years by the big time pattern companies, like McCall's, Simplicity, Vogue, etc. Most local thrift stores will have a slightly used copy at some point or another, otherwise there is usually a good selection of sewing instruction books at public libraries. To help you get started, you should have a few tools in your collection: a good, sharp pair of scissors or cutting shears just for cutting fabric (paper dulls them); a box of pins to attach patterns to the fabric when cutting pieces out, or holding pieces together while you sew them; a flexible tape measure (not one of those metal ones from the hardware store) for taking your measurements and measuring out and around curves; and, well something to sew with. If you are going to do hand sewing, like in period, you only need a hand sewing needle and thread in a color to match close enough to your fabric. Otherwise you will need access to a sewing machine, but they can make sewing go much faster.

It's generally a good idea to wash your fabric before you cut out your pieces, since some fabrics, like cottons, will shrink a bit in the first washing. Always try to follow washing guidelines for the type of fabric you are using; you can get this at most fabric stores when you purchase your fabric. Another good tip is to read over all the instructions with whatever pattern you are using before you start. Also, try laying out all the pattern pieces on the fabric to get the best fit before you start cutting out one piece.

Once you have an idea of the basics, go ahead and figure out what it is you want to make. Take a look at others at events are wearing. Go through Medieval and Renaissance art books to get a better idea of what different styles were worn when and where. T-tunics are easy to make and can be made to cover a wide period with in the early middle ages. For basic patterns for the more structured, later period garb, Simplicity and McCall's have been putting out nice looking Medieval and Renaissance costume patterns that can be found in most fabric stores. Also, there are a few smaller press pattern companies putting out patterns, like AlterYears and Period Patterns.

Glossary

Linen: Fabric made from the fibers of the flax plant (*Linum usitatissimum*).

Wool: Fabric made from the fleece of sheep.

Silk: Fabric made from the spun threads of the cocoons of silk moths (*Bombyx Mori*).

Cotton: Fabric made from the fibers of the cotton plant.

Selvedge: The woven, finished edge of the length of fabric.

Garb: A term used with in the SCA to denote the Medieval 'clothing', or 'costumes' worn to events.

Resources

Buchanan, Rita. *A Dyer's Garden*. Loveland, Colorado, Interweave Press, Inc., 1995.

This book goes into a lot of detail about natural dyes and dye plants, but also contains lots of nice color pictures of natural fibers colored using natural dyes.

Ingham, Rosemary and Liz Covey. *The Costume Technician's Handbook*. Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1992.

A nicely in-depth textbook on sewing techniques mostly used to teach theatre costuming.

http://www.vertetsable.com/demos_basictech.htm

Basic sewing technique instructions found online.

http://www.virtue.to/guest_authors/archaeological_sewing.html

A good article on hand sewing techniques used in period.

<http://sca-garb.freeservers.com/>

The SCA-garb e-mail list website.

<http://www.sca.org.au/lochac/artsci/articles/style.html>

An interesting article talking about how to analyze different clothing styles worn in period.

<http://www.wga.hu/index.html>

A wonderful, searchable, website of Renaissance art.

<http://www.virtue.to/articles/>

A bunch of articles on making earlier period garb.

<http://costume.dm.net/>

A very extensive site with lots of articles and patterns on later making later period garb.