

VIKING GARB 1

UNDERGARMENTS

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Male dress with trousers, tunic and cloak fastened with a brooch.
Female dress with finely pleated shift, over-dress and oval brooches.
Reconstructions.

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Viking undergarments are generally shirts made of plain undyed **linen**, varying in length. (Being the layer closest to the skin and therefore both less visible and sweat-absorbing, it will be washed a lot; since linen is difficult to dye and those dyes would have faded quickly with the washing, medieval folk didn't bother dyeing these under-layers.) Wool was also an option, but I don't recommend it for Australia! Modern, more affordable fabric alternatives include cotton, ramie and cotton-linen blends.

The basic underdress is, essentially, a T-tunic. There have been more complicated archaeological finds; the Viborg shirt² is mind-numbingly complicated, and quite a lot of Swedish underdresses were pleated from the 10th century onwards.³ ⁴ However, this handout is for a plain, unpleated, documentable 9th-10th century underdress.

¹ O. Svendsen, 'Reconstructions', 1987, in E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, England, Penguin Books, 1998, p.36.

² T. Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, Gloucestershire, The History Press, 2012, pp.81-82

³ H. Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress', *Recreating Viking Clothing* [website], 2019, <http://urd.priv.no/viking/serk.html>, (accessed 16 August 2019).

⁴ National Museum of Denmark, 'The clothes and jewellery of the Vikings', *The National Museum of Denmark* [website], <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/the-people/clothes-and-jewellery/> (accessed 16 August 2019).

A Viking woman would wear an outfit consisting of two or three layers. First she wore a linen (or wool) shift/**underdress**, which was sometimes pleated and gathered at the neck. It reached at least to the hip⁵, and often to the ankles, though everyday working dresses would have been shorter.⁶ Sometimes over this she wore a woollen tunic/dress, sometimes *decorated with bands of tablet-woven braid of linen or silk, often with a metal weft for a particularly luxurious effect*, and over this she wore the strapped apron-dress.⁷

Counting linens and wools from women's graves at Birka, nearly 60 per cent of textiles from clothing are linen, the rest being made up almost exclusively of fine or very fine wools; by contrast the majority of dress textiles from men's graves are coarse wools. These figures may be skewed by the common survival of women's linen undergarments inside the oval brooches, but even allowing for this, they suggest that women's costume was dominated by light fabrics, mainly linens and fine wools...

...The dress was worn over a linen undergarment, probably a shirt of some sort, which by the tenth century was generally pleated.⁸



My plain linen underdress.

Viking men wore the linen **shirts** by themselves or under a woollen tunic, over linen breeches. *After the introduction of linen, Scandinavian men might have begun to wear a second shirt of wool on top of their linen shirt, and a double layer is occasionally detectable in illustrations from the larger Viking world...⁹*

⁵ Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress'.

⁶ Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, pp.42-45.

⁷ J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2001, pp.15-17.

⁸ Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, pp.35-37.

⁹ Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, p.82.

... the phrase can suggest a state of undress, but this should not be taken to imply that linen clothing was simply underclothes or nightclothes. Linen clothing was worn next to the skin like underwear, and other clothe (such as cloak, hat, shoes and leg windings) could be put on over it, but the shirt and linen breeches remained visible and were indeed the basis of the entire outfit.¹⁰



A re-enactor's Viking outfit¹¹; his fine white linen undershirt is visible under his green tunic.

Most necklines were keyhole; women's dresses could have quite a long slit for breastfeeding purposes which was then closed with a small round brooch.¹² Round scoop-type necklines were also accurate for women, but low-cut scooping necklines were considered effeminate on men.¹³ Some necklines had ties to close them, which may have been extensions of a bias binding or edging.¹⁴



The neckline of my gown; if I could do it again I would cut a much less wide hole!

¹⁰ Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, p.80.

