

# Early-Period Tunics, Step by Step

Alianor of Ravenglass

## Background

The tunic is the basic garment found in large portions of Europe, including England and France as well as Scandinavia (the Herjolfsnes digs are one of the best sources we have of extant early-period garments) from the early medieval period until roughly the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (after that time, garments begin to be much more fitted). Early-period tunics consist entirely of geometric shapes. There are four basic parts to this garment: the body panel, the sleeve, the gore, and the gusset. The functions of the first two of these should be obvious; the latter two are what lend the tunic a good fit through the chest and shoulders and a full skirt.

There are two basic styles of tunic: two-gore and four gore. The two-gore tunic, shown below was worn until roughly the middle of the thirteenth century.

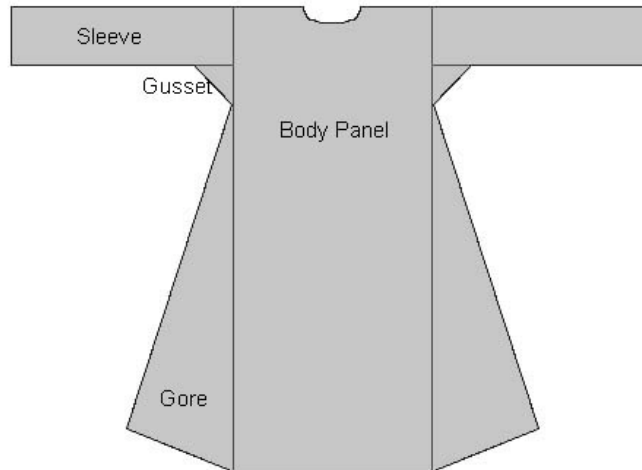


Illustration 1: Early Medieval Tunic<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of the tunic's era, we begin to see the four-gore design, which simply adds a gore in the center of each body panel.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing adapted from Houston.

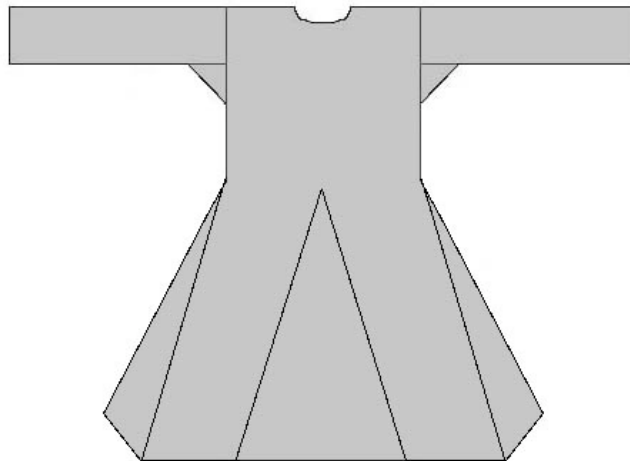


Illustration 2: Later Four-Gore Tunic

### Designing Your Tunic

Before you proceed with making your tunic, you'll need to make a number of decisions about what you want the finished product to look like. The relevant questions are:

- Do I want a short tunic or a long tunic?
- Do I want a two-gore (earlier period) or four-gore (later period) tunic?
- If I'm making a two-gore tunic, do I want long gores (ones that come almost to the gusset, as shown in Illustration 1) or short ones (that come to the waist)?

In making the decision about the length of your tunic, you should consider a number of issues. First, women are *always* pictured wearing long tunics; these may be what to the modern eye seems too long, pooling on the floor, or just at floor-length. Men are pictured wearing both short and long tunics; there seems to be a relationship between social status and the length of men's tunics. That is to say, royalty/nobility and their retainers are nearly always shown wearing long (ankle-length) tunics. Laborers are more often shown wearing knee-length tunics. Both short and long tunics (on men) are also sometimes shown as having a slit up the center, presumably to facilitate riding in a "skirt."

