

MAKING A SIDELESS SURCOTE¹

Prepared for the Borough of Munt Halig Actreo, Barony of Bergental, East Kingdom.

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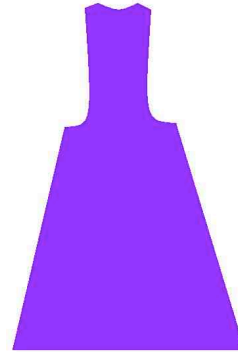
Introduction

My research shows that the garment commonly called a “sideless surcote” was worn in France and England from roughly the end of the 13th century through (again, roughly) the middle of the 15th century, although the details of its shape change quite a bit over that time. A similar garment was worn in Germany during the early 14th century (and possibly much longer, but I focus on England and France so I haven’t looked at nearly as many pictures of German clothes). At the early part of this timespan, the surcote was basically a tunic without sleeves and slightly lengthened arm openings, and was worn over a tunic. At the later part of this period, they became “gates of hell” garments and were worn over a fitted kirtle (often called a “cotehardie” in the SCA).

Basic Shapes



Early (13th – early 14th century) Sideless Surcote (also called a cyclas)



Late (mid-15th century) Sideless Surcote

As you can see from these illustrations, the basic principle of the early and late garments is basically the same: it’s a sleeveless overgown. It would almost certainly have been worn as a third layer – over a smock/chemise and a tunic/kirtle. The cutting and construction of the two is also very similar, as well as being similar to the construction of a tunic (only without sleeves). As time progresses through this period, the body panel (called a “plastron”) gets narrower and the arm openings get lower, so any version between the two pictured above is fair game.

Fabric Choices

Both the early and the later versions of this garment will hang better if they are made with a relatively heavyweight fabric. In period, they would have been made from wool or possibly silk brocade. If you want to use a lighter-weight fabric, I strongly recommend lining the garment. The plastrons of the “gates of hell” variety were occasionally lined in fur!

Cutting Out the Garment

Each of these garments consists of body panels and trapezoidal gores to lend fullness to the skirt. For the earlier version, the body panels are rectangular; I recommend using a rectangular piece as the basis for the later ones as well. You will need the following measurements:

1. Shoulder to floor (or however long you want the gown to be)
2. “Torso” circumference (I recommend your under-bust measurement for early and your hip measurement for late) plus 2 – 3” of ease.

3. Shoulder to wherever you want the arm holes to end. For the earlier garments, this should be fairly close to the armpit; it gets lower as time goes on. By the 15th century, it is below waist-level.
4. Torso at the point of measurement 3 plus 2 – 3” of ease.

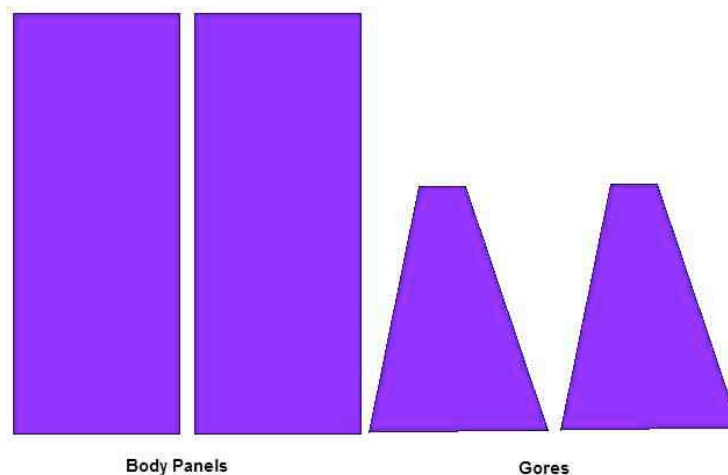
(For later-period surcotes only)

5. The distance from shoulder to the bust
6. The width of the plastron at the shoulders
7. The width of the plastron at bust-level

With these measurements, you can figure out the size of your pieces. Where necessary, I've added an inch or two for seam allowances ($\frac{1}{2}$ ") and hems ($1 \frac{1}{2}$ ").

- Body panels
 - Length = measurement #1 + 2” (or, in English, your shoulder-to-floor measurement plus two inches of seam & hem allowance)
 - Width = (measurement #2 / 2) + 1” (your torso measurement divided by two plus one inch of seam allowance)
- Gores
 - length = measurement #1 – measurement #3 (the body panel length minus the length of the arm hole)
 - width (bottom) = depends entirely on how full you want the skirt to be. The skirt of your surcote should be at least as full as the skirt of the garment you're planning to wear it over.
 - width (top) = $\{[(\text{measurement \#4}) - (\text{measurement \#2})] / \text{number of gores (2 or 4)}\} + 1$ ” (the difference between the width of your body at the point that the arm holes end and the body panels, divided by the number of

You should cut 2 body panels and 2 or 4 gores (all to be placed in the side of the surcote). They will look like this:

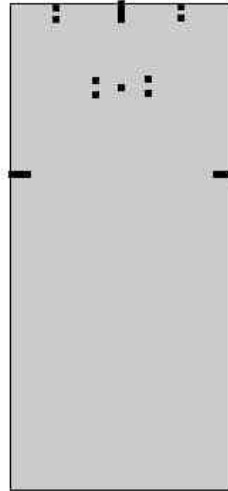


If you are planning to make a 13th or early 14th century surcote, skip ahead to the section on Construction.

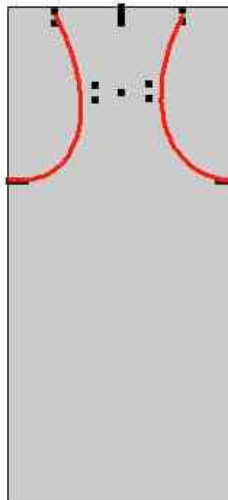
If you are planning to make a later surcote, you still have some cutting to do.

