

RAPIER ARMOR IN THE STYLE OF A 13TH CENTURY LADY'S TUNIC

Alianor of Ravenglass

Item #67P

Abstract

The traditional 4-gore tunic pattern was modified to serve as sufficient armor for rapier combat in the East Kingdom. The primary modification necessary was the addition of a “turtleneck” to cover the fencer’s neck. The tunics were constructed using heavy linen (which passes a punch test) and machine sewn with cotton and cotton/poly thread. Most visible finishing was done by hand.

Background

Rapier combat as it is practiced in the SCA did not exist in the 13th century and certainly a lady of that time would not have participated in combat activities. Since I (Sarah Ford) do fence, however, I would like to be able to do so while looking as much like my persona (Alianor of Ravenglass) as possible. To this end, I have designed and constructed garments that give an accurate 13th century look while functioning as armor for rapier activities in the East Kingdom.

13th Century Women’s Tunics

The tunics worn by women during the 13th century were long, flowing garments. Women’s tunics are generally pictured as long-sleeved and have quite modest necklines and were worn either belted or loose. Tunics are often pictured as being worn layered one on top of another. See Illustrations 1-5 for examples of women’s tunics of the era.

Each of these tunics consists of a number of geometric pieces: two rectangular body panels, two sleeves (rectangular or trapezoidal), square gussets to allow full range of movement in the arms, and four triangular gores, one in each side seam and body panel (see Illustration 6). This type of tunic has been called “Nockert Type I” and dated to the 13th century (Carlson 2000).

Rapier Armor Requirements of the East Kingdom

The most important consideration in constructing fencing armor is whether or not it meets the safety standards of the East Kingdom. The relevant requirements follow.¹

- No skin shall show anywhere on the fighter’s body, regardless of the position or stance of the fighter.
- The entire torso (the chest, back, abdomen, groin, and sides up to and including the armpits) must be covered with puncture resistant material. (Puncture resistant material is any fabric or combination of fabrics that will predictably withstand puncture. The material used for these tunics has passed a 4-punch test, the standard test for fencing armor in the East.)
- The rest of the head and neck [not covered by the fencing mask] must be covered by at least puncture resistant material. The bib on a modern fencing mask is not sufficient by itself.
- Abrasion resistant material is required on the arms (save as noted above) and legs and any other area not otherwise mentioned in these rules. (Abrasion resistant material will withstand normal combat stresses (such as being snagged by an unbroken blade) without tearing.)

¹ East Kingdom rapier combat rules can be found at <http://www.eastkingdom.org/fencing/combatrules.html>.

The tunics I have constructed, when worn with other protective gear (a gorget and something on my legs) fill all of these requirements.

Adapting 13th Women's Garments for Rapier Combat

Obviously, reproductions of the tunics that appear in contemporary illustrations will not be sufficient as fencing armor. Depending on the material used in construction, the garments might or might not pass a punch test. Additionally, while the garments of the period are generally fairly high-necked, their necks are not high enough to conform to the requirement that no flesh be exposed. Even while wearing a gorget and fencing mask with attached hood, there is the risk that the wearer's neck will be partially exposed. The hems fall at about the ankle; this is the same length of "walking dresses" of the period (rather than the long indoor dresses that are usually depicted in illuminations).

As constructed, this armor consists of two tunics: one with a high neckline and an overtunic of standard construction. Both are of the four-gore style described above. For the high-necked tunic I simply attached a triple-layered 3-inch wide "turtleneck" to the neckline rather than simply turning a hem or using a narrower facing. See Illustrations 7 and 8 for early sketches of this armor.

Each of these tunics is made from 7.1 oz linen; those two layers are sufficient to pass a punch test. They were machine-sewn using 100% cotton thread in the case of the white tunic and cotton/poly thread in the case of the yellow overtunic (as I was unable to find 100% cotton thread in the right color). The seams were finished by using a zigzag stitch over the raw edges. Hems, sleeves, and the neckline on the yellow tunic were finished by hand. Under normal circumstances I try to do all visible finishing by hand; in the case of the three-layer "turtleneck" on the white tunic, I felt that machine stitching was necessary for durability. In the 13th century, of course, all of the stitching would have been done by hand with linen thread. Where I chose to use the machine, I did so because I need the garments to stand up to extreme conditions; rapier combat puts quite different stresses on clothing than does even heavy everyday use. I decided that I did not trust my hand-sewing ability enough to make armor that would not need to be repaired after every tournament or, worse yet, fail in the midst of a bout, thus leaving me unarmored in the lists.

