Women’s Kirtles and Cotehardies

The year 1315 started a change in the weather of Medieval Europe. Relatively stable growing seasons and rain patterns gave way to a seven year period of heavy rains and early frosts. Eventually this climatic turmoil resulted in half a century of irregular weather and colder than normal temperatures. Correlating to this sudden change in the environment, the citizens of Europe began to alter their clothing and layer more effectively. At the same time, weaving technology began to allow for those with means the ability to acquire more elaborate fabrics in greater yardages. This combination of technology and weather seems to have given rise to the makings of the elaborate gothic costume seen amongst the nobles and middle class at the turn of the 15th Century.

Women’s costume altered to become more fitted in the under layers. A basic linen chemise would be worn next to the skin to absorb sweat and protect the
outer garments from bodily oils. This chemise could be a tank style top reaching the knees or calves, or sleeved with a fairly straight sleeve pattern. During this time, many theorize that women did not wear braes. There is pictorial evidence however showing women with socks reaching their knees and held in place with a tie or garter above the calf.

Over this, women would wear a supportive layer commonly referred to as the kirtle. This garment supported and shaped the wearer much a girdle or a corset. In the mid 14th Century, at the outset of this style, the garment held the breasts up and in like a modern sports bra. As the style progressed, the shaping separated the breasts and lifted them up slightly more.

The posture also seems to have gradually become more “S” shaped as time went on. It is difficult to determine how much the posture was affected in reality and how much is a stylized construct of the art of the day. In our modern society, unnaturally slender women are utilized to depict our fashion, they are stylized and often lengthened in the leg to be more appealing to our eyes. The same may hold true for other eras of art and depiction of the human form. One can note from manuscript paintings such as Saint Augustin, Cité de Dieu from the XVth Century, that unclothed women bear the same posture. The depiction of the “S” shaped figure lends to a predominance of the abdomen on women. In this time a little extra
weight leading to a pregnant looking belly indicated to the viewer health and fertility, two highly desirable traits for women of the day. As stated earlier though, climatic changes had drastically altered the ability of those in this era to produce crops, primarily grain crops. The middle of the 14th century was marked by widespread starvation increasing the desirability of women bearing this profile. These factors must be born to mind when determining the believability of the visual source.

These garments revealed much of the shoulders and chest. The shoulder line of the garment is depicted as hitting the wearer’s anywhere from 2 inches into the neckline to just off the shoulder. This can be accomplished by structuring the back neckline straight across so there is no give to enable the weight of the sleeve to pull the garment off the shoulder.

Sleeves are shown short or long. Short sleeves were covered by a removable mock sleeve that would be affixed with a pin to hold it in place on the outside of the upper sleeve. Many illustrations show women working with the sleeves removed and the chemise sleeves pushed up or absent. For long sleeves, several variations could be made to the cuff. Cuffs could stop right at the wrist allowing for easier movement. For sleeves that do end at the cuff, tiny buttons and button holes would often be placed down the outside of the forearm making it easier for the wearer to push the forearm up and out of the way for working. Monumental images and illuminations also offer a version with a cuff partially covering the hands to the knuckles. An example of this may be seen above in the image.
from The Grandes Chroniques of France. This type of cuff is used widely throughout the era of the cotehardie. A modification of this style is a cuff that drapes completely over the hand. This style is not as common as the other two, but this draped sleeve is portrayed peaking from many openings in bell sleeved houppelandes.

The kirtle reaches just to the floor. Around the hem, some illustrations depict a finer fabric sewn to the bottom 3 to 9 inches. This would allow the wearer to lift the hem of her cotehardie or surcoat up while walking and not display the plainer and sometimes cruder fabric of the kirtle.