Whether you make a two- or four-gore tunic depends on your time period (according to Alianor, it's 1275 and she's a country girl; I wear both two- and four-gore tunics) and also on your sewing expertise; the two-gore tunics are much easier to construct. With the four-gore tunic you have to fight the theoretical impossibility of putting a two-dimensional object (the gore) into a one-dimensional space (a slit in the body panel).

If you're making a two-gore tunic, you have the option of extending the gores to the gussets or making shorter ones that come only to the waist. Longer gores make the tunic fuller from the shoulder and look better if you're not planning to wear a belt with the tunic. If you are planning to wear a belt, I recommend going with the shorter gores.

## Measuring and Planning a Layout

Once you've decided what your finished tunic is going to look like, you can calculate how much fabric to buy. In order to figure that out, you have to know your measurements. See the tunic measurement worksheet at the back of this handout for which measurements to take (and the math you have to do to translate your measurements into the dimensions of the tunic pieces). Once you've gotten your measurements, you have to figure out how much fabric to buy. To do this, you have to find the most efficient way to get the pieces you need out of the least fabric possible. Figuring out cutting layouts is really like doing a logic puzzle; how can you make the rectangles and triangles fit into the least amount of space possible? I have two "standard" layouts that I use: one that uses the width of the fabric for the length of the tunic (for 60" wide fabric) and one that uses the width of the fabric for the two body panels (for 45" to less than 60" wide fabric).