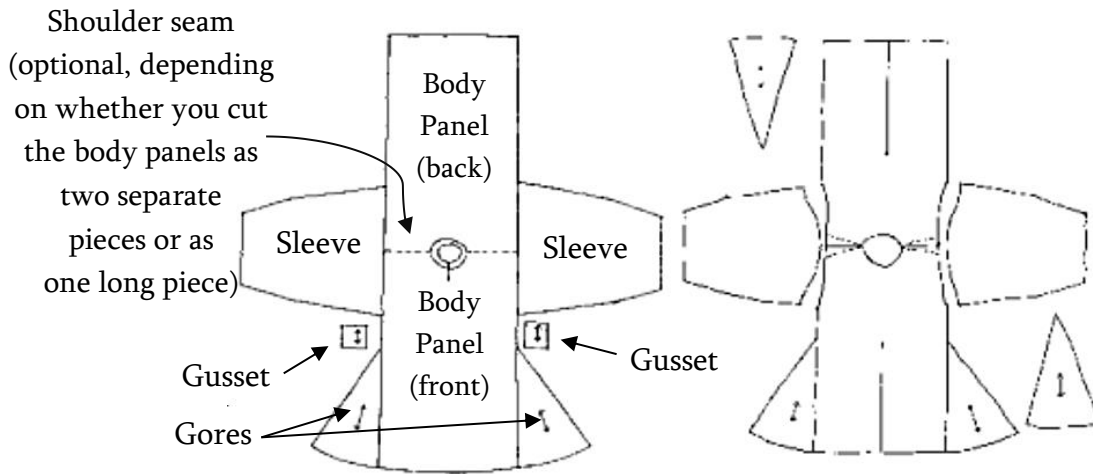
¹¹ VendelRus, *Merry Viking*, [online image], 2010, <https://www.deviantart.com/vendelrus/art/Merry-viking-154677485> (accessed 15 August 2019).

¹² Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress'.

¹³ Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, pp.55-56.

¹⁴ Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress'.

The layout/construction of these garments is essentially a basic geometric T-tunic design, with two long front and back pieces (sometimes with a shoulder seam, sometimes without), sleeves, side gores, and underarm gussets. Some of the sleeves were plain straight rectangles, and some were tapered. Some of them were even curved and shaped slightly.¹⁵



Birka and Haithabu serk patterns.¹⁶ Labelling/annotation added by me.

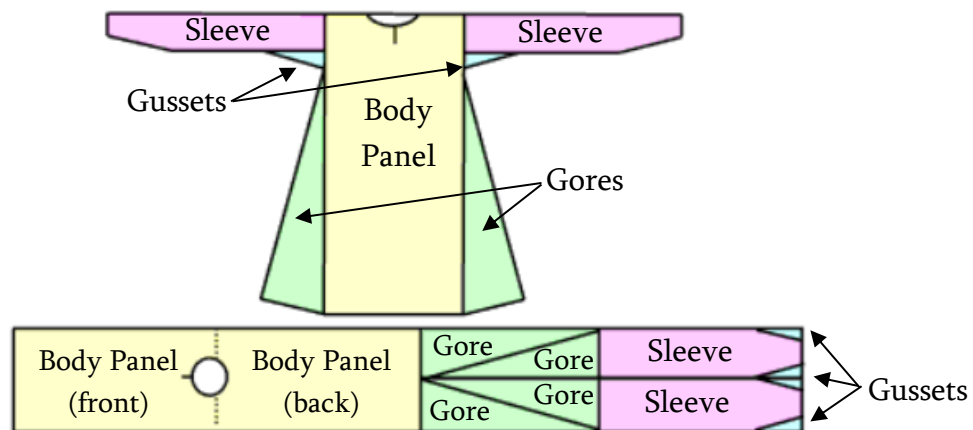


Image from Hurstwic,¹⁷ labelling added by me.

The fabric was cut so as to minimise wastage, as seen in the above diagram.¹⁸ Seams were first done using a running stitch to attach the two pieces of fabric, and then seam allowances were folded, tacked down and finished in a variety of overcast techniques similar to flat-felling. Hem treatments varied according to fabric; linen was double-folded.¹⁹

¹⁵ Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress'.

¹⁶ Thunem, 'Viking Women: Underdress'.

¹⁷ W.R. Short, *Pattern* [online diagram], http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/daily_living/pix/pattern.gif (accessed 16 August 2019).