I currently wear this armor with a modern T-shirt and a pair of long underwear or leggings underneath. The T-shirt is necessary to keep something between my plastic chest protector and my skin; the legwear is necessary to protect me in the event that a blade somehow manages to get under my skirts.

Reflections

The next time I construct a set of rapier armor, there are a few things that I will do differently. To begin with, I am planning to make a third tunic to wear with this armor; it will be made from a lighter linen and will serve a number of purposes. First, it will eliminate the need for a T-shirt underneath the armor (I will simply wear my chest protector on over this bottom-most tunic) which will make the armor considerably cooler to wear. Second, while the armor as it exists now passes East Kingdom armor standards, the fabric will weaken each time it is washed. An additional layer will prolong the life of these tunics as fencing armor. Additionally, I have discovered that this armor provides significantly less protection in terms of padding and preventing bruises than does a modern three-weapons jacket; an added layer of fabric will mitigate this problem.

I also miscalculated when I cut the neckline on the high-necked tunic; I made it a bit too big. This has had mixed results. Because of the larger neckline, I am able to simply slip the tunic on over my head; the split neckline with the panel behind it was intended to allow room for my head to pass

through the high neckline, which is now unnecessary. The larger hole also means, however, that I must always wear a gorget when fencing: the neckline of the tunic is not snug enough to cover my entire neck.

Despite these minor problems, I am quite pleased with this fencing armor and have found it quite easy to use in combat, even in small (roughly 5-on-5) mêlée situations.

Illustrations



Illustration 1: A lady wearing a belted tunic.
Manesse Codex.



Illustration 2: A lady wearing two layered tunics.
Manesse Codex.



Illustration 3: Queen Edith's Coronation. She wears layered, unbelted tunics. Life of Edward the Confessor.



Illustration 5: Mary wears a very long tunic; the lady on the left has a more moderate (floor length) hem. The Murthly Hours, Folio 91v.

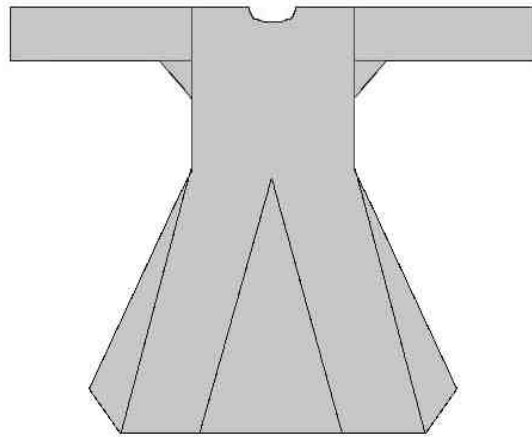


Illustration 6: 4-Gore Design and Assembly

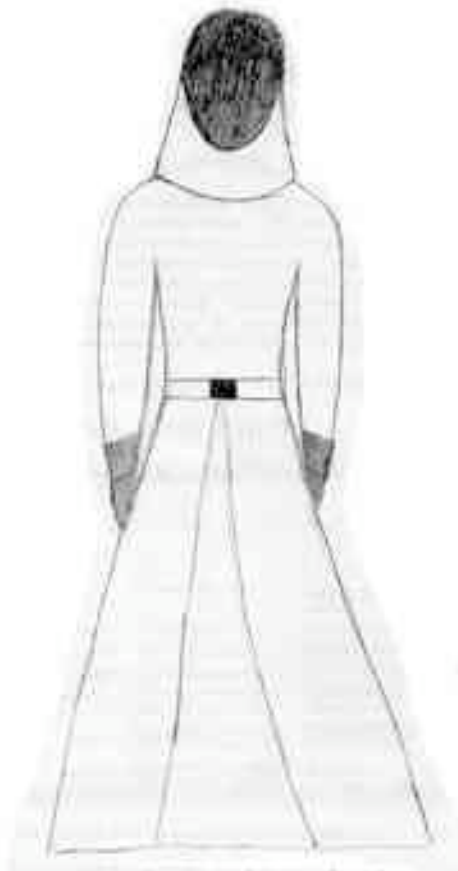


Illustration 7: Initial Sketch of Armor



Illustration 8: Initial Sketch of Undertunic



Illustration 9: The Armor in Action



Illustration 10: The Armor in Action

Resources

(~1280). The Murthly Hours: National Library of Scotland.
<http://www.nls.uk/digitalibrary/murthly/index.html>

(~1425). Manesse Codex: Tempora Nostra. http://www.tempora-nostra.de/manesse/manesse_start.shtml

Carlson, I. M. (2000). Some Clothing of the Middle Ages: I. Marc Carlson.
<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html>

Paris, M. (~1250). The Life of St. Edward the Confessor. <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/MSS/Ee.3.59/>