

## Focus for August: Late 12th Century Dress

Each month's It Cometh in the Mail offers, in addition to the local news and official records which are its main purpose, a few resources relevant to one particular S.C.A. topic. This month's focus is on the fashionable clothing of the late 12th century C.E.--the sort of thing you'll want to wear if you're going to dress to suit the themes of our upcoming Yule and Candlemas events.

### A 12th-Century Bliaut

by Lady Albell ingen Dairmata  
Used by permission.

This is a pattern for a bliaut which both fits me and looks a lot like the sculptures. It is on-line mostly so I can reproduce the bliaut or edit the pattern easily. If you are trying to make a bliaut, hopefully it will help. [Chronicler's note: This article has been adapted for printing. You can see it in its original form, with additional graphics and links, at [www.eg.bucknell.edu/~lwittie/sca/garb/bliaut.html](http://www.eg.bucknell.edu/~lwittie/sca/garb/bliaut.html).]

The bliaut was worn by both men and women from around 1150 to 1250 all over Europe.

These directions are based on *On Making Bliauts, or Norman Court Dress* by Marguerie de Jauncourt and on *A Practical Worksheet for Tunic Construction* by Cynthia Virtue aka Cynthia du Pre Argent. For the research behind the pattern, see Marguerie's page. Marguerie's current website can be found at [bliautlady.50megs.com](http://bliautlady.50megs.com).

### Length & Width

For a woman, the gown should fall to your toe tips or the floor. You want a full skirt and I would suggest a bottom hem of around 200" wide. For a man, the gown should end near your knees (just beyond them) or at your toe tips. If you choose knee length, I would suggest a bottom hem of around 80-100" wide. The neckline in these instructions is a slit neck. Other options include a rounded neckhole (as seen in Terrance's *Comedies*) and a keyhole neckline.

#### Your Measurements (in inches)

- #1** largest of these 3:  
chest around  
tummy around  
hips around
- #2** shoulder to bottom of gown
- #3** Adam's apple (or equivalent spot) to mid bust
- #4** around arm at shoulder
- #5** shoulder to wrist
- #6** with arm down, wrist to bottom of gown
- #7** hip to bottom of gown

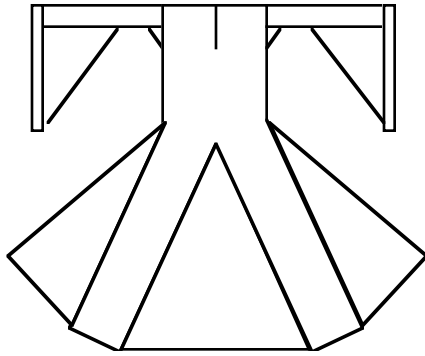
#### Gown Measurements

- A** (front and back panel width) =  $(\#1 + 1") \div 2$
- B** (front + back panel length) =  $(\#2 + 11") \times 2$
- C** (front neck slit) = **#3**
- D** (back neck slit) = 3"
- E** (arm width) =  $\#4 + 1"$
- F** (main arm length) =  $\#5 - 3"$
- G** = how long you want the sleeve to hang (less than **#6**) + 1"
- H** (sleeve edging) =  $\mathbf{G} + \mathbf{G} + \mathbf{E} + 6"$
- J** (gore sides) =  $\#7 + 1"$
- K** (gore width) =  $[\text{bottom width} - (2 \times \mathbf{A})] \div 4$

