

Tailoring a Supportive Kirtle

For 1500's Europe

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Class Outline

- How do we define tailoring?
- What makes a 1500's Kirtle?
- Patterns: What to look for
- Structure of a Tailored Bodice: Top Fabric, lining, interlining/foundation
- Material Options
- Specific Techniques:
 - Bodice Front
 - Basting
 - Bust pocket
 - Acute-angle strap armscye shrink
 - Skirt Hem treatments
- Bonus: Construction Process from Start to Finish

What is Tailoring?

Tailoring: the process of manipulating the shape of fabric, often in hidden ways, to perfectly contour to the shape of the body. It is using stretching and shrinking to achieve a good fit, rather than expanding or contracting darts.

Kirtles in the 1500's



Orazio Gentileschi, *The Lute Player*. c. 1612 - 1615, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC



British School, *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*. c. 1545. Royal Collection Trust, UK



Funeral Dress of Eleonora di Toledo. c. 1560, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

Photograph © Jacqueline Chenault

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Pieter Aertsen. *Woman*. C. 1559. Private collection.



Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, *A Fête at Bermondsey* (detail). C. 1571. Private Collection, UK.

- The Kirtle was the basic women's foundational garment throughout Europe during 1500's.
- The general idea and techniques apply to different variations: the Sottana and Gamurra in Italy, the Cuerpo Bajo in Spain, and the foundation dresses in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and the Holy Roman Empire.
- Similar techniques can be used for some of the gowns that are worn over the kirtle, like the French Gown, the Venetian gown, Florentine gowns, and more.
- These garments share certain characteristics:
 - Fit close to the upper body and support the bust.
 - This support does not seem to rely on the straps of the garment to do the bulk of the work.
 - Have a low, often square neckline.
 - Close with lacing, either in front or at the sides/back side seams. Some are spiral laced, some are ladder-laced.
 - Have a waist seam (this is a distinct difference and evolution from medieval to renaissance women's kirtles).
 - Have an attached skirt which appears to be shaped (meaning the width of the upper fabric is smaller than that of the lower fabric), and gathered or pleated to the bodice.

Iterations on the Theme

- Early Henrican England: Soft torso, wrinkles under the bust, gentle point to emphasize the waist.
- Later Henrican England: Structured torso, triangular, giving a long lean look a la the portrait of Princess Elizabeth.
- Italian: Less pointed in the front for common folk/earlier styles. Florence and Venice each get pointed waists later in the period.
- Late Spanish: Narrow front point, probably with some kind of stiffener to get it to lay correctly.

Patterns: What to Look For

Whether you are drafting your own pattern from nothing, purchasing something from one of the Big Three pattern companies, or something in between, you will need a pattern of some form to begin working on a kirtle. Look for:

- **A pattern without darts.** Darts first start appearing in garments in the 18th century and didn't become truly commonplace for bust shaping until a significant time later.
- **Waistline at the natural waist.** You want the bodice waistline to generally finish at your natural waist. Modern patterns will sometimes go longer than this to give a look that seems more attractive in the mundane perspective, but if you let the waist get too low you'll see bad wrinkles and awkward proportions.
- **Consider acute-angle straps.** This one is a bit of a tailor's choice. The Spanish tailoring manuals published in the late 1500's show an acute angle in the strap. Properly handled, this angle creates a square neckline and a strap that stays up because Physics.

Pattern Resources

- **Margo Anderson's Historic Costume Patterns**

<https://margospatterns.com/>

Margo Anderson's 'Elizabethan Kirtle' as well as the 'Tudor Lady's Kirtle Bodice' are universal enough to be modified for most basic base garments of the era. She also includes some of the most specific and clear directions in how to modify the pattern to fit various body types I've ever seen. Margo is also very responsive online for those with questions or in need of assistance. For those who want a full-featured pattern, these are my go-to.

