

Planning a garment

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Sewing a set of garb can seem like a huge undertaking, but it can be broken down into a few simple steps that will make the project seem more approachable and make it proceed more smoothly.

Do your research

There's nothing worse than spending a lot of time and money on a project just to find out that you missed some important detail or that someone had a much easier or accurate way of doing it. Spend a little time doing some research about the time period of interest. Look carefully at pictures of garments and at extant garments, if available. Check online for discussion groups about the time period or webpages devoted to the subject. It's one of the luxuries of the modern day that there are very few time periods where someone has not already done a fair bit of research and thanks to webpages, blogs, and email, you generally can ask questions of more experienced people. Talk to people and find out what the "gold standard" books are for the period(s) you are interested in.

Picking an outfit

Once you have done some research, pick out an example of an outfit you would like to make. You don't need to make an exact copy, but try not to mix-and-match too much until you understand the "grammar" of a style. Try to at least stick with the same country and the same century – mixing too many cultures and time periods in one outfit is likely to end tragically. Consider the status of your persona, the amount of money you would like to spend on materials and the amount of time you want to invest in making the outfit. When you are just starting out, it is generally better to begin with easier, cheaper, lower-class garments and practice patterns and techniques before working your way up to elaborate court garments.

Choosing your fabric

While it might be tempting to just go with the cheapest fabric you can lay your hands on, take some care in choosing your fabric. The fibers your persona would have had access to – generally, wool, linen, and silk – are good choices, not only because they are accurate, but because they will behave appropriately for your outfit. Even if you make substitutions, make sure they are made with care. Think carefully about the garment you are making – is it a structured garment, like a doublet? Then you should choose a heavier, sturdy fabric, like an upholstery fabric, since a cotton broadcloth is going to be too lightweight to hold its shape. On the other hand, if you are making a lightweight chemise, a very lightweight linen or cotton is appropriate and a heavier satin is going to give you too much bulk under your clothing. Consider the appropriate colors for your garments – a person of low status would not be wearing something in an expensive color or with gold metallic trim. Are there sumptuary laws for the time and place you are interested in that can give you clues as to your choices? Also think about how you will be using the garment - if you are going to be wearing it around open flame (campfires) or in the hot summer months, natural fibers are best since they smolder and burn instead of melting and they breathe so you do not overheat. If you have difficulty finding appropriate fabrics, contact Eithni for tips and tricks.

Start with the underwear!

It's often not the most interesting part of an outfit, but if you don't begin with the appropriate under-layers, your garb will just never look quite right. This is of greatest importance for later-period outfits, but even early period garb will look better when worn with the correct layers. If your outfit calls for a hoop and corset, then start with that hoop and corset!

Creating and testing a pattern

The very first rule of sewing from a pattern is simple: Patterns Lie. Even experienced seamstresses rarely get it right on the first try when working with a new pattern right out of the box. Therefore, it is important to try out a pattern before cutting it out of your good fabric. Buy some inexpensive fabric (or extra lining fabric) and tack the outfit together to test how it will look once it is put together. Make any changes you will need, like lengthening a doublet or shortening sleeves, on this initial pattern. If you make any major changes, cut a second practice pattern to confirm the fit. If you are unsure of how to fit your pattern, ask others in your group, or take it to an event and ask the local chatelaine who might be able to help you during the day.

Sewing the outfit

Be patient and use your resources! Especially if you are just learning to sew, it can be a long process, but it will be worth it in the end. Ask for help from people near you who sew or take it to an event and try to get some feedback from experienced costumers. People are generally more than happy to help if you only ask! If it is a technique that you are unsure of – try searching YouTube – there are many, many how-to videos for sewing and other craft skills.

Don't forget accessories!

In most places during the SCA period, even the poorest people would wear hats, shoes, and other accessories. While shoes can be expensive or difficult to obtain, they can also be sewn with some patience. Other accessories like headcoverings are much easier and probably even more important to the overall look of your outfit and often easier to sew. Go back to the images you used in your initial research – what accessories are common? Which can you make or buy?

Resources

- ❖ Lexis of Cloth and Clothing – clothing terms, definitions, and images from Britain, mostly from the high Middle Ages. <http://lexisproject.arts.manchester.ac.uk/>
- ❖ Stepping through Time - Olaf Goubitz - An excellent book on they types of shoes used through time and their construction - ISBN 9080104469
- ❖ Footwear of the Middle Ages - A very nice webpage on the shoes used in the SCA period <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/SHOEHOME.HTM>
- ❖ Elizabethan Costume Page – Drea Leed - <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/index.html>
- ❖ Viking Resources - Thora Sharptooth, OL - <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikresource.html>
- ❖ Fabrics-store.com – inexpensive linen – watch for sales and use the code “ILOVELINEN”
- ❖ Raymond's Quiet Press – for metal accessories for many periods - <https://raymonds-quiet-press.myshopify.com/>
- ❖ Atlantian MOAS links – links on pretty much any topic in the SCA, including costuming. <http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/>
- ❖ Google Scholar – go to Google, under “more” is Google Scholar. This filters out private sites and only returns hits from academic sources.