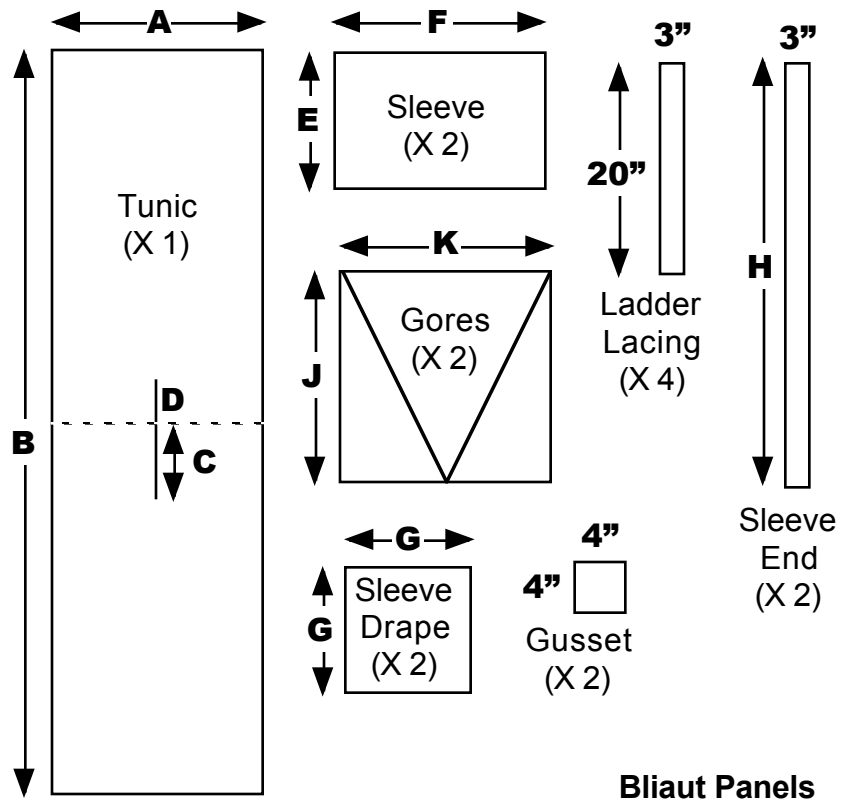
Yes, The letter "I" is missing. It looks too much like a "1" on some browsers.

## Panel Layout

The drawing to the right shows all the panels in this bliaut. The drawing below shows them assembled (with the skirt spread out).

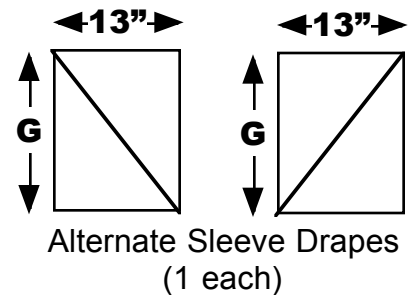


The number under each panel name indicates how many of the panel you need. For instance, (obviously) you need 2 sleeves.



If measurement **G** is longer than 13-15", you will want to make the sleeve drape into a G x 13" rectangle. In this case when you cut the two drapes, cut down the diagonals to make them into triangles. On one drape cut the diagonal top left to bottom right. On the other drape, cut the diagonal top right to bottom left.

Otherwise, you can leave the sleeve drape as a G x G square and not cut the diagonals.



## Getting Fabric

If you don't already have fabric, draw out your panels on paper assuming 36", 41", 45", and 60" fabric. This will give you the amount of fabric you need for all the standard fabric widths. Convert your measurements to yards. One yard is 3 feet (and 1 foot is 12"). Add 1/2 yard to each measurement just in case.

Bliauts were usually made of wool, linen, or silk. Cotton was either extremely rare or not found many places in the 12th Century. If you are interested in accurate fabrics, stick to wool, linen or silk.

If you haven't made many outfits before and are nervous about this or have a tight budget then you might want to consider cheaper fabrics. I have made several bliauts out of \$1 a yard cotton and found them very comfortable and they looked good too. This could be as cheap as \$5 for the whole bliaut. If you love the results, you could buy more expensive fabric later and make another one. (This way if it doesn't come out right, you didn't use up expensive fabric trying it).

If you are an experienced sewer (I always make a cheap fabric one first but perhaps you sew more than I do) or have made an inexpensive bliaut already, ask yourself, "What am I making the bliaut for?" If its for a fancy dinner perhaps you want silk (they wore silk bliauts as a court dress). If its for a day to day event, you might want wool or linen depending on whether its winter or summer.

You want a fabric which will drape well and fall into the folds seen in contemporary 12th-century sculpture and drawings. This doesn't necessarily mean a thick fabric. Hold up a bunch of prospective fabric and see if it drapes gracefully or tries to stick out in gravity-defying angles on the way down.