For the later surcote, now is the time when you will want to shape the plastron of your surcote. Measure from the top of each body panel and make a mark at whatever your measurement #3 (the length of your arm holes) was. Then find the center of the body panel. Mark this at the top

and at measurement #5 (shoulder to bust) down from the top. Based on that center line, mark the width of the plastron at the shoulders (measurement #6) and at the bust line (measurement #7). Be sure to remember to mark half the measurement from the centerline or things will be twice as wide as you intended! Once you have all of these measurements marked, your body panels should look like this:



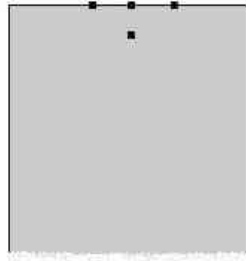
The next step is to mark out the curve of the plastron & arm hole. The goal here is to get a shape that is pleasing to the eye BEFORE cutting! Your markings should look like this:



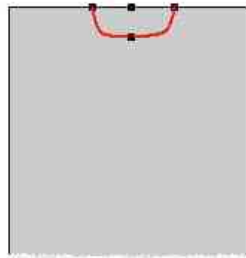
Make sure you're *really certain* of this line before cutting! Remember that you can always take more fabric away, but it's hard to put it back on. I would recommend folding each body panel in half lengthwise and making only one cut to ensure symmetry.

Construction

The first step in constructing these garments is to mark and roughly cut the neck opening. For a close-fitting neckline, find your neck circumference and add roughly an inch to it. Then divide that number by 6. This gives you the radius of the circle you want to cut for your neckline. Find the center top of each body panel and mark this measurement on either side of it (remember, radius is the distance from the center of a circle to its edge). Then mark the same distance down from the center top edge on both body pieces. The end result will look like this:



Now *carefully* cut a slit down to the marked point on the front and back body panels. Pin or baste the top edges from the marked points out, and see if the neck opening is big enough. If it is not, adjust your slits (I recommend having your neckline lie slightly lower in front than in back) and pins/basting until it does fit and is the size that you want. Once you've got this figured out, carefully mark the neckline (by drawing a smooth curve connecting the marked points) and cut it out.



Once the neckline is cut, you need to sew your shoulder seams. On a tunic, the shoulder seams are parallel to the ground and the weight of the sleeves pulls them down so that they lie against the shoulder. A surcote, however, does not have the sleeves to force the shoulder seams to lie on the shoulder. Because of this, you have to tailor the shoulder seams to the slope of your shoulder. (I learned this from experience – my first surcote has little gaps where the shoulder seams kind of stand up on their own above my actual shoulders!) This tailoring is easiest if you have a friend to help you, but it's also possible to do solo. First, baste or securely pin the body panels together using a "normal" $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance and put on the garment. If you're working with a friend, have that friend pin or baste the shoulder seams a second time, this time so that they lie smoothly along your shoulders. If you're working solo, look in a mirror. Try to eyeball the slope of your shoulders. I *do not* recommend trying to pin these seams while you're wearing the garment, as the motions necessary to do so will distort the line of your shoulder. Remove the garment, pin or baste it, and check your work. Continue until you're satisfied with the fit. Trim the excess material and sew the shoulder seams. It should end up looking something like this:



The next step is to attach the gores to the body panels. To do this, find the length of the sides of your gores. If your gores are slightly uneven, use the *smallest* measurement. Measure this

same distance up from the bottom of your body panels and mark that point. Line the top of the gore up to this mark and sew it on. Repeat until the gores are all attached.

Once the whole thing is together, you'll need to finish all the raw edges (neckline, armholes, hem). There are a number of ways that you can do this. The simplest is to simply roll a hem (turning the material twice so that the raw edges are completely encased) and stitch it down. For the armholes and neckline, another option is to turn the raw edge under and then apply bias tape over it. There is historical precedent for a similar technique using strips of fabric cut on the grain with their raw edges turned under. If you use this method, your strips should not be more than 1/2" to 3/4" wide after you've turned the raw edges under (otherwise they won't lie smoothly around the curves). For the hem, simply even out the hem (if your gores didn't all line up properly) and turn it up and sew.

Resources

The Maciejowski Bible (for 13th century French surcotes).

http://www.medievaltymes.com/courtyard/maciejowski_bible.htm

The Life of King Edward the Confessor (13th century English surcotes, mostly on men and over armor) <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/MSS/Ee.3.59/>

The Manesse Codex (for early 14th century German surcotes). <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/cpg848>

The Luttrell Psalter (mid-14th century English).

<http://www.redruth.cornwall.sch.uk/departments/History/lutt/The%20Luttrell%20Psalter%201345.html>

Jean Froissart, Chronicles. (15th century, Flanders).

<http://www.bnf.fr/enluminures/manuscrits/aman4.htm>. See "Isabella of Bavaria welcomed by Charles VI" and "Marriage of Richard II of England".

Grandes Chroniques de France (14th century, France).

<http://www.bnf.fr/enluminures/manuscrits/aman5.htm>. See "Birth of Saint Louis" and "Charles IV and Jeanne of Bourbon"

Carlson, Marc. Some Clothing of the Middle Ages. (for extant garments)

<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html>

Lady Jehanne de Wodeford. The Sideless Surcote. (another construction method).

http://www.geocities.com/wodeford/sideless_surcote.htm

Thursfield, Sarah. The Medieval Tailor's Apprentice: Making Common Garments 1200-1500. © 2001, Quite Specific Media Group.

Houston, Mary. Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th, and 15th Centuries. © 1996, Dover.