- **The Tudor Tailor**

<https://www.tudortailor.com/>

The Tudor Tailor books each have some form of a bodice draft, and their Etsy store is home to a set of graded patterns for a kirtle. The printed pattern is decent, though without the extensive fitting instructions given by Margo Anderson. That said, I am a great fan of the style lines for the basic kirtles published in their most recent book, *The Typical Tudor*. For a garment maker who is willing to make a leap in scaling and grading a pattern without a lot of hand-holding, or who happens to be close to the size used in their books, I suggest referencing *The Typical Tudor* heavily.

- **The Modern Maker**

<https://www.themodernmaker.co/support-garments>

For those who are interested in self-drafting and the Bara system, I never hesitate in recommending *The Modern Maker*. One of the patterns on the site is for the 'Cuerpo Bajo', or 'low body' - a basic bodice pattern. It works as-is for Spanish garments, but if you want to lean into other regions note that the bodice point usually needs significant adjustment to get the desired look.

Structure of a Tailored Kirtle Bodice

- **Top or fashion fabric.** Historically wool or silk in different weaves including damask and velvet. I'll also make a kirtle out of linen for reasons of expense and temperature. If your top fabric is particularly thin or fragile, you can *flatline* it to muslin or another fabric for stability and body.
- **Foundation or Interlining.** The magic layer - this is what gets the most manipulation and tailoring. Also referred to as the 'canvas'. Fabric options include heavy linen, canvas, horsehair canvas, paste buckram, and wool melton.
- **Lining.** Protects the stitches in the foundation, and allows the garment to shift and move slightly over the layers beneath. I tend to go for a linen or on occasion silk.

Material Specifics: The Top Fabric

Wool

- Suitable for most if not all of Europe throughout the 1500's.
- Wool - especially a fulled wool - can be an absolute dream to work with. It doesn't fray, is stable, is hard to get off-grain, and hides wrong stitches or wonkiness. It takes to steam shaping - both stretching and shrinking - beautifully. It also has a very nice drape, with some weight and stiffness on its own so that skirts have a certain amount of unescapable swish.
- Lighter weight suiting wools for the spring and fall, and *slightly* heavier weight ones for winter.
- Works for most classes, depending on the color and quality of the fabric.
- Favorite Sources: Burnley and Trowbridge, Renaissance Fabrics, Mood, Beckenstien's Men's Fabric in NYC (\$\$\$)

Silk

- A period upper-class option, especially in Italy or across the continent later in the century.
- Look for high-quality shantung (a little like dupioni but without the slubs) or taffeta. Silk Faille is another useful weave of silk with a more pronounced pattern of soft ribs. It has a bit more body and stiffness than taffeta.
- If you look *very* carefully you can sometimes find 100% silk brocades with the correct weight, but I've had the most luck sourcing solid color silks stateside.
- If working with very light silks, you may want to flat line the fabric with another, heavier weight material.
- Favorite Sources: Burnley and Trowbridge, Gray Lines Linen, Mood, Silk Baron, Renaissance Fabrics, Sartor (\$\$\$)

Linen

- I am not aware of linen being documentable as an outer layer on kirtles in-period, though we DO know that linen was used at the time in garments for linings and the like.
- Still useful for hot-weather garments. It is breathable and light, and will wick moisture well.
- Can be tricky to keep from going off-grain and getting wonky
- Not as forgiving of missed or odd stitches
- Doesn't steam shape very well on its own.
- Favorite Sources: Gray Lines Linen, Burnley and Trowbridge, Carolina Calicoes

Cotton

- Cotton DID exist in-period, but was relatively rare in Europe and not used for these purposes.
- Can be a good option on a budget, especially for mockups, test garments, or emergency "I want something natural fiber that I can get from my local Joann's".
- If the garment will be worn, I'll look for Kona cotton from Joann's - it is heavier weight and behaves a little more like broadcloth.

Polyester

- These tailoring techniques will NOT work well on polyester - the fabric cannot grow or shrink under steam even a little bit, and can melt if exposed to too much heat.
- Polyester doesn't generally look or hang right.
- Harder to make polyester look good and get a really excellent result.
- That said - if a polyester fabric is the perfect pattern and style, give it a shot!

