

A Stitch in Time; The Evolution of the Tunic

Introduction

When I conceive the idea for a class, it's from one of two reasons. The first is that I've made some exciting new discoveries about history or craft and I want to share it with people. The second is because I've come across some widely held mythconception that I want to explode. This collegium springs from both; I found out some really interesting facts about tunics during my research for the Hordweard project. And I've also become aware that there's a belief amongst some late period enthusiasts that T-Tunics (which is your basic tunic) are not period. In this collegium I will only be talking about European clothes; eastern clothes probably followed a similar development, but I haven't studied it in detail.

The Main Features of The Tunic

The main feature of a tunic is that it's designed to be pulled over the head and worn as is, perhaps controlled by a belt. This is unlike the later, more fitted styles such as cotehardies and houpellandes, where the wearer "stepped into" the garment and then closed it with buttons or laces.

The Earliest Clothes

The earliest clothes were stitched animal hides, and the shape of the hides probably dictated the cut of early clothes. Some time in pre-history, spinning and weaving were developed, and this led to clothes inspired by rectangles (cloth worn straight off the loom). The earliest woven clothes were most likely rectangular lengths of cloth, draped around the body.¹ This type of garment still survives in the Indian sari; however anyone who's experimented with Roman clothing knows a draped rectangle can be bulky and confining, and generally can't be put on without help.

The Ancient World

The Greek Chiton and Peplos

The Greek chiton was a rectangular garment, wrapped loosely around the body with the fold on one side, and the other side



*The goddess Athena wearing a peplos.
C5 BC. Acropolis Museum, Athens.*

¹ Dorothy K. Burnham, *Cut my Cote*, 2 – 5.

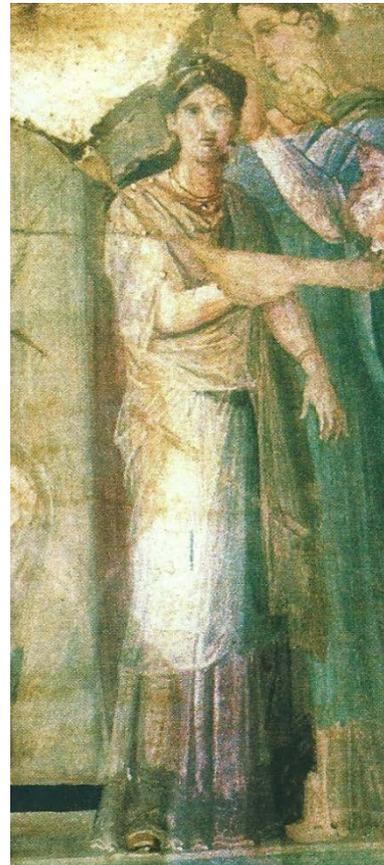
either stitched up or left open (stitching is much more likely). It was then stitched or pinned at the shoulders, to form loose arm and neck holes. The peplos was a similar garment, but tended to be made of heavier fabric and more likely always tubular. It was clasped at the shoulders with brooches.²

The Roman Tunic

The word “tunic” comes from the Latin *tunica*, the main garment worn by both men and women since the earliest days of Rome. The most basic form of the Roman tunica is simply two rectangles of cloth, stitched along the shoulders and sides for men (with neck and arm holes, obviously).³ The female version (for freedwomen) was two rectangles stitched up the sides, but joined along the shoulders gathers in the material which look a little like buttons.⁴ The tunica differed from the Greek clothes in that it was always permanently joined along the shoulders, whether by a continuous seam (for men) or decorative bunches of cloth (for women).



The Arringatore, c100 -75 BC



Detail of fresco in Pompeii, C1AD

This seems like the obvious basis for the first incarnation of the tunic. A rectangle is the most simple shape for fabric, and this could be made up directly from the loom with very little cutting and minimal stitching.

² “Ancient Greek Clothing,” http://www.novaroma.org/nr/Ancient_Greek_Clothing, accessed 17/03/2013.