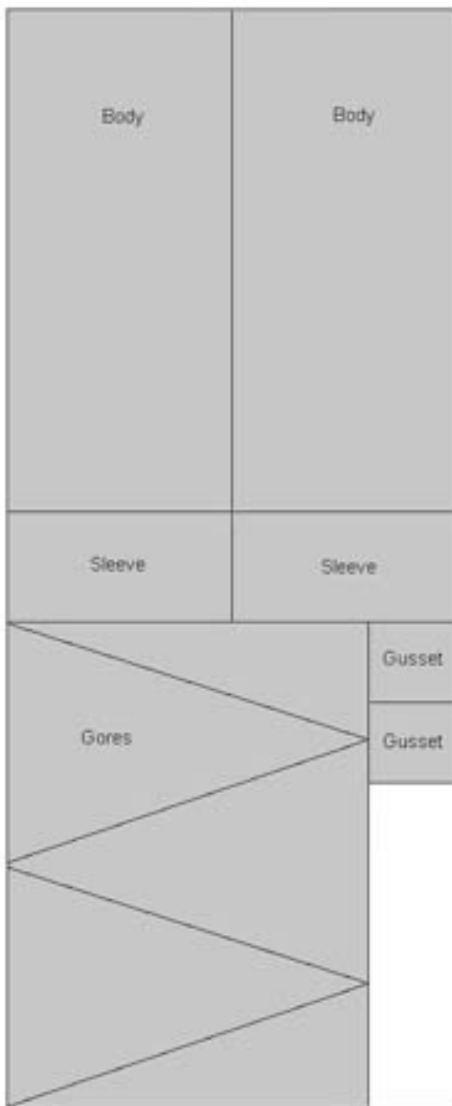


Illustration 3: 45" Wide Fabric Layout

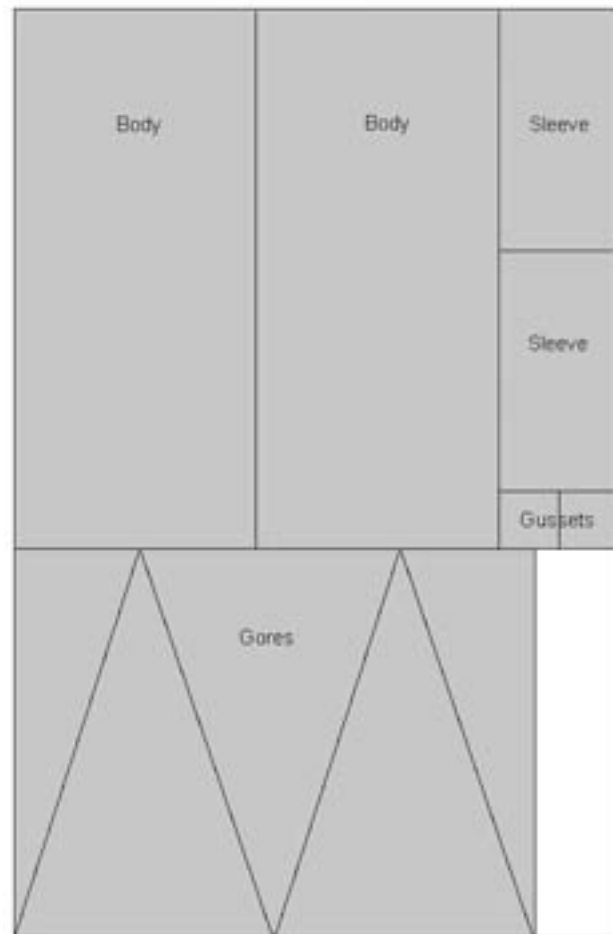


Illustration 4: 60" Wide Fabric Layout

Keep in mind that if your fabric has a directional pattern, you'll need to cut all of your pieces with the same orientation to the pattern; this means that you may need more fabric.

### A Note About Fabrics

Some authenticity buffs will tell you that you must make your garb out of woven linen, silk, or wool; cotton is bad and polyester (or any other synthetic fabric) is even worse. Don't take this as gospel. I would encourage you to consider linen and wool before any other fabrics because they are more historically accurate for the time and place that these garments represent, but if they are not within your price range, you should pick the woven fabric that you like that falls within your budget. I emphasize using a woven fabric first because it is more authentic (there is documentation for knitting during the Middle Ages, but not for knitted cloth cut into pieces to make garments) and second because, especially for the beginning tailor, knits are often quite difficult to work with (due to their stretch).

Wool and linen do have several things to recommend them: they are durable, they are historically accurate, and they breathe much better than synthetic fibers. During hot weather, I am more comfortable in my heavy linen tunics than I am in my light cotton/poly broadcloth clothes. 100% cotton falls somewhere in the middle of this spectrum; it doesn't breathe as well as linen or wool but it is better than a synthetic material.

### Washing

It is important to wash and dry your fabric before cutting and sewing. You should do this using the hottest/harsh settings possible. There are two main reasons for pre-washing: first, it will let any bleeding of dyes happen before you're washing your clothes with a load of other laundry. Second, it will pre-shrink your fabric. If possible, it is a good idea to wash and dry your material several times before cutting and sewing.

### Cutting

Now you have your measurements, a cutting layout and material. The next step is to mark your measurements on your fabric. There are lots of products out there specifically for marking fabric, and these are available at your local fabric store. I have been known to use a regular pencil or colored pencils to do my marking.

Once all the pieces are marked on the fabric, you need to start cutting. I usually start with the body panels, and then move on to cutting the rest of the garment. The most difficult part of the cutting process is doing the gores. I recommend taking the rectangle of fabric that your gores will come out of and folding it in half along the long axis, as shown in Illustration 5.

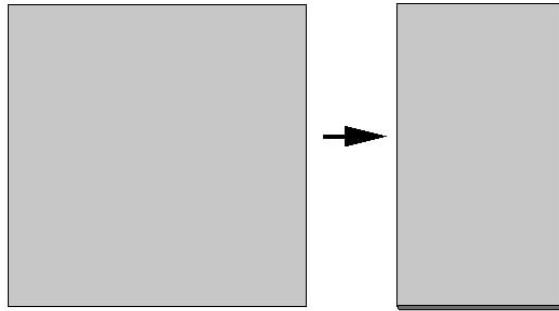


Illustration 5: Fold the gore section in half

Once you've folded the fabric in half, you need to cut the section in half along the diagonal, as shown below.

