

A woman's chequered cote, mid-14th century

Baroness Uta Bouchte aka Ulla-Mari Uusitalo

Fashion



The female fashion after the mid 14th century preferred the gowns to be fitted from shoulders to hips, and laced in front, sides, or back, or buttoned down front. The sleeves were long and narrow, or the overdress had short sleeves, often embellished with tippets. The short sleeves and tippets evolved from wider sleeves of the beginning of the century – the sleeves got shorter, finally leaving just a flap hanging behind the arm. The flap evolved into a tippet, a long narrow piece of fabric or fur.

Picture 1 shows the slim silhouette of the era. At the same time it is a rather rare example of an overdress with short sleeves and no visible tippets or flaps – unless they are “hiding” in the background of the illumination. (*Romance of Alexander*, fol. 127v, 1338-44). This picture was one of my sources of inspiration.

Materials

The most common fabric for European clothing for centuries, also in the 14th century, was wool. It was used by people of all levels of society. The rank and wealth of the person could be seen from the quality of the wool they wore – coarse, unfinished cloths for the poor, the finer ones for those who could afford them. Thomas Cross, in charge of the great wardrobe accounts of the English king, listed woollen fabrics from the most expensive to the least expensive in the early 1340s. The most expensive were 1) woollen cloths dyed in grain, then came 2) coloured cloths, which were only dyed in half grain or not in grain at all. They were followed by 3) short cloths, then 4) striped cloths and finally 5) the cheaper English cloths.

Checked and / or striped patterns on wool fabrics have been found in archaeological finds e.g. from London, Novgorod, Herjolfsnes in Greenland, and Turku in Finland. The pictorial evidence also proves that checked fabrics were used all over Europe. The *Romance of Alexander* alone has several examples (e.g. 127v and 172r – pictures 1 and 2), and some Spanish images (Picture 3) show checked fabrics cut in bias, or the fabric was somehow woven with a diagonal pattern.



Picture 2:
Romance of Alexander,
fol. 172r,
1338-44



Picture 3:
"The Martyrdom and
Death of St. Vincent"
by the Master of
Estamariu, 2nd half of
the 14th century

Multicoloured checks and stripes were woven using yarns of different colour as weft and/or warp. In the dyes analysed from the finds of the London excavations, there is a predominance of reds. The most common dye was madder, which produced warm brick-red, but also peach, yellow, violet, brown and tan. If it was combined with blue (woad or indigo), it gave purple or black. With yellow, it gave orange, gold or brown. Undyed wool of different shades of brown was also used.

If the cotes were lined, they were lined with thinner wool, silk, linen, or fur. The sewing was mostly done by linen, silk, or woollen threads.

Cut of the cotes

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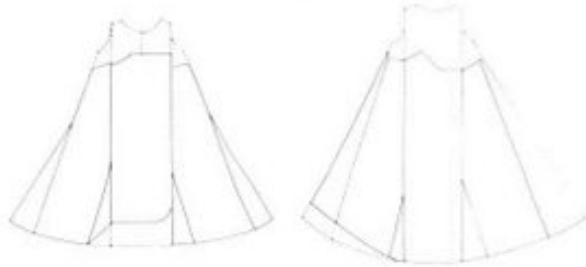


Fig. 25. Rekonstruktion av en tvåsidig klänning, gjord efter Beguines mantel, T.s. framsida, t.h. ryggsida.



Fig. 26. Diagram av grönfärdig dräkt. Efter Norderlind.

Most of the surviving medieval cotes have a simple construction made of panels and gores – straight panels cover most of the body, and gores create the flare of the skirt. The basic idea can be seen in the Kragelund tunic (12th-13th c.), the tunic of St. Louis (pre-1270), the St. Bridget's cloak (early 14th c. – recycled from a long surcoat), the Bocksten man's tunic (14th c.), the Skjoldehamn tunic (14th-15th c.), and the Queen Margareta's Golden gown (early 15th century).

The fashionable tight and fitted look of the 14th century's latter half could be created by using the same basic patterns, but with curves and intakes. The use of lacing and / or buttons allowed the pieces to be cut narrower, when there was no need to pull the dress over the head.