³ Alice Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 31 – 36.

⁴ Alice Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 75 – 85.

Two similar sleeveless tunics have been found at Marx-Etzel and Obenaltdorf, in western Germany. The Marx-Etzel tunic has not been reliably dated, while the Obenaltdorf tunic dates to the early 3rd century AD. Based on jewellery found with it, it is probable the Obenaltdorf tunic was a Roman import.⁵

Sleeved one piece Tunic



Linen embroidered tunic, 2nd/3rd CAD, Egypt.

could be worn belted, or unbelted.

A number of extant examples have been found in Egypt, and for these reasons this style of tunic is often called the “Coptic tunic.” The style was also adapted in Byzantium, and from there spread to the courts and cathedrals of western Europe. This “dalmatic” tunic has much wider sleeves, and a flared hem. Because these garments were often used as court garments or church vestments, a number of spectacularly decorated examples survive, such as the “Charlemagne dalmatic” from St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.⁶

The problem with the rectangular, sleeveless tunic, is that you either have a comfortably sized body with no arm protection, or a rectangle that stretches from the shoulder to the wrists, which is huge and becomes uncomfortable to wear.

During the 2nd century AD, there is definite evidence that sleeved tunics had become standard for Roman men and women, and probably appeared long before this. These sleeved tunics simply had rectangular sleeves at the sides, and were stitched along the sides, from the wrist to the hem. Short sleeves appeared first, with longer sleeves appearing later, around the 3rd century.

The tunics



© Roma Sacra

Charlemagne Dalmatic, c 11AD, St Peter’s Basilica, Rome.

⁵ Gale Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo Saxon England*, 110.

⁶ <http://saintpetersbasilica.org/Interior/Sacristy-Treasury/Sacristy-Treasury.htm>, accessed 20/03/2013.

One major problem with this one piece construction is the stress that gets placed on the sleeves. As the side seam goes from the wrist to the hem, there comes a point where you have to stitch at right angles, and this creates a big stress point. The sleeves have a regrettable tendency to rip at this point, especially if they are narrow.

The Reepsholt Shirt

A sleeved tunic from the Reepsholt bog in Friesland is made from a single piece of cloth, sleeves and all, sewn up at the sides, with a wide boat neck opening. It was 115cm wide in the body, which would have made quite a baggy tunic to wear, especially without a belt. It has been dated to the second century AD.

The similarity of the Reepsholt shirt to the Coptic style tunic suggests that it was an import from Rome.⁷

Dark Ages and Early Medieval Period

The Thorsberg Shirt

The one piece tunics described above are theoretically easy to cut and sew.⁸ However, there are disadvantages. You need a wide piece of material to start with in order to get the full width of the sleeves and body. They also tend to be uncomfortable around the shoulders, and I find the sleeves uncomfortable; unless you're holding your arms out at the sides, your arms are always moving against the grain of the fabric. For this reason, even if I am constructing a big rectangle tunic, I generally use pieced construction.

The other problem with these tunics is that they are very baggy. This is not a problem in a warm climate, but in a cold one, a baggy tunic is not good protection against the cold.

One of the earliest extant garments showing pieced construction is the Thorsbjerg shirt, made for a man, which dates to the third/fourth century AD. This is made from four pieces of woollen fabric (back, front, two sleeves), and has a body width of 60cm, making it a fairly close-fitting garment. The neck



Thorsbjerg shirt. Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum.

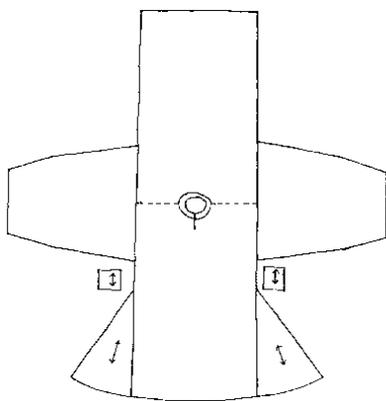
⁷ Margarethe Hald, *Ancient Danish Textiles*, 336 – 338.