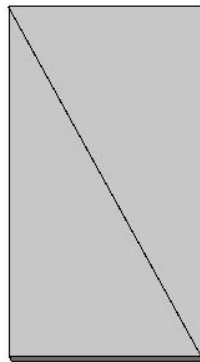


Illustration 6: Cut along the Diagonal

Once you've made this cut and unfolded the fabric, you're left with three triangles. You'll sew the two that are half the size of the other one together along their straight edge to form one triangle roughly the same size as the one that didn't need a seam.

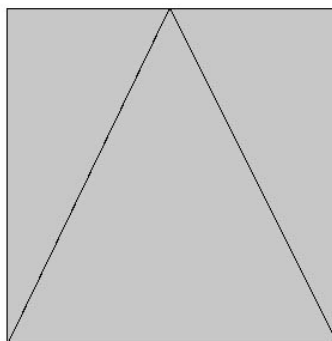


Illustration 7: 3 Triangles, two half the size of the other

## Assembly

Once all of your pieces are cut out, you're ready to start sewing together your tunic. There are three pieces ready to sew together as soon as you finish cutting: the split gore, the gussets and the sleeves, and the body panels. First, pin the two straight sides of the split gore together and seam them. Next, pin each gusset to the long side of a sleeve as shown below.

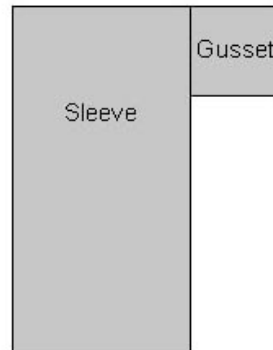


Illustration 8: Gusset and Sleeve

Finally, sew the body panels together along one of the short sides. This forms your shoulder seam. Don't worry about leaving a hole for your head – that's what we'll do next.

Find the center of your body panels, along the shoulder seam. Mark this spot. Then mark another spot one inch down (onto either body panel) from the original center spot. This will be the center of your neck opening. Think about how the neckline of a T-shirt falls when you hold it up by the shoulder seams – you're doing the same thing. Measure from this center point out in a circle whose radius is your neck opening measurement. Once you've made enough marks that you feel that you can cut a reasonable circle, do so, removing the center of the circle. If you're not sure of your neck measurement, start out conservative; you can always make the hole bigger but it's much more complicated to put cut fabric back on.

Once the neck hole is cut, it's time to decide how you're going to finish your neckline. If you're going to do it using a sewing machine, you want to do so now. If you're going to do it by hand, you can either do it now or later. See the section "Finishing the Tunic" on various ways to finish the neckline.

Now you can get to the really interesting part of assembling the tunic. First you need to attach the sleeves/gussets to the body pieces. Find the center of the top of each sleeve (not including the gusset) and pin that point to the shoulder seam.

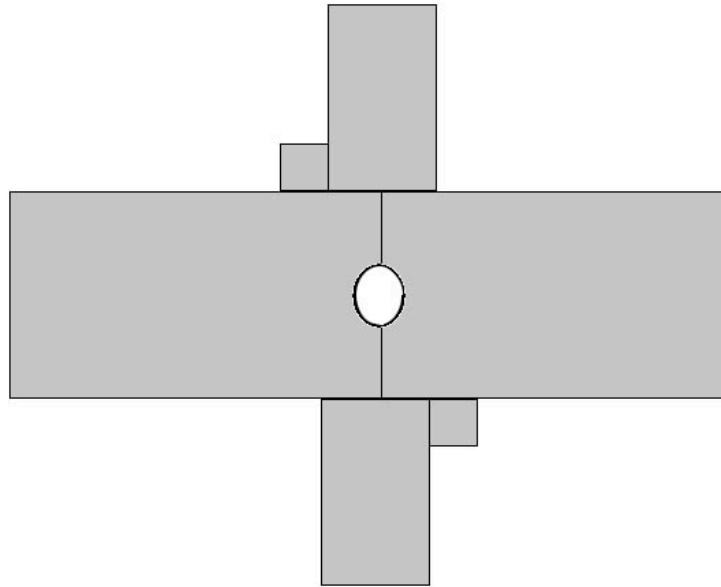


Illustration 9: Sewing Sleeves and Gussets to Body

Pin the seam allowance down so that you'll be able to sew over it smoothly. Pin and sew the rest of the sleeve and gusset to the body of the tunic. I recommend laying the seam allowance of the joint between the gusset and the sleeve towards the sleeve rather than the gusset.