If you want to go for an accurate color, read up on 12th Century colors. Aenor has written about English/French clothing and colors. You can also see colors in paintings (Italian men's and women's bliauts, English men's and women's bliauts), sculptures (Nordic women's bliaut) and books (English Book of Ruth).

Whatever you pick make sure its a color you like. If its accurate and you hate it, what good was it? As a very general guideline, I have seen almost every color but the florescents in some area or medieval time. Some colors were more expensive and some were reserved for funerals but that depends on the area and time period.

Don't forget to pick up a matching spool of thread. One should be fine. Thread always looks a smidgeon lighter when its used than on the spool. I would suggest worrying about trim after you are done with the gown.

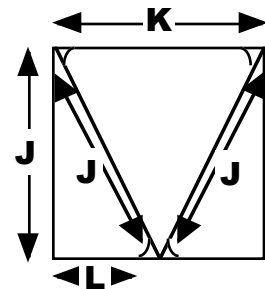
## Drawing the Panels

Using a ruler, a measuring tape and chalk, draw all the gown parts on your fabric. When you are done, check all your lines and make sure you havent mismeasured or forgotten a piece. You will probly find it useful to draw in (BUT NOT CUT) a dotted line on the tunic as shown. This will help you find the shoulders later.

## Cutting it out

Did you check all your measurements and lines at least twice? O.K., take a deep breath and cut out the panels.

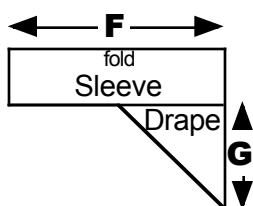
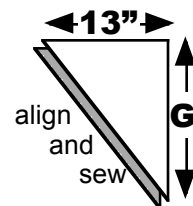
When you are done, there is one more cut to be done on the gore panels. Draw curves on them to round off the corners, shown here. Measure down the sides of the gore **J**. Measure **L** in from the corner. Connect the two points with a curved line. For knee length bliauts, **L** should be around 3". For ankle or floor length bliauts, **L** should be around 10". Cut the curvy corners off the gores.



## Sewing it

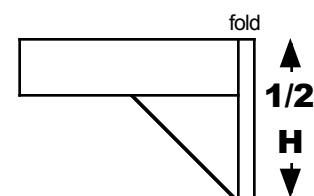
Cut **C** and **D** if you havent already and slip the tunic over your head. If the slit is too small, make it longer. Don't make the back slit too long. It should come to your bust in front. There is evidence for short neck slits and one all the way down past the bust.

If you went with a **G** x **G** sleeve drape, fold it in half diagonally. If you went with a **G** x 13" sleeve drape, sew two triangles together on the diagonals to form a long triangular drape. The top edge is 13" and 13". The side edge is **G** and **G**. Make sure you put your triangles together so two fabric outsides are together (nothing is wrong side to right side).

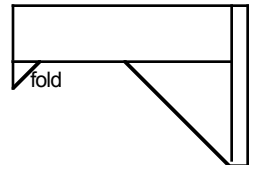


Fold the sleeve in half and sew it to the drape as shown. You will end up with a sleeve where the arm pit end isn't sewn yet and the part at your wrist drapes down.

Sew the sleeve end around the big wrist opening. Put the join seam on the bottom of the sleeve.



Put on the sleeves. They should come to between your wrist and knuckles. There are variations with longer sleeves. If they are too long, mark the point where it hits your shoulder and make it 1" longer than that. These sleeves cannot be easily shortened by hemming the wrists.