Material Specifics: Interlining/Foundation/Canvas

Linen Canvas

- My 'stock' fabric for interlinings/foundations is heavyweight linen.
- Typically Gray Line Linen's 7.5oz "Warsa" weight linen.
- Might use in single or multiple layers.

Wool Melton

- Another fabric I keep in stock.
- Mid-heavy weight wool melton/coating weight wool
- Used for stiffening and structure.
- Need not be fancy or expensive! If it's fancy, has cashmere etc mixed in, probably not what I'm looking for.
- A little bit goes a long way.
- Sources: AK Fabrics in NYC, Mood, Burnley & Trowbridge

Horsehair Canvas

- A new-to-me option. I don't have a good sense of how historical horsehair canvas might be. Certainly horses were shedding in the renaissance and their manes could have been woven into canvas.
- Look for real horsehair, not synthetic.
- Note that you may not be able to grow/shrink horsehair for shaping. I am trying it in places where I might use wool melton, rather than as an all over interlining.

Paste Buckram

- Linen or other canvas, possibly stiffened with a hide glue.
- A tantalizing possibility to get stiffened garments before whalebone came into the picture.
- Has issues with sweat and rain as moisture re-activates the glue making everything soft.

Material Specifics: Linings

Handkerchief Weight Linen

- My go-to choice for linings.
- It's natural fiber, (relatively) cheap, and doesn't add a lot of bulk.
- It also presses beautifully, giving crisp lines on inner seams.
- For perfectly period, go with a neutral unbleached color. For a bit of fun, add a pop of color (though beware bleed into your undergarments!)

Silk

- Documentable and expensive.
- Can be useful in tight areas like sleeves.
- Can be a way to reuse leftover fabric from past projects

Tailoring a Supportive Garment

I've experimented with several options to add support to a bodice foundation. From least-most supportive, they are:

A Single Layer of Linen

- The simplest option.
- Relies entirely on any additional layers underneath and the the cut of the fabric to maintain its shape
- An option for wearers who do not need much support, or patterns that are well fitted under the bust.
- Kirtles, however, are usually a foundational garment or worn on their own so I often find I want more support than a single layer of linen provides.

Multiple Layers of Linen, padstitched

- Padstitched layers of linen work as one structure to support the body.
- You can pad stitch the entire front of the garment, or leave cup shapes at the top edge, similar to the boning pattern seen in surviving later-period exemplars.
- Gives a surprising amount of support in a light structure when properly fit to the wearer, especially with the cup pattern giving the bust a place to sit.

Sandwiched Linen & Wool, Padstitched - standard & boning-style

- Technique is to sandwich layers of linen and wool together and padstich them, increasing their structure and support.
- Two methods:
 - 'Standard', irregular spaced rows so that the fabric moves as one. Do it on a curve away from the body and the garment will have some structure on it's own.
 - 'Boning-style', straight lines either from top to bottom or following the patterns of late-period stays/bodies with a cup. Keep stitches even and regular. If done on an EXTREME curve 'away' from the body - IE over your finger as you stitch - and then pressed flat, the pad stitched layers form ridges much like boning channels.

- Both techniques add wool to the front of the garment. Keep that in mind when considering heat and temperature-worthiness of your garment.

Bones on the lacing edges

- With any of these techniques, you can add bones to the lacing edges, which adds additional structure and stability, preventing buckling at the laced 'seam'.
- Particularly useful for Venetian Gowns and back-lacing garments.
- Careful with front-lacing garments, the boning can make the underbust fit less snug and supportive.

Fully Boned

- A final option is to fully bone the garment. We only begin to see this a *little* very late in-period, generally as a separate 'pair of bodies'.
- Boning options include reed, synthetic whalebone, and zip ties. I'd avoid metal corset stays, as they are intended for different styles of garment and don't tend to work well for this scenario.