Up to this point, the assembly for the two-gore and the four-gore tunics has been identical. Now it starts to diverge. If you're making a four-gore tunic, this is the time to set in the front and back gores. You'll want to put the seamed gore in the back of the tunic. This is probably the most difficult part of making a tunic. To insert each of these gores, mark the spot where you want the point of the gore to fall (this should be at the center of the body panel, as far from the hem as your gore is tall). If you remember high school geometry, you'll recall that the sides of a triangle are longer than it is tall; what this means to you is that when you set the gore into the body panel, you'll have some excess to trim off at the hem. The tailoring of this part of tunic is rather difficult. I recommend using as small a seam allowance as possible and working first at getting the point to lie as flat as possible before sewing the length of the seam. Once you've got the front and back gores set in, you'll have something that looks like this:

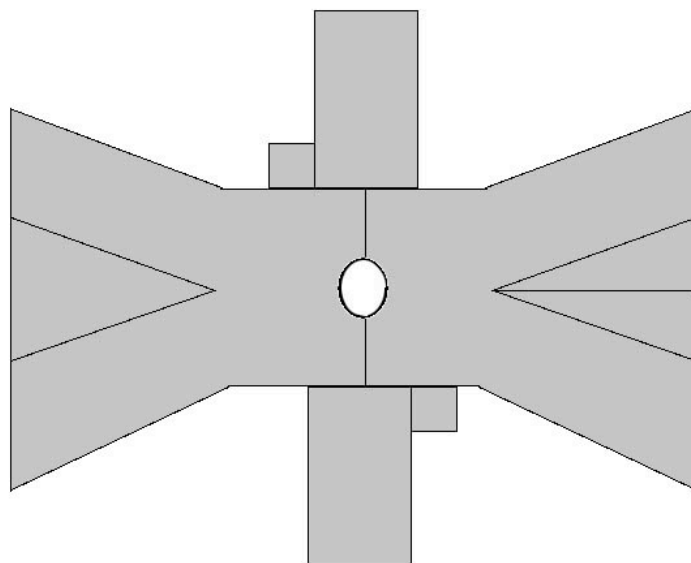


Illustration 10: Center gores set into body panels

Once the center gores are set in, the assembly for the two-gore and four-gore tunics is once again the same.

Next you need to attach the side gores. Measure up from the hem the same distance that your gore is tall, and set the gore point in there. As we saw with the center gores, this means that you'll have some excess to trim off at the end. Sew the side gores to the body panel. I usually attach both side gores to one body panel (either both to the front or both to the back).

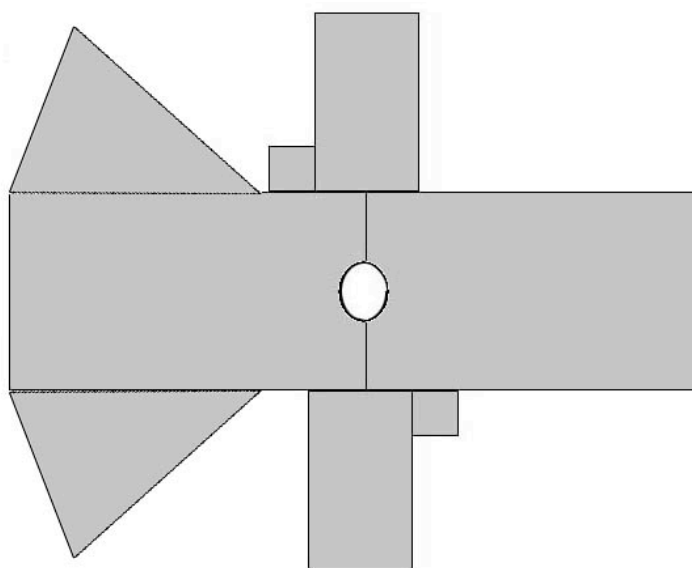


Illustration 11: Gores attached to body panels  
(Obviously if you're making a four-gore tunic, there should be center gores in this picture)

