

Basic sewing skills

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Before You Start

Decide on a Project – Put some thought into what you want to make, your budget, and your current sewing skills. If you want to make garb, but are new to sewing and are on a budget, consider either a simple outfit (the ubiquitous newbie tunic) or a single garment that can be incorporated into a more elaborate outfit as your skills grow (a hat, apron, chemise, etc.). Consider how authentic you want to be and choose your pattern and fabrics accordingly. Take very careful measurements – ideally get a friend to help you.

Read and Understand the Pattern – Patterns (particularly commercial patterns) can be tricky beasts. Make sure you read and understand the pattern before you begin. It can be worthwhile to think through anything that is confusing or seems too good to be true (beware of “short cuts”). Double-check measurements. Consider making a mock up in cheap muslin if it’s a complex pattern, uses an expensive fabric, or is a fitted garment.

Deciding on Fabric

Fiber content – Whenever possible, use natural fibers. They are more authentic, safer, and more comfortable. Wool and linen (or bast fibers) were the most common fibers, silk was used in some places and becomes more common later in SCA period. Cotton is not common, but not unknown, and a good default if you can’t get linen. Upholstery fabrics can approximate late period brocades, but try to get them with some natural fiber content to prevent overheating.

Burn test – One to the tragedies of buying fabric is that the bolts sometimes lie. One way to test for the approximate content is to do a burn test. Cotton and Linen burn cleanly to a soft, dry ash and smell like burning paper. Linen tends to feel “cool” to the touch whereas cotton feels warmer. Silk will also burn to a similar ash but will have a “raw silk” type smell similar to the fabric before burning. Silk usually has a softer, more fluid hand than cotton or linen, but can easily be mistaken for things like rayon. Wool burns to a slightly oily ash and smells like burning hair. Synthetic fibers will melt as well as burn and produce a hard edge to the burnt section.

Fabric weights and hand – Choose fabric that is appropriate to your project. Is the final item flowing or structured? Is it meant to be warm or cool to wear? Think about the function of the garment and either choose a fabric of the appropriate weight or use appropriate interfacings and interlinings to make it the correct weight. Linings should be chosen to roughly balance the outer fabric to prevent either side from pulling strangely.

Purchase enough yardage – Make sure you buy enough fabric! It sounds basic, but make sure you purchase enough to take fabric shrinkage into account, to get all the pieces laid out, and to match patterns (if needed). If this is your first time making a pattern, it’s also not a bad idea to buy a yard or two extra for potential mistakes.

Preparing the Fabric

Wash and dry your fabric – If you ever plan to wash something, you should wash and dry it before you cut out your pieces. Generally, you want to do the worst case scenario washing and drying *before* you invest time in cutting and sewing the garment. For cottons and linens, wash in hot and dry until crispy (ideally twice).

Wools and silks can be washed in cold and line dried. Just remember to never use a hotter washing or drying method than you do so in this initial preparation or you risk additional shrinkage and potential seam distortion.

Ironing – If the fabric is wrinkly, iron it before you start cutting – it is a boring step, but will ultimately simplify your life immensely and prevent cutting accidents.

Right side and Wrong side – If the fabric has a right side and a wrong side, consider using a sharpie marker to mark “R” and “W” on the selvedge. Once you have pieces cut out, you may want to mark the right or wrong side with a chalk mark, a pin, or a piece of masking tape.

Nap – If the fabric has a direction or texture, consider using a sharpie marker to mark the direction of the fabric with little arrows on the selvedge.

Pattern – If the fabric has a repeating pattern, make sure you take it into account when cutting out pieces. Do you want to match the patterns? Where would it be important to do so (i.e. the front of a doublet)? Where is it less noticeable (i.e. shoulder seams)? How large is the repeat? Is the pattern the same upside down?

Seams

Choosing thread – Your sewing experience can be very heavily impacted by the type of thread you choose. Use a cotton-wrapped poly core thread for machine sewing, a silk or linen thread for hand sewing, and a heavyweight button thread for sewing on buttons, gathering stitches, and other places where you need extra reinforcement.

Waxing your thread – If you are hand sewing, waxing your thread with beeswax makes the experience much easier. The wax strengthens the thread, prevents it from tangling, and makes it easier to untangle when it does knot. Just run the thread over the cake of beeswax 3-4 times before threading your needle. Optional: you can also iron the waxed threads to set the wax.

Seam allowances – Generally, allow yourself between ¼ and ½ inch for a seam allowance. Places of heavy stress (pants crotches, armor) might need more and delicate areas (veil edges, neck holes) may need less. If you are using a commercial pattern, make sure to double-check what that pattern is assuming for a seam allowance. Many will use 5/8", but not all! Most SCA-period seam allowances are very small compared to modern seams!

Clipping curves – Making your curves lie flat is largely dependent on clipping your curves. If your seam is convex before the piece is turned inside out, cut out little V's since the fabric will be mashed together on the inside once it is turned and taking out this little bit of fabric will prevent bunching. If the curve is concave, little slits will do, as these will be spread apart once the piece is turned.

Cutting corners – One of the only places where cutting corners in sewing is a good idea is when you are literally sewing corners. As with convex curves, you want to reduce the amount of fabric that is being mashed into a small place. Leave enough material that the corner won't pull out and be careful when turning.

Finishing seams – seams that will be exposed on the inside of a garment should be finished. This prevents the seams from unraveling and can improve the appearance of the seam. Simply zig-zagging over the raw edges, like a serger does, is a good basic option, but consider flat felling, French seams, and tacking seams open as options to finish your seams. Try looking for these techniques on YouTube or on the Archaeological Sewing webpage (see below).

Blind stitching edges – putting in tiny little stitches along the edge of a seam helps keep the edges sharp and prevents weirdness from happening in the wash. Consider on hems and major body seams.

Useful Techniques

EMVS – Eithni's Magic Veil Stitch – this is a quick and easy stitch that will produce a very narrow rolled hem without the pain of using a roller foot or hand-rolling the hem. (See www.eithni.com)

Eyelets – Eyelets are a great alternative to grommets. They are more authentic, they don't damage the fabric and - best of all – you can move them or change them if you need to!

Lacing rings – Another option for lacing up garments is to use lacing rings. These small rings are sewn onto garments so that there is a free segment next to the edge of the fabric and the lacing cord runs through the rings.

Whipcording – Many people use lucet cords to lace their doublets, but another option is whipcording. It is a relatively quick and easy way to make a strong cord. You can use DMC floss and make a cord that will match any outfit you are making. <http://www.eithni.com/Whipcordingdemo.htm>

Handsewing vs. Machine Sewing

Handsewing takes additional time, but it can be done at events, in front of the TV, and in the car, and the results are quite satisfying! Further, the results often lay much more nicely and some techniques (eyelets, inset gores, etc.) are actually EASIER and often quicker when done by hand!

Resources

My website: I have various other sewing tutorials available. www.eithni.com

Archaeological Sewing: For authentic seam types. <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html>

YouTube: Whatever stitch or technique you are trying to learn, there's a video for it!