Specific Tailoring Techniques

Pad Stitching the Bodice Front

- Adds structure to the front of the garment.
 - Option for 2 or more layers of fabric in the bodice front.
 - Cut your additional layer(s) to the full pattern size in the front area, then grade them down.
 - The first layer should be reduced by your seam allowance, the other layers can step by the same amount or a little less.
1. Stack the layers and run a central basting line from top to bottom. This keeps all the layers together and centered. The graded layers face 'in' to the body, while the smooth clean front faces 'out'.
 2. With a long thread and the fabric curved away from how it will sit on the body (gentle curve for 'standard', extreme curve for 'boned' style), pad stitch from the center -> out. Don't be surprised if the layers shift as you are working - that means the stitching is working as expected.
 3. When you reach the edge, fix the loose end down with some whip or herringbone stitches. They do not need to be pretty.
 4. Repeat from the center -> out on the other side.

Basting the top fabric to the foundation

This technique ensures that your top fabric and foundation will move and behave as one through the construction process. When your garment is complete, remove any visible basting threads.

1. Lay your top fabric on the foundation and smooth it out.
2. For large pieces (front and back):
 1. Stitch up the CF/CB with a long basting stitch.
 2. Stitch out horizontally at the waist with a long basting stitch in each direction, from the center -> out.
 3. Stitch diagonally from the place where the waist and center line meet -> the edge of the garment with more long basting stitches

3. With a more regular, smaller basting stitch (but not tiny), sew around the outside of the piece, keeping outside your seam allowance if possible. Do this for all pieces - the large ones that have other basting and the small ones where these are the only stitches.
4. Moving forward in construction, treat these basted and flat-lined pieces as one.

Steaming a Bust Pocket

This technique adds a little room just in front of the armhole for the bust to sit, so it is not being pressed quite as forward and up. Mostly useful in wool garments, other top fabric doesn't tend to have as much stretch (though it still helps). If it doesn't make sense to you or doesn't seem necessary for your wearer, skip it.

1. After basting the top fabric to the foundation but before closing the side seam, bring your front side pieces to an ironing board.
2. Carefully, with lots of steam and heat, stretch the upper fabric just in front of where the armhole will sit. You are trying to add a bit of a 3D pocket to the area.
3. Be careful NOT to stretch the area UNDER the bust. This wants to be a place for the bust to rest, not slide down into.

Shrinking/Easing the Armhole for an Acute-Angle Strap

If your pattern utilizes an acute-angle strap, this technique will eliminate the bubble that can form in the armhole. This one is tricky and may take a few projects to get the hang of. You want to reduce the bubble WITHOUT adding tension to the outside of the strap.

NOTE: If you are not binding the armholes, this can leave visible stitching under the arm. Color matching and neat stitches will be your friend in that case.

1. Cut a piece of straight-grain material at least as long as your shoulder seam -> side seam line on the front piece of your garment.
2. Pick the start and end points of your gathering. If you are working with a Bara pattern, it usually starts a little above the level of the front opening, and ends past the C-siii 1/2 mark.
3. Pin the straight grain fabric to the basted foundation-and-top front piece outside the gathering start point.
4. Pinch together the foundation/top (NOT THE STRAIGHT GRAIN MATERIAL) between the two gathering points. You are looking to take out maybe a half inch, maaaaaybe. Pin the foundation to the straight grain strip at the gathering end point.

5. Ease the pinched material to the straight grain strip with your favorite method. I tend to use many pins to fix it all together.
6. Using a small, careful stitch (remember it may show!), attach the pinched material to the straight grain strip.
7. Steam the curve gently to work out any puckers.

Skirt Hem Facings

An option to add some stiffness and body to the hem of a skirt without fully lining it and wasting fabric or adding heat.