¹⁸ W.R. Short, 'Clothing in the Viking Age', *Hurstwic.org* [website], http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/daily_living/text/clothing.htm (accessed 16 August 2019)

¹⁹ C. Priest-Dorman, *Viking Tunic Construction* [website], 1997, <https://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/viktunic.html> (accessed 16 August 2019).

Measurements: (remember to add 2cm seam allowance!)

Body panels - Length of tunic (shoulder to desired length, anywhere from thigh to ankles):

Width of tunic (widest part of body): _____

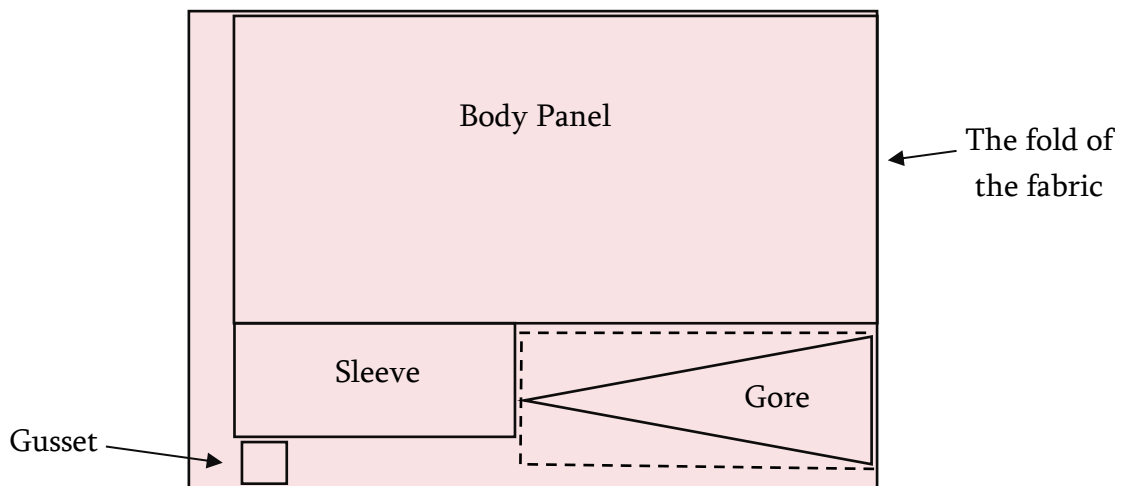
Height of gores (waist to floor/hem): _____ Width: _____

Length of sleeves (arm length): _____

Width of sleeves (biceps): _____ Wrist measurement: _____ (for tapered sleeves – measure around your clenched fist/knuckles and use that as the circumference for the tapered end, not your actual wrist)

Gussets: ~10cmx10cm square

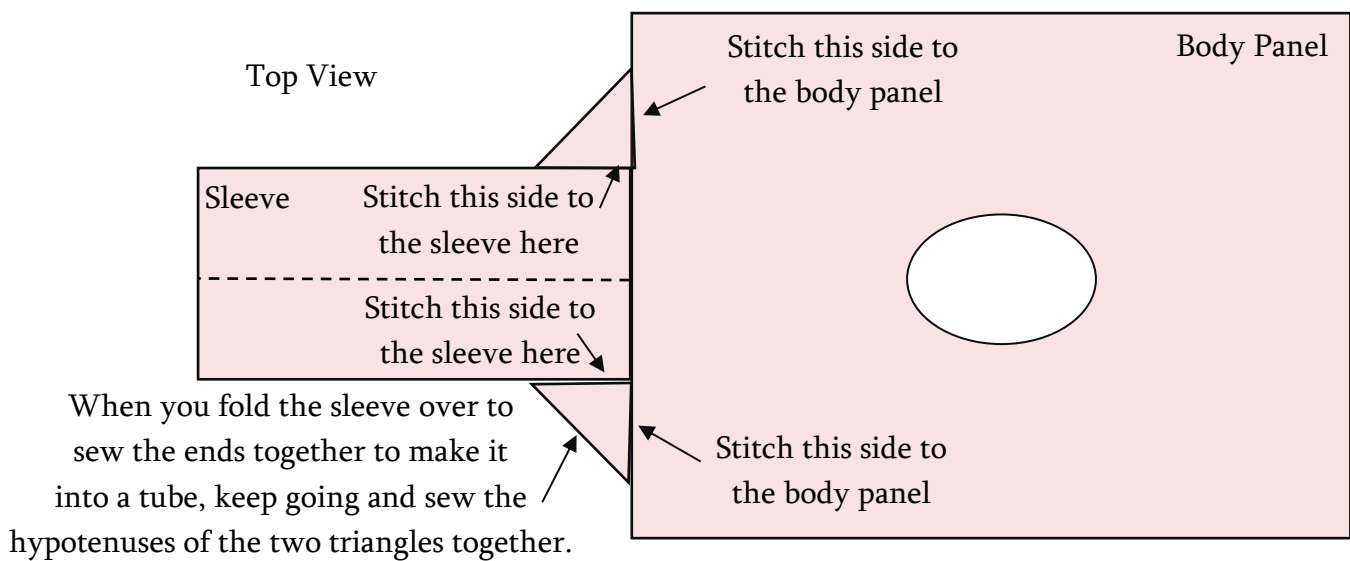
You will need two of each piece, so fold your fabric in half and lay it out flat, mark out one body panel, sleeve, gore and gusset, check the measurements, pin the two layers together, and cut them out. Our fabric is often wider than what the Vikings had, so my layouts often look like this (remember, the fabric is folded over and you will have two of each piece):