⁸ Theoretically – I actually find cutting a big single piece of fabric quite difficult.

hole is quite wide, but deeper at the front than the back.⁹ There is some evidence of shaping at the shoulders, and the sleeves taper from the elbow to be close fitting at the wrist. The material is of very good quality, and the shirt was obviously tailored to a specific individual.¹⁰

The Birka Tunics¹¹

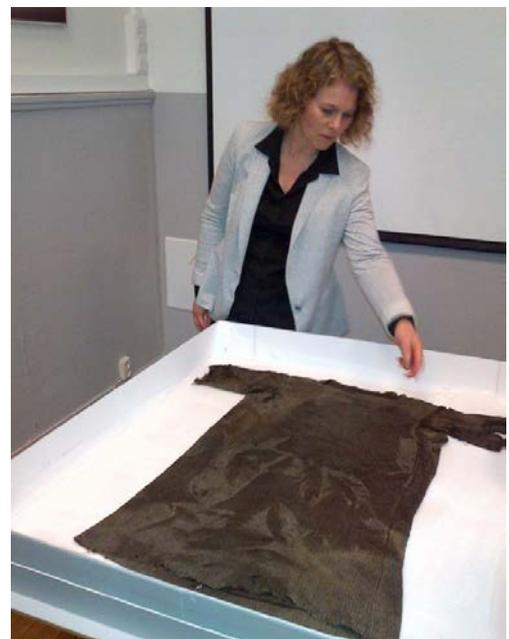
Birka was an important Viking trading settlement in the 9th and 10th centuries, and has been heavily excavated. Although only fragments of textiles have been excavated, enough pieces have been recovered to be able to make some educated guesses as to construction, based on what's been preserved, and artistic representations.



Pattern for a Birka tunic

As well as pleated smocks for women and front split coats, there is plenty of evidence for wool and linen tunics. The body of the tunic is cut from a single piece (known as “poncho style” construction), with a keyhole neck. Triangular gores are often used to add extra width to the skirt, particularly if the body of the tunic is narrow. The sleeves can be either tapered or left open.¹²

Two disputed features of the proposed reconstruction are the side gores and the underarm gussets. They appear in later garments, but no one is quite sure when they first appeared. The early appearance of side gores is suggested by a recent find from a thawing glacier in southern Norway – a woollen tunic dated to the 3rd century that shows side gores.¹³ The underarm gusset solves the problem I mentioned earlier of sleeves are stitched with the side seam going from the wrist of the sleeve to the hem of the body tending to “pop” in the underarm due to the stress placed on the fabric. Underarm gussets solve this; the stress



⁹ Margarethe Hald, *Ancient Danish Textiles*, 339 – 340.

¹⁰ Gale Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo Saxon England*, 111 – 112.

¹¹ Agnes Geiger, “The Textile Finds from Birka,” *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe*, 80 – 99; Inga Hagg, “Viking Women’s Dress at Birka: A Reconstruction by Archaeological Methods,” *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe*, 316 – 350.

¹² The pattern is taken from Carolyn Priest-Dorman, “Viking Tunic Construction,” <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/viktunic.html>, accessed 22/03/2013

¹³ <http://science.nbcnews.com/news/2013/03/21/17403302-pre-viking-tunic-found-on-glacier-as-warming-trend-aids-archaeology?lite> accessed 22/03/2013

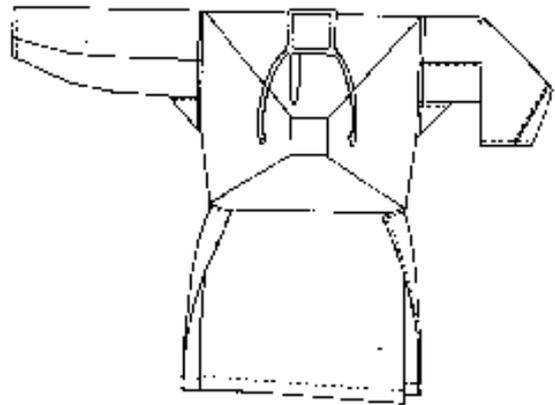
is distributed across fabric, rather than a seam.¹⁴ However, they can make the sleeve of the tunic quite baggy.

