



Blue 15th Century Kirtle with Trapezoidal Skirt Panels

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This gown is an example of a fitted, self-supportive kirtle commonly worn throughout much of the 15th century in England and the Northern European continent. It is made in fulled blue wool and the bodice is lined in white linen for additional strength. All visible stitching is hand sewn in silk twist thread, with hand done eyelets in silk, a filament silk fingerloop lace, and a brass lace chape.¹ The skirt is attached by a waist seam (fig. 5), and consists of twelve trapezoidal panels, sewn with the bias edge to the straight edge all the way around. The use of narrow trapezoidal panels provides superior fullness and drape, with very little waste of fabric.

A late 14th century dig in London reveals several panels of a trapezoidal shape that were presumably once part of a skirt.² The narrow edge would have been at the waist, with the wide at the bottom. With the narrow fabric widths common in the period, cutting trapezoidal pieces, two from each length of fabric, would yield a full skirt with very little fabric waste. Figure 1 shows how the pieces may be cut with either wide or narrow fabric. The skirt pieces are then sewn together with the bias edge to the straight edge (fig. 2), a technique that will allow the skirt to drape gracefully.

While the London skirt is dated to the late 14th century, there is scant archaeological record of women's clothing from the 15th century. Although dresses with seams on the bodice and waist are commonly depicted in the highly-detailed art of the 15th century, skirt seams are often omitted, presumably obscured amongst the folds of fabric, leaving one to rely upon conjecture for how the skirt panels are arranged. Therefore, one might presume that this simple, fabric-thrifty construction technique carried over into 15th century women's dresses.

When attaching a trapezoidal skirt to a bodice, often the waist measurements don't match exactly. One could cut a little out of the side of each panel, or pleat or gather the skirt into the bodice. One of the London skirt panels has such gathering stitches at the top (fig. 3). Images such as the *Columba Altarpiece* (fig. 6) show small pleats at the back of the dress. Gathering or pleating the skirt back creates additional fullness in the back of the gown.

The lace is made from filament silk, and is fingerloop braided in the pattern of "A Brode Lace of V Bowes", a pattern from Manuscript Harley 2320, ca. 1475. The pattern did not indicate multiple colors, therefore only a single color was used.

¹ Dress construction details based on information in Crowfoot et al, pp. 164. The lace chape is based on Egan et al, pp. 281–285. For more dress construction details, please see accompanying documentation *Red c. 1380 Western European Fitted Gown, Lined in Blue Linen*.

² Crowfoot et al, pp. 178–181

Appendix:

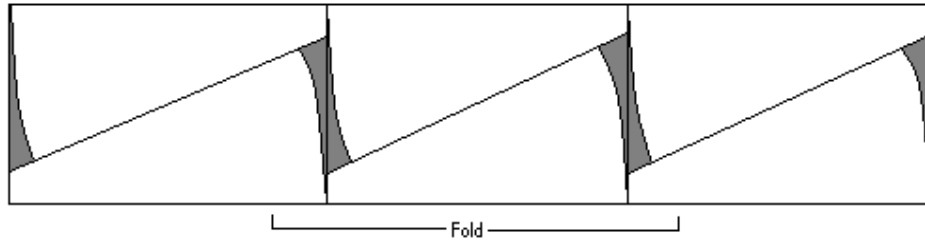


Fig. 1 This diagram demonstrates how twelve trapezoidal panels may be cut from a modern, wide fabric (depicted folded lengthwise) with very little waste. If the “fold” is disregarded, it demonstrates how the same can be accomplished from typical narrow period fabric.

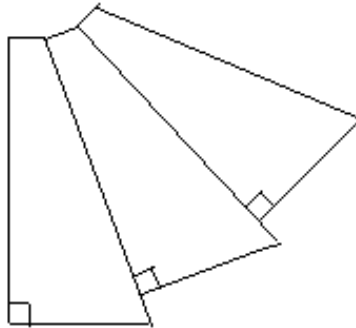


Fig. 2 When placed with the bias edge against the on-grain edge, an almost pin-wheel like effect is achieved. The combination of bias and straight provides a beautiful drape and prevents sagging.



Fig. 3 These (presumed) skirt panels were unearthed in a late 14th century London deposit.