1. Cut strips of wool or linen to stiffen the hem, roughly the width of four fingers. You want enough length for the full circumference of the skirt.
2. Cut strips of lining fabric, wider than the stiffener, at least as long as the stiffener in total.
3. Steam a curve into the wool strips. This prevents awkward bubbling around the curve of the hem.
4. Fold the hem of the skirt up over the long edge of the curved wool strips. Baste into place.
5. Press the bottom edge of the lining up. Baste it into place along the skirt hem.
6. Wrap the top of the lining around the skirt. Pin or baste into place. You may need to fiddle or snip into curves to prevent bubbling as the lining was not shrunk.
7. Fell the bottom of the lining to the skirt, going through all but the outer fabric layer
8. Using careful, small stitches, fell the top of the lining strip to the skirt, taking stitches through both the wool and outer skirt fabric.

Construction Process from Start to Finish:

Construction Steps

1. If using more than one layer in your foundation, pad stitch the pieces together using your chosen method.
2. Baste the top bodice fabric to its corresponding foundation pieces.
3. Steam stretch the bust pocket.
4. Shrink the armscyes if you've cut your straps on an acute angle.
5. Sew the bodice seams. Depending on where your opening(s) are placed, these could be side, front, center back, etc. Leave the straps open on each side for now.
6. Fit the garment (assuming the wearer is available). Pin the straps and the lacing opening as best you can. Once you have confirmed fit, sew the straps closed.
7. Fold the bottom edge up to the seam allowance and baste or herringbone stitch in place. If you use herringbone stitch, take care not to go through to the fashion fabric.
8. Optional: Add small pick stitches on the outside of the garment along both sides of each seam, to hold the seam allowance in place.
9. Baste the lining into place and then fell it into place around the neck, opening(s), and armscyes. You can either sew the lining up along the major seams first OR baste each piece into the garment and carefully stitch them to the foundation. Leave the bottom several inches open if you are inserting a skirt. If you are adding sleeves, leave the armscyes open. You want to leave a slight bit of looseness in the lining - it should be able to shift a little on the body without the outer fabric bunching.

Adding the Skirt

1. Piece any skirt panels as needed and seam the full panels together. If you are using a lining, repeat this process with the lining and then baste the lining to the skirt. You may choose to pick stitch along any seams to keep them flat, and/or turn edges under or whipstitch them to prevent wear and tear if the top fabric tends to fray.
2. Finish any openings - IE for a front-lacing kirtle, finish the skirt fronts CF where they stay open.

3. If you want to add volume to the pleats, add a strip of wool to the top edge where it will be pleated and baste it into place.
4. An internal waistband is ONE way to attach the skirt to the bodice:
 1. Cut a length of fabric (for the internal waistband) about 2-3 inches tall and as wide as the natural waist of your bodice (the easiest way is to lay the strip along the garment itself, you want this to match the garment well). Mark critical spots along the strip: for example the middle, and if you want the skirt to be flat front mark how far around you want the pleats to begin. Often the bodice side seam is a good place for this.
 2. Line one corner of the skirt up with the internal waistband and pin. Pin it flat to the waistband up to the point where you want the pleats to begin. Repeat this on the other side.
 3. With a generous length of strong thread, begin sewing the skirt to the waistband with a strong backstitch.
 4. When you reach the pinned point, knot the thread to secure it at that point.
 5. Sew a gathering stitch along the top of the skirt (NOT the waistband) from that spot to the other pinned point.
 6. Gather the skirt along the gathering thread until it is compressed to the width of the space between the two flat points. Add several stitches to firmly attach the waistband to the skirt at that point.
 7. Go back along the waistband and backstitch the gathered skirt onto the waistband, with 1-2 gathers per stitch. You may want to pin the gathers in place along the waistband to ensure even distribution.
 8. Once you've finished attaching the pleats to the skirt, return to the loose end and continue attaching the 'flat' portion to the internal waistband.
 9. Fold the internal waistband upwards and press.
 10. Attach the internal waistband to the bodice canvas, leaving the lining free for now. In the back it should sit right at/above the edge of the bodice. In front/at the dip, it should go straight across with the skirt fabric flattened against the canvas.
 11. Stitch the bottom edge of the bodice lining into place.