Kirtles were laced in some fashion onto the wearer. The absence of buttons in the under layer provides for a smoother finish and increased comfort when the cotehardie is worn over it. Lacing could be at the sides, the center front, or the back. For the kirtle layer, the majority of depictions display the kirtle as laced in the front. This is by far the easiest of ways to construct this garment for the wearer. Back lacings require assistance in dress as do most dresses with side lacings. It is also more practical during pregnancy to make room for the growing belly. After pregnancy, the front closure aids in easily opening the garment for breast feeding. The placement of the lacing affects the end results of the breast support. Lacing in the front pushes the breasts together as well as up giving a unibreast effect to the garment. Kirtles structured with side lacing support but flatten the breasts more like a modern sports bra. During the 15th Century, painting details reveal knowledge of “princess seams”. Utilization of this extra seam allows for the separation in the breasts seen in later iconography.
Over the kirtle is worn the cotehardie or surcoat. This layer or layers is an equally close fitted layer, but differs in its decorative features. Details in art of the time reveal finer fabrics and embroidery details not seen on the under layer. Hems pooled at the feet and a large diversity of sleeve types may be found.

Necklines and bodies received finely detailed decoration often depicted as gold lines in illuminations. Above in the figure of *Saraide partant pour Gaunes* a scalloped pattern is used on the collar with the widest part of the scallop towards the hem of the garment. The hem of the cote illustrated also bears what appears to be 9 inches of decorative stitchwork as well. *Le Tres Riche Heurs* offers additional examples of similar designs on the bodies of cotehardies. The Bedford Hours depiction shown previously shows what appears to be a richly brocaded fabric as the body of the cote.

Sleeves provide an excellent source for the influence of fashion during this time. The most common sleeve seen is the fitted sleeve. As on the kirtle, these could be buttoned up to enable the wearer to pull them back for work.

In the manuscript, *Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes*, A lady can be seen by her loom with her sleeves rolled up in this way. The next deviation of fashion comes in the form of the slit oversleeve. This development in sleeve style may have come from ladies unbuttoning their sleeve and allowing them to lay open. This look is achieved by cutting the sleeve in line with the underarm up to the elbow. These could end at the same level as the crotch or
Taking this a step further, the area of the elbow was rounded out leaving a more narrow piece of fabric to hang at the back of the arm. This is referred to a tippet. See the April page from *Le Tres Riche Heurs*, the lady crouching down in the dark cotehardie in the middle has such tippets. These came in many styles and lengths as well. Often they are seen as a different colored cuff from the body of the garment that wraps around the arm above the elbow with a piece that hangs down perpendicular to it. A stone monument in the collection of The St Louis Art Museum depicts a tippet that consists of narrow strips doubled over and tied to each other down the length of the tippet.

Some ladies preferred to put a bell sleeve on their cotes. These bells also varied from a length that reached from the groin area to the ground. In the May processional of *Le Tres Riche Heurs*, a lady in approximately the middle on horseback displays this style. From *Tacuinum Sanitatus* can be seen the short version of this sleeve with a “flame” style of dagging at the edges. (It should also be noted on this picture that her cote is laced up the sides.) All of these sleeves are illustrated to suggest that they have a lining often in a contrasting color.
From the bell sleeve we find ourselves at the bag sleeve. These cause more of a challenge to documentation. Many bell sleeve houppelandes show a sleeve peeking out from underneath that is gathered at the wrist. These can documentably be found on mens surcotes from the period and begin with the grand assiette armsece. This type of armsece scoops deeply into the body of the garment allowing for a larger amount of fabric to be gathered lower down the sleeve. At least one example of these sleeve type ends at the forearm of the wearer. The body of the garment is obscured by the houppelande depicted on the lady. In the Tacuinum Sanitatus, women are depicted in bag sleeved cotes. It is unclear from this manuscript the method utilized to attach the sleeve to the shoulder of the garment.

The last type of sleeve is the cape like sleeve. These may have developed from the long version of the slit sleeve. Cape sleeves attach just at the top half of the armsece. The could flare out from there, be rounded at the bottom or straight across, and have dagging. Additionally, extra fabric could be cartridge pleated or box pleated into the shoulder to provide a more luxurious appearance.