The Birka tunics are quite economical to cut, and comfortable to wear. Cutting the tunic with a narrow body means the tunic is close to the body, which is more practical in a cold climate, while the gores mean you can move about and work in it quite easily. It's little wonder this shape became a standard for garments for centuries to come, as we shall see.

The Viborg Tunic¹⁵

Viborg, in the Jutland peninsula in Denmark, was another important Viking centre. Finds from excavations revealed one of the few extant linen garments known from the medieval period, a man's tunic dated to the 11th century.

The body of the shirt is cut "poncho style," but has some shaping in the shoulders, to ensure the sleeves fit better. The sleeves themselves are pieced, either to make the best use of the fabric, or more likely, to provide a better fit. The sleeves also use underarm gussets. The sides are stitched to the waist, with front and back flaps extending the length of the tunic, which means it can be worn close to the body, without needing gores to make it comfortable to move in. The neck is square, with draw cords to fasten it. The front is two layers, with the layers "quilted" together with running stitch.¹⁶ I wonder if the tunic was meant to be worn under an open coat, to show off the decoration.



The Viborg tunic is the earliest extant garment that uses ties, and also one of the earliest to use pieces not just for basic shaping, but also closer tailoring.

The Moselund Tunic

This tunic was discovered as part of a bog burial in Denmark, in 1884. The pieces of the tunic have

¹⁴ I suspect these gussets developed out of a popped underarm seam – the square would be the easiest shaped patch to insert.

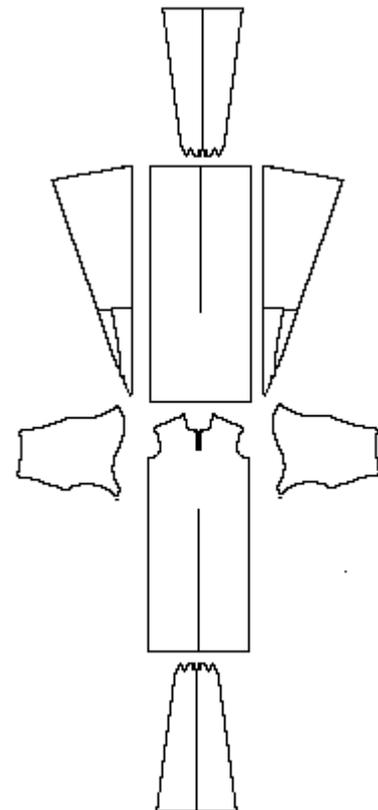
¹⁵ Mytte Fentz, "An 11th Century Linen Shirt from Viborg," <http://www.forest.gen.nz/Medieval/articles/Viborg/VIBORG.HTM>, accessed 22/03/2013

¹⁶ Carolyn Priest-Dorman, "Viking Tunic Construction," <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/viktunic.html>, accessed 22/03/2013

been reconstructed several times since then, and it has been dated to around 1100.

Unlike the Birka and Viborg tunics, the body of the Moselund tunic is constructed with a separate back and front piece. It is also one of the earliest extant garments to show one of the most significant features to develop in tailoring – set in sleeves. Set in sleeves have a curved armhole and a curved sleeve shoulder; they can be shaped to fit the shoulder comfortably, with no bulk in the underarm, and the shaping of the seam also eliminates the stress that can cause the seams to pop. The side gores are supplemented by front and back gores, to give more flair. These front and back gores are split, which would make it easier to ride a horse.¹⁷

Excavations from another Viking site in Denmark, Hedeby, suggest this construction dates back to as early as the 10th century. No complete garments have been found from Hedeby, but enough has been found to suggest tunics made with separate back and front pieces, set in sleeves, and front, back and side gores, similar to the Moselund tunic.¹⁸ Thor Ewing thinks they were inspired by Middle Eastern fashions, and were brought back to the Viking world by traders.¹⁹



