

EARLY 14TH CENTURY WOMAN'S CYCLAS

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Abstract

This cyclas was constructed of linen using polyester thread. The pattern was developed based on an extant garment, commonly known as Herjolfsnes 37; modifications were made to give the garment a train and longer arm holes. The neckline and side openings are finished in black linen. The color is one that could have been achieved using either madder or brazilwood.

Background

The cyclas is a sleeveless overtunic initially worn by soldiers over their armor (see Illustration 1). It came into common civilian by the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century (See Illustrations 2 and 3). Because this particular example is made entirely of linen, it would have been worn by a member of the middle class. The train is also fairly short, whereas that of a woman of greater means would likely have been much longer.

Construction

This example consists of four main pieces: a back, a front, and two side gores, and is consistent with similar garments found in the Herjolfsnes excavations (see Illustrations 4 and 5). To form the train, I cut the back piece 12" longer than the front and made the gores asymmetrical to accommodate the difference in length. In the Herjolfsnes garment, the gore looks like a triangle with a "V" cut out of the top point to form the armhole, whereas mine is flat across the top and the back leg of the triangle is elongated to form a smooth shape around the hemline. (See Illustration 6 for the cutting layout of the garment and an illustration of the shape of the gore.) I constructed the cyclas using heavyweight linen, with roughly 10x10 threads/cm. Finer linens found in the London excavations and dated to the latter half of the 13th century had roughly 22 warp and 20 weft threads per inch. These examples were likely used in making underwear, linens, and headpieces.¹

I assembled the cyclas using French seams, which are not documented as early as the 14th century. There are relatively few surviving linen garments of the period, however, so we cannot be absolutely sure that this technique was not used. In period the cyclas would have been stitched by hand with linen thread. I sewed the long seams by machine due to time constraints and to ensure the durability of the garment; I used polyester thread because linen is beyond my mundane means. All finishing stitching (the facing on neck and armholes and the hem) was done by hand using double-folded hems and a hem stitch. While most evidence of double-folded hems is on silk garments², this linen is *very* prone to fraying and so it seems likely that the technique would have been used in this case as well.

The neckline and armholes are finished in contrasting (black) linen. Early evidence of this "look" is found in the manuscript of The Life of King Edward the Confessor. In Illustration 1, King Sweyn wears a cyclas that is clearly edged around the neckline and the armholes, although it does not appear that the edging is a contrasting color. I simply finished the neckline by binding it with a narrow strip of linen folded in half over the edge with the raw edges turned under. I

¹ Crowfoot, E., Pritchard, F., & Staniland, K. (1992). *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150 - c.1450*. London: HMSO.

² Crowfoot, E., Pritchard, F., & Staniland, K. (1992). *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150 - c.1450*. London: HMSO.

finished the armholes using a technique similar to the “reverse facings” commonly seen on the necklines of tunics. I stitched a narrow band of black to the raw edge of the arm hole, then turned it such that the raw edge fell between the facing and the main garment. I turned the raw edge of the facing under and stitched it down. This technique is plausible for this garment because it uses half as much fabric as method used on the neckline. Since contrasting edging was often made of more expensive material than the main garment, it makes sense that a person would want to conserve it as much as possible.

Color

The red color of the cyclas is one that can be achieved using dyes available during the 14th century. It seems most likely that this color would have been created using madder, which produces a “warm brick-red” or brazilwood, which was available beginning in the late 12th century. Another possibility is kermes but it is unlikely that it would have been used for this garment both because kermes produces a more scarlet color and because it was quite expensive. See Illustration

Reflections

In general, I am quite pleased with this garment, since it is based on my first entirely original pattern. I brainstormed the pattern very quickly after seeing images of Herjolfsnes 37 online, and did not have to modify it much in constructing the final garment. I would, however, not make the contrasting facings on the cyclas the same color as the tunic I intend to wear it over, since this just makes the contrast fade into the background. I would also probably narrow the bindings on the neckline and armholes to more accurately reflect the examples found in the London excavations. Finally, the shoulder seams would benefit from being fitted to the slope of the wearer’s shoulders so that the garment lies flat along the shoulder line rather than standing up a bit as the shoulder slopes down. This gap appears in Illustration 1 but is not present in images of women wearing the cyclas (Illustrations 2 and 3).

Illustrations



Illustration 1: Cyclas on King Sweyn.³



Illustration 2: Gawain and a Lady.⁴

³ Paris, M. (~1250). The Life of St. Edward the Confessor. Folio 4r, King Sweyn's oppressions. The flight of Queen Emma to Normandy with her two young sons.

⁴ Crowfoot, E., Pritchard, F., & Staniland, K. (1992). *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150 - c.1450*. London: HMSO.



Illustration 3: Manesse Codex Plate 20



Illustration 4: Extant Garment, Herjolfsnes 37⁵

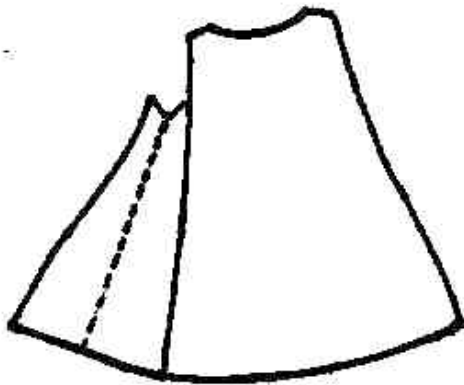


Illustration 5: Line Drawing of Herjolfsnes 37⁶

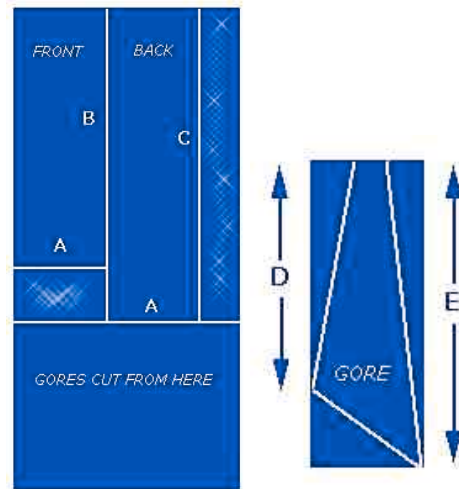


Illustration 6: Cutting Layout Used in Cyclas Construction

⁵ Forest, M. Herjolfsnes 37. <http://webnz.com/forest/Medieval/articles/garments/H37/H37.html>

⁶ Ibid.



Illustration 7: The Finished Garment on the Seamstress.

Resources

- Crowfoot, E., Pritchard, F., & Staniland, K. (1992). *Textiles and Clothing c. 1150 - c.1450*. London: HMSO.
- Forest, M. Herjolfsnes 37.
- Paris, M. (~1250). *The Life of St. Edward the Confessor*.