Women wore belts beneath the outer layer of their garments upon which the would keep their necessities. In order to reach these items, small slit would be placed in the dress to allow access to the belt.

Hems of the outer garments would pool at the foot of the wearer. This provides the added benefit of protection from the elements by preventing unwanted updrafts of cold air. In addition to the embroidered decoration mentioned previously, women would also sew contrasting bands to the base of the dress. This could have been done to replace a worn hem, but in the April panel of Le Tres Riche Heurs, a lady is depicted wearing a white hem attached to the dress with a scalloped seam that is in congruity with the overall design of the dress suggesting it was an original design element. In addition to decoration of the hem, some cotehardies were constructed with a brief train in the back of the wearer. The Works of Christine
de Pisan show an example of a woman in the arms of a man with her skirt trailing behind her.

In order to ensure the durability of the garments, iconography suggests that they may have been created with a complete lining. Many illustrations depict women with their skirts pulled up for working. By folding back the hem of the better outer dress, the wearing could keep it clean. This allows a visual depiction representing a different fabric lining the inside of the garment. In order to create a warmer garment, fur lining may also be added at this layer.

Several garments still exist that may give us clues as to the construction of this garment. Clothing manufacture was done at home and would vary according to the seamstress producing the garment and her skills. Just as each of us have different theories as to how to achieve a similar look, seamstresses in the middle ages would have as well.

The first extant garment that lends itself to this style is the Soderkoping kirtle. This heavily damaged garment dates from 1242. It consists of four main body panels, a surviving sleeve, and four sets of gores distributed evenly about the skirt.

The bodice is no longer intact. This garment was parti-colored and made of red and blue wool. The following is a redrawing from "Some Clothing of the Middle Ages" by Marc Carlson. This style of construction would ensure thrifty use of available fabric, but would not be suitable if dealing with brocade patterns. The even placement of gores allows for the skirting to hang evenly and comfortable at the hem.

The Uppsala gown dates from approximately the 1360s and is cut in
four panels. Each pattern piece is highly shaped to snugly fit the wearer. While this gown belonged to a small girl, the cut would easily have been adapted for a larger size. This type of cut would better showcase without interruption a brocaded pattern. This pattern shows the flaring of the skirt to frame the bodice allowing for the hem to fall evenly around the feet of the wearer. This patterning style however does result in waste fabric after cutting. This gown is not fully lined, but has a heavy linen lining in the bodice. The sleeves on this gown follow the grand assiette style rather than the more familiar set in style.

Herjolfsnes no. 42 shows a style that is similar to the Soderkoping kirtle. This piece has a front gore, but instead of a gore in the side seam, a portion of the underarm is squared off to produce the fullness needed at the side to achieve the desired drape at the hem. This has been cited as probably belong to a man, but tight fitting at the chest. This garment is constructed from a heavy twill fabric in black
and brown. One notable detail is the slits for the hands in the side panels of the garment.

Herjolfnes no. 38 further expands upon the idea of the side panel. This garment splits the under arm into 4 separate gores that terminate at the bottom of the armscye. Each of these gores provides a useful way to adjust fitting. This garment also has the side slits as well.

Unfortunately, existing garments are few and far between and one has not surfaced at this point showing how princess seams would have been utilized.

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Panofsky, Erwin. Tomb Sculpture. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.)


Jeune femme, en buste, tournée vers la droite Pisanelli

Online Resources:

Gallica online (in French) – wonderful resource for illuminations
http://gallica.bnf.fr/

Saint Augustin, Cité de Dieu

Grandes Chroniques de France

Guiard des Moulins, Bible historiale

Histoire de Merlin

Quinte-Curce, Histoire d'Alexandre le Grand

Marc Carlson’s “Some Clothing of the Middle Ages”
http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html

The Use of Power and Influence by a Medieval Woman
http://www.r3.org/life/articles/women.html