

A Hand-Sewn Wool Sleeveless Surcote

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Presented as an Entry in Stromgard's Baronial Arts and Sciences Championship

Rationale:

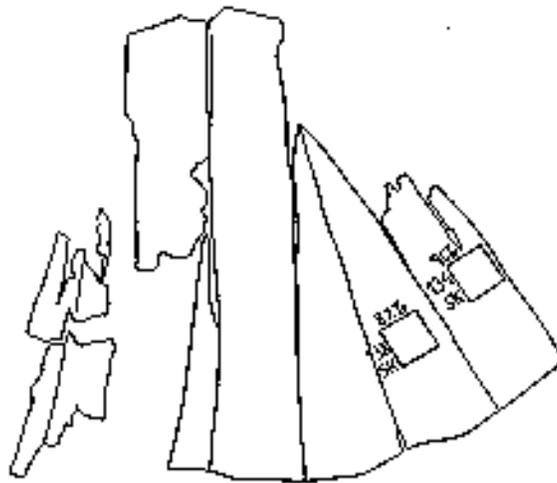
The sleeveless surcote or cyclas appeared at least as early as the 13th century in Western Europe and presumably evolved into the later sideless surcote seen by the end of the 14th century. It seems that there was both a male version and a female version, with the male version typically being shorter and split up the front and the female version typically reaching to or past the feet and not being split. For women, the cyclas was worn over the gown and under a mantle (if a mantle was worn) and could be either plain or decorated. I have not examined enough images to be able to confidently state a particular age or social standing with which this garment was predominately associated.

Medieval Images:

For some representative images of women wearing this type of garment in 13th/14th c. English and French artwork, see the color appendix.

Archeological Garments:

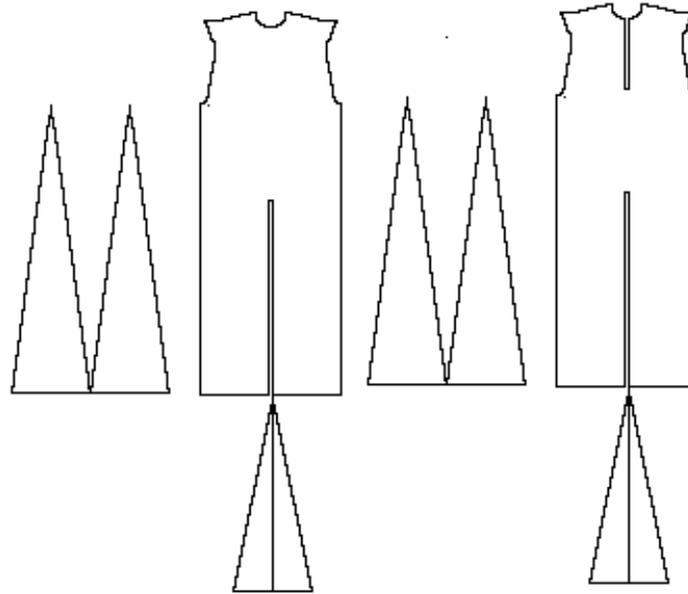
There are a couple of extant garments which appear to have been something at least broadly similar to the cyclas as I am trying to recreate it. For example, this tunic from Rønberg Mose:



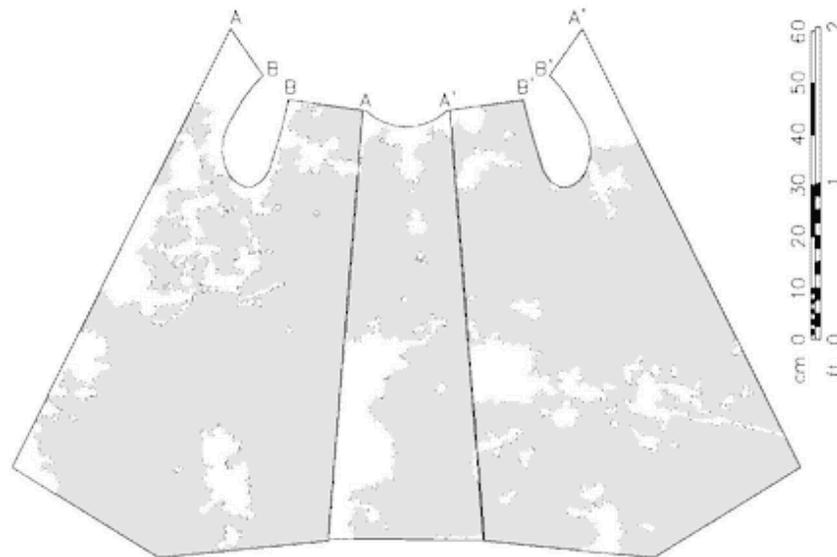
I. Marc Carlson; source: <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/ronberg.html>