12. Using careful, neat stitches, use a felling stitch on the outside to attach the skirt to the bodice bottom.

13. Use a felling stitch to secure the bottom edge of the lining.

Closures and Finishing the Skirt

1. Add closures to the garment. Eyelets, hooks, lacing rings - whatever you intend to use, this is the time to add them.
2. Put the garment on the wearer and check your hem length. If it is SIGNIFICANTLY long, this is the time to trim - but if it's within an inch or two, consider using a tuck to shorten it rather than just cutting it off. This is a period documentable solution.
3. If the skirt is lined, affix the lining to the bottom of the skirt and start on tucks. If you are going to add a facing instead, use the techniques from the tailoring section.
4. If your skirt is slightly too long, you can take a tuck. Anything larger than ~1 inch starts to bubble and behave oddly. Take the tuck and then stitch the loose edge down - it provides an added bit of structure to the skirt when all is said and done.
5. If you take tucks or find the hem treatment stitches show too much, consider adding a strip or two of contrasting fabric as a guard on the bottom. Black is the usual choice for this, often black velvet to show off your ability to afford such an expensive textile even if its just for trim. You can also just add a strip or two for style.

Material Sources

Burnley and Trowbridge (online, ships from VA)

Wools, silks, cottons, linens. Their focus is on Colonial garment making but their staff has resources and knowledge for medieval and renaissance construction as well.

Gray Lines Linen (online and in-person in NYC)

Linen of various weights (their Warsa is my go-to for foundation/canvas construction and their handkerchief is what I use for linings). Reasonably priced Shantung silk in a reliable and usually in-stock range of colors.

Mood Fabrics (online and in-person in NYC)

The big daddy of fabric stores. Gorgeous selection of silks and wools in multiple weights. Be careful with your checkbook in the men's suiting section - but if wool is what you are after, they probably have it.

Beckenstein Men's Fabrics (in-person in NYC)

Wool, glorious wool! High end wools that will make you drool and your budget weep - but this is the sleeper place to go for wool in NYC. For modern projects they have an amazing selection of more reasonable cotton shirting, but it's less useful for historical work like a kirtle.

Silk Baron (online and in-person in LA)

A wide range of silk taffetas and shantung. Some fabrics are one-of-a-kind so if you know you need something, move. They also have silk velvet, though it is VERY slippery and needs a stiffer backing to be really useful for our era.

Sartor (online or in-person in Europe)

Limited runs of historical patterns, sometimes in polyester and sometimes in silk of varying weights and styles. Often worth a peek, but costs can be quite high and shipping a challenge. If you fall in love with something it may be worth it, but not the place to go if you are on a timeline or a budget. Their linens and other fabrics are also high-quality but usually not worth shipping to the states unless you are also getting something really special in the same order.

About the Instructor

Mistress Marguerite Honoree du Cheneau came to the SCA through clothing. More specifically, she was a performer at the third-largest Renaissance Festival in the country and decided to start learning about the clothes so she could answer patrons' inevitable questions about the fabulous gowns she got to wear while performing. Once she had a copy of *The Tudor Tailor* in hand, she couldn't stop at research and started constructing - a farthingale, smocks, and French hoods were the first items on her table.

Shortly after her final year on the cast at the festival, she stepped up her garment construction skills - specifically her hand sewing skills - at a week-long workshop held by *The Modern Maker*. She constructed her first hand-sewn, truly period-accurate kirtle and was hooked.

Since then, she's constructed numerous kirtles, sotannas, gowns, and other garments based on these basic skills and techniques. She's experimented with different levels of support and structure, trying to understand and compare the support given to various body types and how it might match or contrast with some of the only real records we have from the time: portraiture.

She continues to work and experiment with the silhouettes of the 1500's, trying to understand how the garments might have been constructed. We will never know for certain - but by making, wearing, learning, and iterating, we can get ever closer to solving the same challenges in fabric and thread as those who came before.

Mundanely, Marguerite is a software developer and professional actress with a focus on classical and Shakespearean work. She lives in the Barony of Storvik in the Kingdom of Atlantia, (m.k.a. the District of Columbia) with her amazing goddess of a pup, Athena.

www.atelierdcheneau.com