The Moselund Tunic

¹⁷ Margarethe Hald, *Ancient Danish Textiles*, 60 – 61, 341

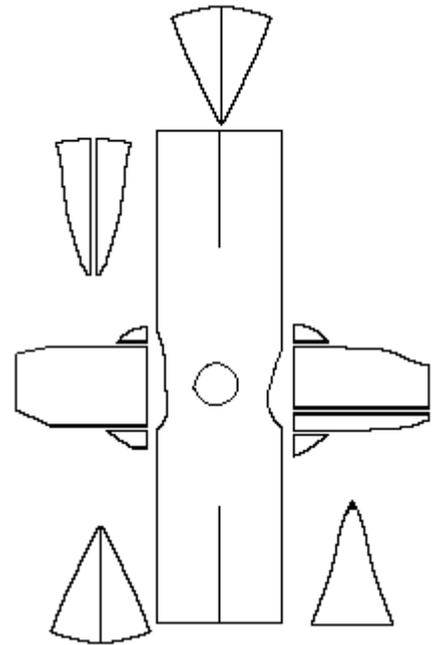
¹⁸ Carolyn Priest-Dorman, “Viking Tunic Construction,” <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/viktunic.html>, accessed 22/03/2013. The Hedeby finds appear to be worn out garments cut into their component pieces, and used as caulking in ships. This makes reconstruction problematic.

¹⁹ Thor Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, 10 – 11.

The Medieval Period

Bocksten Man²⁰

The Bocksten Man is a bog body from 14th century Sweden, who was most likely murdered before his body, and clothing, were almost completely preserved in a bog. His tunic is of quite good quality, with front, back and side gores, but has obviously been cut to



make maximum use of fabric.

The body of the tunic is cut poncho style, with a round neck. Only one of the gores is a complete triangle; the rest are composite. The sleeves are the same basic shape, but while one is a whole piece, the other has been carefully made from two pieces of fabric, indicating the maker didn't have enough fabric to make two identical sleeves. The sleeves themselves are tapered.

Bocksten Man's tunic gives us the final "basic" pattern of the T-Tunic. This style represents the beginning of tailoring; the body can be cut to fit quite well to a specific individual, while the side gores make the tunic easy to move in unrestricted. Front and back gores increase this ease of movement. I think you can see from this style, how complete shaping to an individual body would have developed.

Even though it dates from the 14th century, its development can clearly be traced from the original sleeveless tunics worn by the Romans and the Greeks.

²⁰ Margareta Nockert, "The Bocksten Man's Costume," (*Textile History* 18:2), 175 – 186.

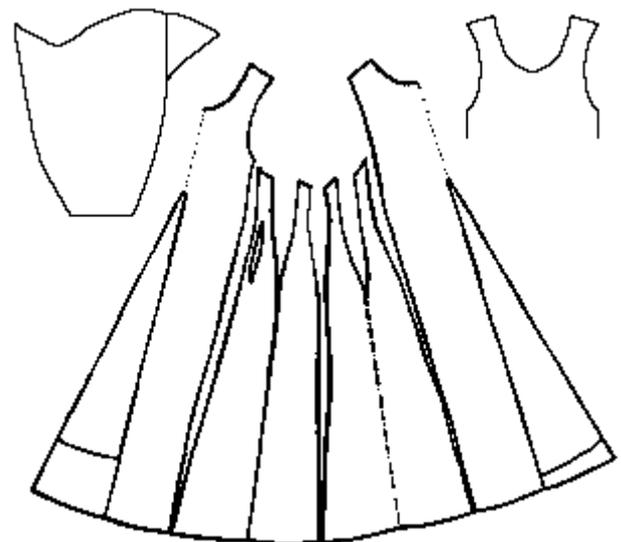
The Greenland Finds²¹

The Icelandic Vikings established settlements in Greenland from the early 11th century, but by the mid-15th century these settlements had collapsed and were abandoned. However, they left behind a treasure trove of archaeological finds, including near complete garments. Towards the end of the settlement, people were being interred in cemeteries not in coffins, but wrapped in worn out garments. The latest of these garments show the most complex construction of any tunics, but can still be thought of as tunics because they're designed to be pulled over the head.