Per I. Marc Carlson: "This garment from the 1200s is of a 4-shafted twill. It has 2 large side

gores, and at least a narrow gore in the front center." I. Marc Carlson also gives this potential piece layout (ibid):



This is an extant silk surcote from 1307 that apparently belonged to King Rudolf I of Bohemia:



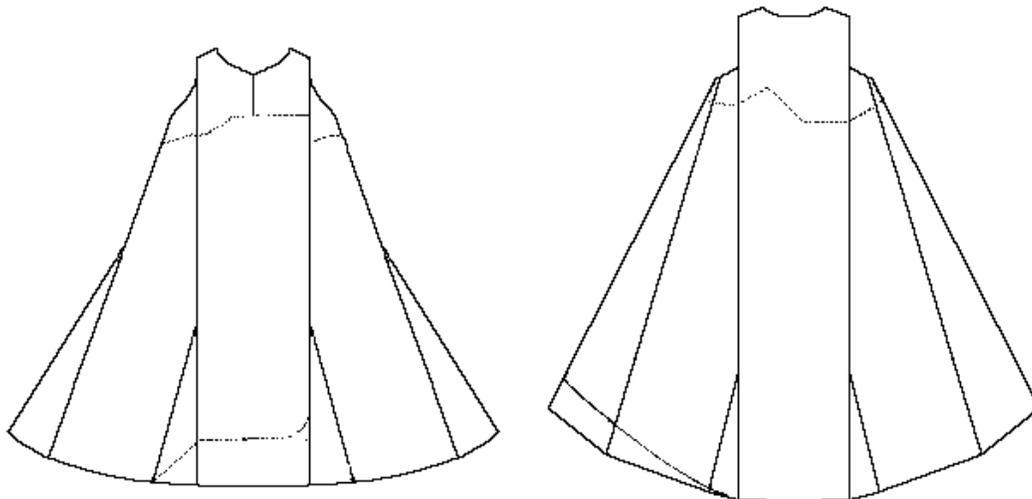
Source: http://www.kostym.cz/Anglicky/6_Dobove/07_Svrchniky/VI_07_08.htm (includes original source for above image / information about this garment)

There is another extant silk surcote, this time from Spain, dated to around 1235 (and also a royal garment):



Source: http://www.kostym.cz/Anglicky/1_Originaly/01_Goticke/I_01_61.htm

Some interpretations of yet another surviving garment (the "Mantle of St Birgitta") from the mid to late 14th century suggest that this also may have been a surcote or cyclas, which if it were would give further clues about methods of constructing such a garment:



I. Marc Carlson, source: <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/birgitta.html>

In my previous research into and thinking about 13th century clothing construction, the take-home message is rectangular body pieces sometimes (but not always) joined at a shoulder seam, side gores, and usually some kind of arm-hole shaping. For my humble persona, minimal shaping and fitting makes sense -- basically, I imagine a woman like Eulalia would have relied on the width of the fabric available to her rather than carefully measuring each gore.

What I Did:

I had some fairly lightweight green wool fabric that I wanted to use for this project. Wool was the standard fabric for the clothing of common people (apart from undergarments). I cut two body pieces roughly the width of my shoulder to shoulder measurement, then used what remained of the fabric to make gores. I used the width of the fabric for the length of each piece. I laid out my pieces and free-handed an arm shape similar to that from the Rønberg Mose garment (my gores initially came all the way to the top of the shoulder).

At this point, I used running stitch to sew the pieces together¹. I tried it on... and it was too small. I mean, it fit, technically, it was just a very "sexy" fit, which is not right for 13th century clothes. Since the wool was from a thrift store I had no way to obtain more, so I went through my fabric stash and found a piece of a similar weight fabric in a pale gold color². This seemed like my best option for making this work, so I used it to cut out some more gores. I ripped out the seams and added the gores, adjusted the armscye to accommodate the new additions, and sewed everything together again using running stitch. I finished the seams using felled seams sewn with a double-fold hem stitch (which was rare on medieval garments made from wool; see <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/wool.html#WEHem> for more information on hem stitch).

This was my first completely hand-sewn garment (other than hosen and hats), instead I normally do my joining seams by machine and then hand-finish them. This was a nice step up for me, and I actually enjoyed the process. I use linen thread for all my hand sewing, which was, according to Crowfoot et al³, typical. I still have not found a single perfect answer to whether or not the linen thread I use should match the fabric. While I have always heard that linen was difficult to dye historically, Crowfoot et al state that royal household records mention purchasing dyed linen thread for sewing.