Alternatively, you can use the tighter, more economical layout on the previous page if you don't mind gore seams. You can also use this layout to create more gores for a fuller skirt (see dotted lines). See the diagrams on the previous page for how they fit together.

Construction Notes: My current underdress was made with one very long body panel, so there is no shoulder seam. If I am making one with a shoulder seam (like the men's tunic I made my partner) I like to stitch the shoulder seams for a few centimetres on each side, then put it on the person who is wearing it and pin and mark out a neckline. After this I neaten the neckline on a flat surface, cut it out, and finish the rest of the shoulder seam.

I could not find much information on exactly how gussets were attached in extant finds, so these are the methods that I was shown or that I figured out by muddling through. One way is to take each 10x10cm square, cut it into two right-angled triangles, and attach them thus (I will demonstrate):



Square gussets utilise much the same construction method, but can be a little tricky.



The tunic I made for my partner.

If I am making tapered sleeves, I mark the centre point at the wrist cuff and measure my wrist/fist circumference out from that. Then I drape the sleeve over my arm (allowing for seam allowance at the shoulder), roughly mark the elbow, and draw tapering lines from the elbow to the ends of the wrist circumference. I then trim the excess off and mirror it on the other sleeve. It doesn't need to be exactly fitted to your arm, just tapered enough that the sleeves don't get in the way of work (since my upper arms are quite large, a straight sleeve would be very baggy at my wrist; if you have slender arms you can probably get away with straight sleeves).

Gores can also be tricky. Take the length of your tunic and subtract the height of the gore from it. The result is the distance between the shoulder seam and the waist point; mark this point on both sides of the tunic so that you can pin the point of the gore to it. The length of the sides of the gore will be greater than its height (insert flashbacks to Maths classes here), so stitch from the point downwards; once the sides of the body panel are completely sewn to it, there will be excess gore to trim off before you can hem the tunic.

Historically linen hems were double-folded, but if you don't have enough allowance for that you can simply fold it up once, pin it, and sew it. Finish all your seams by running them through the zig-zag stitch on the sewing machine (unless you want to do it all by hand and use one of the historically accurate tacking methods).

And you're done! You now have Viking undergarments. If you have made a men's shirt, it will be mostly hidden under the main tunic, so don't worry about decorating it. If you have made an underdress to wear with apron dresses, you can add some simple decorations to the neck and sleeves since they will be visible! Options include visible stitching of seams in a contrasting thread, stem stitch embroidery²⁰, and strips of trim such as tablet weaving or samite silk edging.²¹

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²⁰ C. Priest-Dorman., *Viking Embroidery Stitches and Motifs* [website], 1997, <https://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikembroid.html> (accessed 16 August 2019)

²¹ Priest-Dorman, *Viking Tunic Construction*.

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