The most complex of the tunics are from Herjolfnæs, and are known as the “10 gore gowns.” They have separate back and front pieces, with two piece triangular gores in the front and back, and shaped gores at the sides. The side gores start quite narrow, and then flare out heavily towards the base; they are not triangular. This would have resulted in a tight-fitting bodice, with a hugely flared skirt. One of the longer-sleeved garments has very tight sleeves, with fit ensured by buttons. The tight-fitting, buttoned sleeve is attested by literary and archaeological evidence from 14th century mainland Europe, as is the fashion for tight-bodied, flared gowns.²²

When the Herjolfnæs garments were first reported in the early

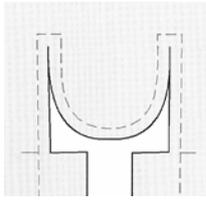


20th century, costume historians declared this was the construction method used throughout Europe in the 14th century. However, Robin Netherton has challenged this view, pointing out that contact between Greenland and Europe was sporadic, particularly towards the end of the settlement period. She does agree the Greenland fashions were influenced by European styles, but believes the Herjolfnæs garments represent a local attempt to

²¹ The Greenland textiles are exhaustively documented in Else Østergård's *Woven into the Earth*. Extensive reconstruction patterns and instructions can be found in *Medieval Garments Reconstructed*, by Lilli Fransen, Anna Nørgaard and Else Østergård.

²² Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard and Kay Staniland, *Museum of London: Textiles and Clothing 1150 – 1450*, 180 – 185.

replicate European fashions using familiar techniques of cutting from rectangles and triangles, rather than representing mainland tailoring.²³ However, it's entirely possible that these fitted garments evolved from garments not unlike the Herjolfnæs garments, that didn't survive. It's not too big a leap to imagine a seamstress or tailor thinking a better fit could be achieved by cutting right down the middle of the back or front of a tunic, and lacing it closed.



One final note about the Herjolfnæs garments: at least two of them have the front and back gores inserted with a “tongue” in the body piece, and the front and back gores on either side. You'll find some re-enactors presenting this as an alternate way of putting in the front and back gores. I think it makes more work, and I'm more inclined to think it represents a mistake in the construction: the cuts for the front and back gores were initially cut in the wrong spot, well off-centre, and the “tongue” construction is the fix rather than the intention.

Renaissance Europe

In the renaissance period, the wealthy classes wore true tailored garments, shaped to fit their bodies, rather than the basic, pull over the head tunic. But even for the wealthy, the tunic did not disappear; it stuck around as the style for undergarments long after the medieval period.

Tudor and Stuart Chemises



The Victoria and Albert museum alone hosts a large collection of chemises and smocks which, aside from the decoration, could be taken directly from the proposed reconstructions of the Birka tunics. The example at the left, from the V&A, comes from 1630, and there are later ones.

So why did the basic tunic remain in use for so long, even for the wealthiest? I think it comes down to economy and efficiency of construction. The T-Tunic is a very economic use of fabric; even if you

²³ Robin Netherton, “The View from Herjolfnæs: Greenland’s Translation of European Fitted Fashion,” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 4, 143 – 172.

cut your gores as complete triangles there's very little wasted material. It's also quite an easy garment – the construction is based around rectangles and triangles, so you don't even need a pattern, just some basic measurements, a straight edge and a piece of chalk.

Conclusion

Compared to late medieval and renaissance tailored garments, the tunic in its various incarnations is indeed a fairly basic and not as attractive garment. But those tailored garments almost certainly evolved from the pull over the head tunic. Far from being dismissed as “the easy option for beginners,” the tunic should be studied and celebrated for its place in the evolution of clothing.

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