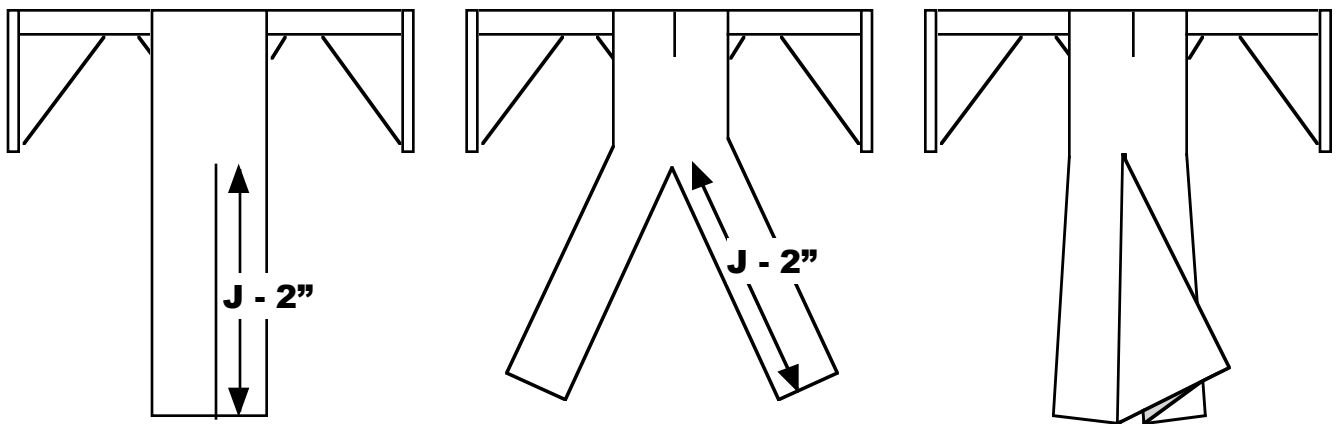
Now fold the gussets in half diagonally. Sew them to the sleeves at the armpit as shown.

Lay the tunic down inside out. Turn the sleeve outside out. Place the sleeve inside the tunic so the arm holes line up. Pin it so the sleeve stays lined up (pin sleeve to tunic, not thru tunic/sleeve/sleeve/tunic). Starting from the bottom of the arm hole, sew around connecting the sleeve and tunic.

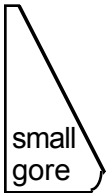
Turn the garment so all of it is inside out (the sleeves are no longer tucked inside the tunic).

Find the center of the body panel at both ends. Draw then cut a slit J - 2" long (as shown in the left and middle pictures below) on each. Your gores come in 2 types, 1 panel (the big ones) and 2 panel (the littler ones). Sew a big gore into each of these slits.

The picture to the right below shows the big gore after it is attached. The gore is sewn to the tunic along its 2 sides and appears folded in half.



hem

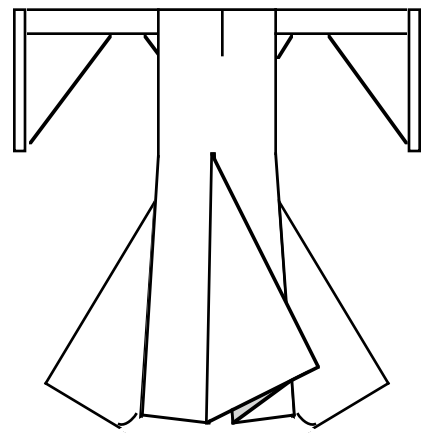


The smaller gores have 2 sides. One ends in a 90 degree angle (like the corner of a square), the other ends in the rounding cut you made. Hem the top corner of each small gore down as shown here.

Sew the rounding side of each small gore to a side of the tunic so the bottom of the tunic touches the point where the rounding starts.

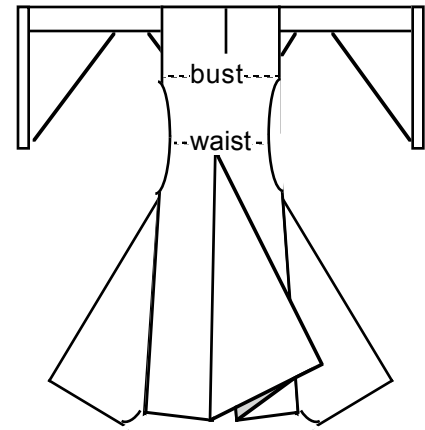
Next sew the square sides of the gores together. It's fine if the top part of the gores leave an inch or two of flat edge.

Put the bliaut on and decide where you want the side lacing to start. It will end at the top of the side gores. Ladies, this garment will look best if you do NOT wear a bra. . . 18th C inventions. . . and sew the bliaut till just where your bra line would be. Period artwork seems to suggest a squashed bust was in vogue. If you prefer a modern silhouette, try fitting the gown tightly while wearing support. Lacing the side openings tightly and giving just enough room upwards will cause the dress to give you support.