There's just one more set of seams to sew before you have a completely assembled tunic, but unfortunately they're quite difficult. Start by folding your tunic in half at the shoulder seams. Then match what will eventually be our side seams at the ends of the sleeves. Things get tricky when you get to the gusset. You need to match the two free sides of the gusset to the sleeve and to the body. This takes some fiddling. Once you've wiggled the gusset into place, continue pinning the sides together until you reach the bottom, then sew the seam. I usually sew this seam in two parts: first I sew from the end of the sleeve to the corner where the gusset and the body panel come together. Then sew the rest of the seam, making sure that the two lines of stitching meet (otherwise you'll have a hole in the armpit of your tunic!).

### Finishing the Tunic

Now you've got a tunic that is all in one piece, completely wearable. All that's left to do are the finishing touches: the hem, the ends of the sleeves, finishing seams so that they won't fray, and the neckline.

You have a number of options for finishing the neckline of your tunic. You can simply roll the fabric under (I usually do a double-roll, so that the raw edge is tucked away underneath) and stitch it down. You can do a single roll and finish the neckline with bias tape. You can also cut a strip of fabric and fold it over the edge of the neckline, tucking the raw edges under, and stitch it down.

To hem the tunic, trim any extra length off of the gores, then measure and pin either a single or a double roll of fabric and stitch it down. Do the same to the cuffs.

If your fabric is likely to fray, you probably will want to finish the seams in order to keep them from dissolving into nothing. If you're sewing your tunic by machine, the easiest way to do this is by using a zig-zag stitch over the raw edge of the seam allowance. You can do effectively the same thing with hand sewing by whip-stitching over the raw edge with small stitches. If you have a serger, you can serge the edges.

Once all the raw edges are dealt with, you're done! If you want to dress your tunic up, you can add trim or embroidery at the neckline, cuffs, and hem (although hems do tend to get dirty, especially on long women's tunics).

***Congratulations! You've now made a 100% documentable tunic.***

### Source

Houston, M. G. (1996). Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries. New York, Dover.

## Tunic Measurement Worksheet

### Measurements

Chest: \_\_\_\_\_

Shoulder-to-floor: \_\_\_\_\_

Waist-to-floor: \_\_\_\_\_

Arm Length: \_\_\_\_\_

Bicep: \_\_\_\_\_

Wrist: \_\_\_\_\_

Neck Circumference: \_\_\_\_\_

### Tunic Pieces

Body Panel Width:  $\text{Chest} / 2 = \text{_____} + 4 = \text{_____}$

Body Panel Length:  $(\text{Shoulder-to-floor}) + \text{_____} = \text{_____}$

or  $(\text{shoulder-to-hem location}) + 2 = \text{_____}$

Sleeve Length = Arm Length

Top of Sleeve:  $\text{Bicep} + 2 = \text{_____}$

Bottom of Sleeve:  $\text{Wrist} + 2 = \text{_____}$

Gore Length:  $(\text{waist-to-floor}) + \text{_____} = \text{_____}$  (the amount added should be the same as the amount added to the length of the body panel)

OR

Gore Length:  $(\text{waist-to-hem location}) + 2 = \text{_____}$

OR

Gore Length:  $(\text{shoulder-to-floor}) - (\text{top of sleeve} + \text{half of gusset}) + \text{_____} = \text{_____}$  (the amount added should be the same as the amount added to the length of the body panel)

Width: \_\_\_\_\_ (depends on the desired fullness of the tunic)

Gusset: \_\_\_\_\_

Neck opening:  $(\text{neck circumference}) / 6 = \text{_____}$