

# EARLY 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY KIRTLES

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## Abstract

I based these garments on the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* and on extant garments from the Herjolfsnes finds. Each garment is made from 100% linen. The main seams are machine-sewn and finished, and all visible finishing (hems, ends of sleeves, necklines, etc.) was done by hand.

## Background

I drew my inspiration for this outfit from the June calendar page in the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. In that image, shown below as Illustration 1, two peasant women harvest grain. Each wears a long-sleeved white smock underneath a short-sleeved kirtle. The *Tres Riches Heures* dates from the early part of the fifteenth century; these garments continue to appear throughout the century. By the mid-1400s, women wore these garments with pin-on sleeves in a richer fabric (as shown in Illustrations 2 and 3); they also served as the foundation garments for houppelandes and Burgundian gowns (Vibbert).

There are a number of theories about the way these garments were constructed; I have come across three primary construction methods. The end goal in every case is to achieve a fitted garment, which is not possible with exclusively straight seams and geometric shapes as appear in earlier garments (tunics). The first two methods are based on a four-panel garment design; one of these methods uses straight front and back seams, while the other uses curved front and back seams.<sup>1</sup> The final method is based on the Greenland finds, and shapes the garment by including a number of long gores in the sides of the garment. Garments of this type are often referred to as “Greenland Gowns” or “10-gore gowns.” There are three extant garments that fit this rough model; they are all dated to the mid- to late-14<sup>th</sup> century.

## Construction

I made each of these garments from 100% linen. The smock certainly would have been made from linen during the medieval period; whether or not the kirtle would have been is a matter of great debate among costuming researchers. I believe that linen is a reasonable choice for this garment because short-sleeved kirtles are primarily seen either as the middle layer of three (smock, kirtle, gown), as Vibbert describes, or is worn by the lower classes or the middle classes in an indoor setting. Both of these dresses were made using the 10-gore design. The smock was slightly modified from Herjolfsnes 38, and the kirtle is a combination of Herjolfsnes 38 and 39. Illustrations 4 and 5 show these two garments. Each dress started out as a series of relatively geometric shapes: rectangles for the body panels and sleeves, triangles for the front and back gores and the sleeve gussets, and 8 “elongated triangles” (as pictured in Illustration 6) for the side gores.

The basic construction of each of these garments is the same. I did the bulk of the construction using a sewing machine because I was working on a fairly tight schedule to get the garments done. There is, however, no visible machine stitching; all lacing holes, hems, and finishing were done by hand. The first step was to insert the triangular gores into the front and back panels. I

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent side-by-side comparison of these two methods, see *La Cotte Simple* by Lady Marcelle de Montsegur (Tasha McGann).

then basted the front and back seams (leaving a bit open at the top front and back as the beginnings of the neck opening) as well as short shoulder seams (completing a crude neck opening). This gave me a tabard-like garment which I then put onto a dress form. With the body panels on the dress form, I was able to angle the shoulder seams to match the slope of my shoulder. I pinned these new seams. While I had the body panels on the dress form, I measured the distance from the shoulder to the bottom of the arm to get an approximation of where the top of the side gores should lie. I then basted together the sides of the dress (four gores each) down to about hip level and basted those panels onto the front and back pieces. I also basted the fitted shoulder seams.

At this point, the garment was “whole” in the sense that I could start to do the fitting. I put the garment back on the dress form and marked the neck opening, then cut the neck opening. With that done, I started to tighten the garment up. First I pinned the front and back seams so that they fit the curve of the bust and the spine. As I did this fitting, I made sure not to take these center seams in too much so that the curve would not disturb the lie of the center gores. Instead, most of the fitting happened in the side panels. I took these in a little bit at a time, making sure to keep the fitting relatively even across the gores. I also made sure to keep the fitting relatively even from side to side; to do otherwise would have pulled my front and back seams off-center. Once I had the garment completely fitted to the dress form, I marked the center front seam and removed the pins in order to get it off of the dress form. I then machine-based these new seams, leaving the front open so that I could get the garment on and off. Only then did I try it on. As it turns out, my dress form actually mimics my shape rather well, so very little further fitting was necessary. I finalized the fit of the neckline and shoulder seams and cut the curve of the armhole. Then I removed the basting and sewed and finished all of the seams. I left the seam allowances large so that should I need to let the dresses out sometime in the future, I will be able to do so. I attached the sleeves, lining up the top seam of the gusset with the shoulder seam (thus making the gusset sit on the back of my arm). Each garment then laces up the front. For the smock, I attached facings to the inside of the front opening and then worked 36 eyelets (by hand) through which I run a white silk lucet cord. For the kirtle, I attached 50 small split rings to the inside of the front opening. I spiral-lace the garments from bottom to top and “lock lace” them at the top to hold them in place, running the excess cord down the inside of the dresses.

What I have described above is actually the *ideal* of how I constructed the garments. In fact, I had to do some creative problem-solving in the process. For the smock, I discovered before cutting out the garment that I had slightly less white linen for the project than I had thought. With careful cutting and piecing, I was able to cut the entire smock from approximately 2.5 yards of 60” linen. In order to make this work, I had to piece the center front and back gores (sewing two right triangles together on their “straight” edge to create one isosceles triangle) as well as the sleeves (rather than being one piece, each sleeve is actually three – a front, a back, and an attached “cuff”). I’m confident that this sort of piecing happened during the medieval period as well. In constructing the kirtle, I cut the neck hole too large on the first attempt. Rather than attempting to re-attach fabric (which would have been difficult and messy), I simply “shortened” the kirtle by moving the shoulder seams down and re-fitting the garment, then re-cutting the neckline.

### Reflections

In part, this project was an experiment to see if the Herjolfsnes garments could be made to be supportive. The short answer to the question is, “sort of.” I do get sufficient bust support from

the gowns, but they cannot be used to *maintain* the high bustline that appears in many of the period illustrations (I can create it, but it lasts about 5 minutes as long as I don't move my upper body at all).

Illustrations



Illustration 1: The *Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry*, June.



Illustration 2: The Birth of Mary



Illustration 3: van der Weyden. Mary Magdalene.

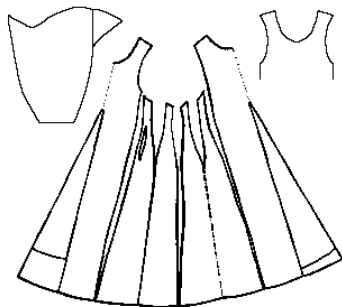


Illustration 4: Herjolsnes 38 (Drawing by Marc Carlson)

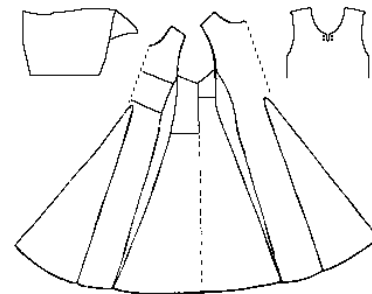


Illustration 5: Herjolsnes 39 (Drawing by Marc Carlson)

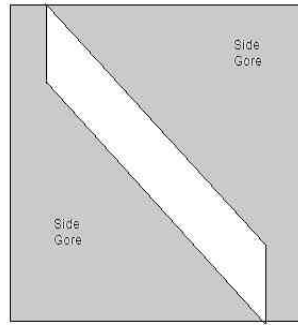


Illustration 6: Shape of the side gores



Illustration 7: Completed Garments  
L: front view; C: back view; R: view of side gores

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