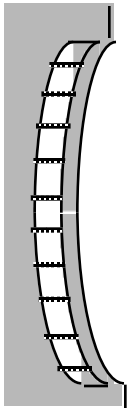


*bliaut finished but for side seams*

Draw a curve from the opening start to the gores. The depth of the curve depends on how curvy you are. I'm a 38" 30" 38" so I give myself about 3" of depth to each curve. You want to take the fabric from your largest measurement to your waist measurement. You want the sides to lace tightly, not just closed. A smidge too much curve means the sides don't exactly lace shut and THAT'S OK. A smidge too little and the garment won't lace tightly. When you are satisfied with your curve, cut it out. Try the garment on and pin it shut. Remember, you will be hemming the raw edges. If its too big, cut more. When you are done, sew the sides closed from the armpits to the top of the curve and hem the edges of the curve.



You cut fabric for lacing ladders; doubtless, you are saying to yourself, "What's a lacing ladder?" Well, I took the idea from a similar Spanish garment about 100 years later. (I can no longer find the source.) It's basically a strip of fabric connected to the gown only at the horizontal "rungs". This creates "holes" you can use to lace the gown.

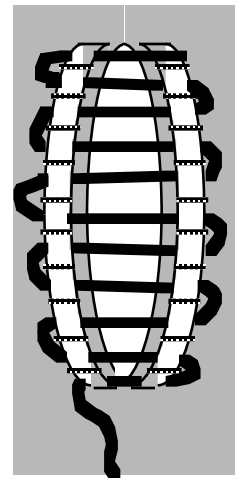


Hem the sides of each lace to make it into a flat strip of fabric.

Pin the lacing to the inside of the curve edges so the hemmed parts face each other and are hidden. Sew a line across the lacing connecting it to the curve every 1".

Sew the side gores together. Then roll hem (roll the edge till no raw parts show) the sleeve ends, neck hole and any internal seams. Do NOT hem the bottom yet.

Take 2 laces (shoe laces are fine). Tie one end to the top rung of the lacing ladder. While not in the garment, loosely lace the sides as shown in *The Zen of Spiral Lacing* [[festiveattire.com/research/lacing/lacing.html](http://festiveattire.com/research/lacing/lacing.html)].



Put on the dress and give each side a good long tug till they are tight. Tie an undo-able knot to secure each side and tuck the extra shoelace into the gown.

Put the garment on and make sure the bottom is roughly even. Now hem it.

## Trim

Use trim to cover the obvious seams around the wrist and neck. Something that looks woven or embroidered would be better than the late period fancy looking trims popularly sold in fabric stores. I've been told *orfois* (gold embroidered trim) was popular in the 12th C. If I find proof, I'll post a picture here.

## Wait! A whole lot of me shows at the sides and the neck!

So you put the gown on and a whole lot of skin is showing at the sides and the neckline isn't something your mother would approve of. . .Oops. Well that's what happens when you go out without your underwear. Underneath this gown you wear a simpler gown or two. The undermost layer needs to be sewn closed at the sides rather than laced. I have found that lacing any undergowns makes the top lacing poofy but other people have had more luck with it. You can manage with a simple T-tunic style under gown that has a smaller neck opening than your bliaut and is about the same length. The undergown should have fitted sleeves. There is evidence that the sleeves could be too long, forcing the undergown sleeves to look scrunchy. I've tried making my sleeves fingertip length and liked the scrunchy effect.

## Accessories

No outfit is complete without accessories. How often do you go to a fancy event without shoes?

Your bliaut needs a belt called a *ceinture*. It's a long strip of decorated fabric with long stringy tassle ends. It gets wrapped around you so the middle is in front just under your bust. It crosses in back and ties just below the waist in front. The tassles hang down.

Then you will need shoes, a hairdo (braids, turban, veil for women), brais (for men), leggings, jewelry, pelice (women's overcoat), and a cloak. When you have all this, you are one well-dressed 12th-century noble!