The accompanying text reads:

There are the remains of seven skirt panels, all incomplete. None have any indications of a hem or of stitching along any lower edges. Little remains of the seams joining the panels, many apparently having broken away or perhaps been cut away. Some very narrow turnings (4mm wide) extant down the sides may be the remains of seams; normally one might have expected to find a broader seam allowance, as in the fragments of hose, for example. Narrow seams are also a feature of the London hoods and this may have been a method of economizing on cloth. Of four tapering pieces form the tops of skirt panels, two can be satisfactorily matched to larger lower sections. Three of these sections measure 100mm at the waist edge, one seems to curve in to give a smooth fit over the hips, and another, the only one to show and indication of this, has evidence of single thread

gathering along the upper (?waist) edge....

The longest surviving section of a skirt panel measures 690 mm (followed by others 650mm and 520mm). The original cut and arrangement of these panels is difficult to ascertain now. Each has one edge almost on the straight grain of the fabric. In only one instance, however, does the seam appear to be along the line of a warp thread; in all other cases there is a divergence of 10-20 mm down the length of this edge, perhaps more indicative of a casual than a sophisticated approach to cut. None of the skirt panels appears to have been of the rectangular form found in other excavated medieval dresses and usually associated with triangular gores in the skirt to give additional fullness at the hem. The Scandinavian dresses are mainly without a waist seam, but probably represent much older shaping traditions.

Image: Crowfoot et al, p. 178

Text: Crowfoot et al, p. 181

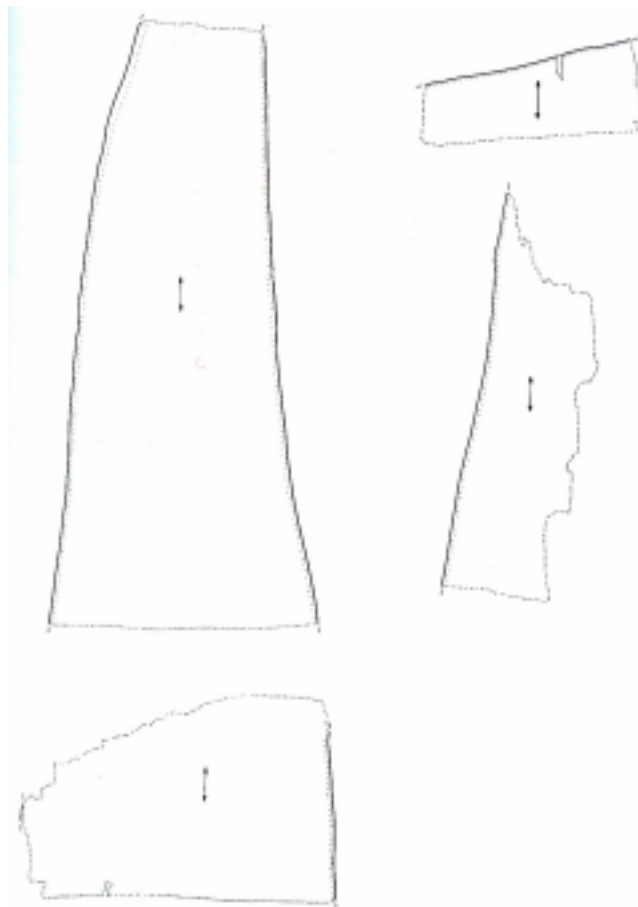


Fig. 4 Additional panels from the London deposit.

Crowfoot et al, p. 179



Fig. 5 Dress with waist seam. By the 15th century, many dresses with waist seams appear in the highly-detailed art of the period.

Memling, Hans; *Crucifixion*; Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgedichte, Lübeck; 1491



Fig. 6 The dress in this image has pleating in the back of the skirt where it meets the bodice, at the waist seam under the belt.

Weyden, Rogier van der; *St. Columba Altarpiece*; Alte Pinakothek, Munich; ca. 1455

Sources:

Crowfoot, Elisabeth; Frances Pritchard; and Kay Staniland. *Textiles and Clothing: c.1150 – c. 1450*, vol. 4 of *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*, 2nd ed., Suffolk, Boydell Press, 2001.

Egan, Geoff, and Prichard, Frances. *Dress Accessories: c.1150 – c.1450*, vol. 3 of *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*, 2nd ed., Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002.

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Swales, Lois, and Williams, Zoe Kuhn. *Fingerloop Braids*, vol. 108 of *The Compleat Anachronist*. Milpitas: The Society for Creative Anachronism, 2000.