For someone of lower means, I do not think that dyed linen would have been the most likely option, even if it was available. Wool thread, possibly, including threads pulled from the fabric itself, would be reasonable, or undyed (and probably unbleached) linen thread. I had a spool of white linen thread on hand which I decided to go ahead and use -- even the

¹ Examples of running stitch in archeological garments are discussed at <http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/wool.html#WSRunning>

² There's at least one parti-colored extant garment from this time period, see <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/soder.html>

³ Crowfoot, Elisabeth, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland. *Textiles and Clothing, C.1150-c.1450*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 2006

clothing fragments found in the London finds (again, see Crowfoot et al) had been sewn together with linen thread (which had rotted away when the wool remained), suggesting that even ordinary persons used linen thread instead of wool.

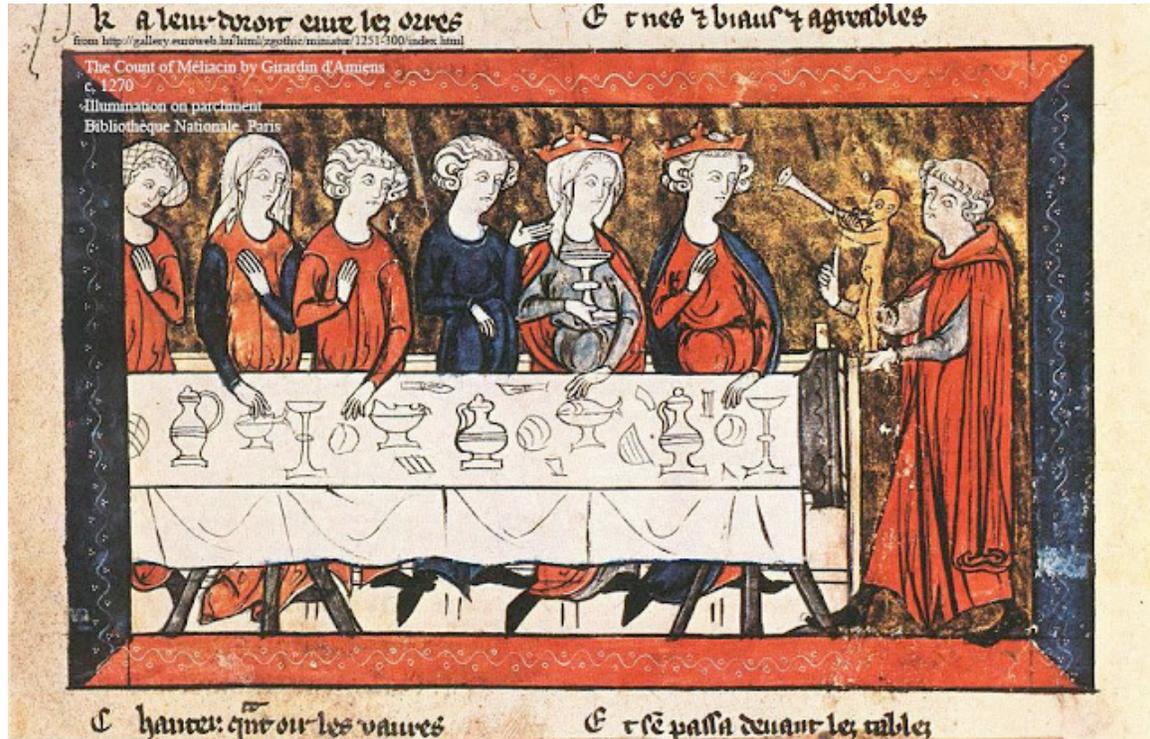
I finished the neck and arms using a narrow bias-cut strip of linen with the edges folded under and a line of running stitch on each edge. This matches a finishing technique on an extant garment from the late 14th century shown in Crowfoot et al and is my preferred method.

To do the hem, I simply measured a curve from the shoulder, marked it and cut it. I made the center back slightly longer than the center front, as I think dresses look better that way. I started off sewing the hem with a double-fold hem stitch but I didn't like how the fabric was lying, so I ended up just using running stitch. I double-folded the hem.

Final Thoughts

I'm very pleased with how this turned out. Doing all of the sewing by hand was a good learning experience for me, and a really big leap forward in my abilities and confidence. I'm looking forward to wearing this at many future events.