Picture 4: St. Bridget's cloak and one of the Herjolfsnes finds

The cut of the sleeves varied from simple straight pieces to complex constructions, like the *grande assiette* cut (very wide armseyes, several gussets). *Grande assiette* allowed great movement of the arm, together with a tight fit, and has its best example in the Charles de Blois' pourpoint (pre-1364). Simpler variations of the cut are also traceable in the Queen Margareta's Golden gown 100 years later (slightly larger armseyes at the back, and several gussets under the arm), and the Herjolfsnes dresses from Greenland (gusset inserted at the back, behind the arm).

My chequered cote

I came upon a piece of chequered woollen twill, just enough to make a short-sleeved cote. Twill was still a common weave in the mid-14th century, even though tabby weave was beginning to increase in popularity. The fabric I found is not very fine in medieval standards – it doesn't even have a smooth, fullered surface – so it was to make an everyday dress of a middle-class woman. One could also imagine that the fulling was left undone to leave the pattern more visible.

I started out with a basic construction of four straight panels, two for the back and two for the front. Having two panels united by a seam at the back, instead of one single panel, helps to create a more fitted look. In front, I left the seam open to put in the lacing.

For the sleeves, I used a pattern inspired by the Herjolfsnes cut (see picture 5). The lack of fabric resulted in piecing the sleeves from four pieces, instead of the usual one piece + one gusset. Still, the gussets are placed at the back of the arm, as in the Herjolfsnes finds and the de Blois' cote.

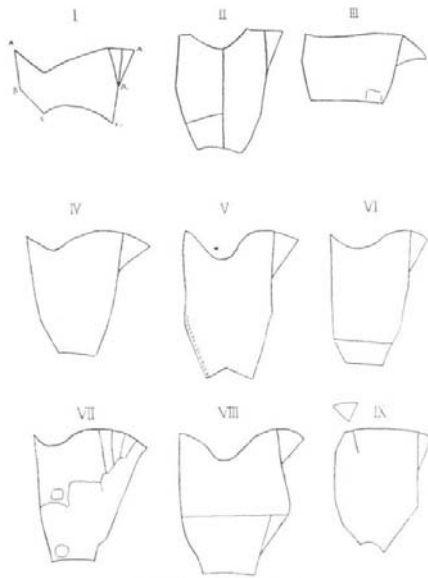


Fig. 59. Diagrams of sleeves (I-IX).
 I. No. 43, II. No. 44, III. No. 45, IV. No. 28, V. No. 41,
 VI. No. 42, VII. No. 43, VIII. No. 67, IX. No. 78.

The armseyes for my cote are slightly enlarged, but not as much as in the de Blois' pourpoint – which is the extravagant example of that fashion in the mainland Europe.

The gown is lined with thin grey linen from shoulders to the hips. The purpose of the lining is to make the woollen dress more comfortable to wear, and it also offers some support for the loosely woven woollen fabric. The stiffer linen bands between the wool and the linen lining under the eyelets offer extra support for the lacing.

The partial lining has its inspiration in the Queen Margareta's Golden gown, where the upper part of the gown had been lined with linen. There had actually been a double lining, since there are traces of both finer blue and coarser white linen – maybe to give more support to the silk brocade dress.

Picture 5, Sleeves according to Nörlund



My chequered cote is completely hand sewn, mostly with stem stitches, because I trust stem stitched seam better than running stitched. I used undyed linen thread for sewing, including for the eyelet holes (sewn with eyelet stitches) and for the flattening of the seams of the lining (sewn with running stitches), and wool yarn for flattening the woollen seams (sewn with running stitches). A cote for a wealthier woman, made of a finer fabric, would have "required" silk thread.

The seam allowances of the wool are not always folded to hide the edge of the fabric, which bothers a bit the modern eye, but it was common practice for fabrics that didn't fray easily. For the sleeves I did fold the seam allowances, because that way they would bulge less to the outside – the downside of having to piece the sleeves from several pieces, is the amount of seams. The linen of the lining has double folded seam allowances, because the fabric frays. The hem and the wrists also have a double folded edge.

The cote is laced with a finger-loop braid, made of mixed silk-wool – not the same braid as in the picture. I usually wear the dress with white tippetts attached to the sleeves – of course, as usual, the tippetts were not ready when the picture was taken. (The armband is the sign of the baronial MoAS.)

Something I would do differently next time is to have the lacing go even further down. The cote is so tight that getting into and out of it puts strain on the opening.

Picture 6: Me!

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Romance of Alexander in French verse, with miniatures by Flemish illuminator Jehan de Grise and his workshop, 1338-1344 <http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msbodl264>