Appendix: Medieval Images



Virgin with child, Northern France, 1250-1275, ivory (trace evidence suggests it may have originally been painted and gilded). In the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. Source: <http://goo.gl/pEhAiD>



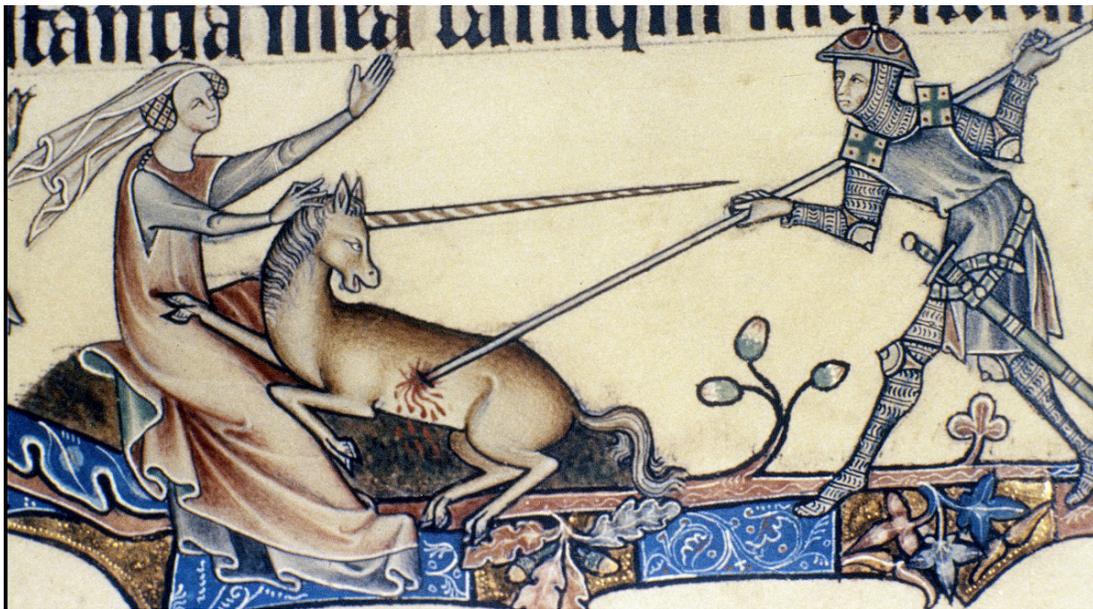
End of the 13th century, France; Lausanne, Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, U 964 - Biblia Porta; fol.178r. Facsimile online at <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bcul/U0964>



DeBrailes Hours, f. 24r; I'll admit I might be stretching a little with this one, but it's the earliest specifically English image of a surcote/cyclas I could find.



The Ormesby Psalter ([Bodleian Library MS. Douce 366](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/MS/Display.aspx?loc=ms.15.1)), ca. 1310 (England). Partial facsimile at <http://goo.gl/x2NZjI>

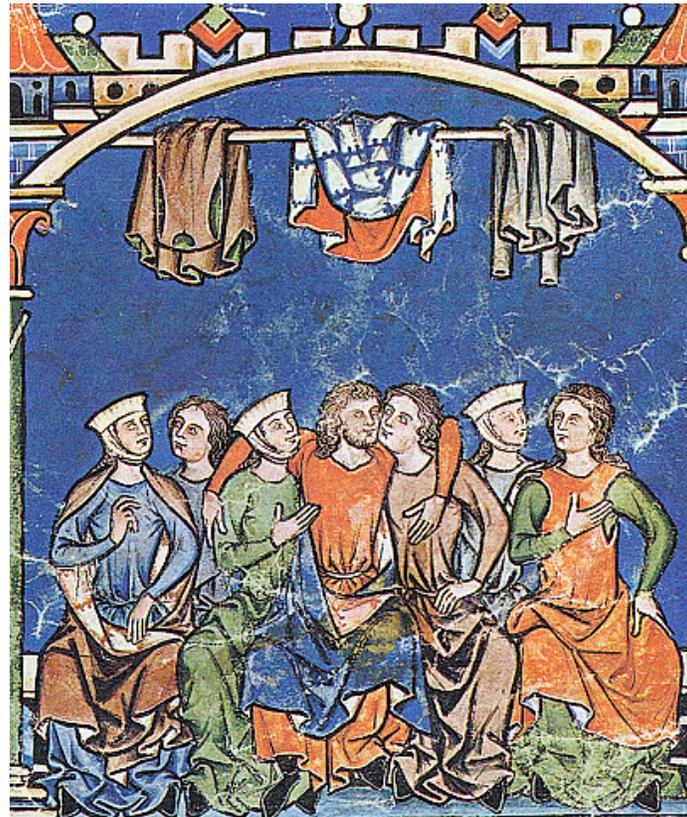


Ibid. Both of these were found at this blog: <http://bestiary.ca/chimaera/303>

The images on the following page are both from the Maciejowski Bible, produced around the middle of the 13th century in France. The Maciejowski is also interesting in that it also shows depictions of both men and women wearing "hanging sleeve" tunics, which can look superficially like a sleeveless garment.



The lady appears to be wearing a cyclas that buttons in the front.



Note the garment hung over the curtain rod at the top left. Although it may be meant to represent a male garment, it does give some hints as to the construction of the surcote.