

An Exercise in Authenticity.

by Lady Katerina da Brescia.

For a recent project of mine, I decided to make it as authentically as possible. I bought linen material and linen thread and researched period sewing techniques. What a more appropriate place to share this research than Cockatrice?

Materials

Common materials used in our period are wools, silks, and linens. Depending on what household item or piece of clothing you intend to make, will depend on what materials are most appropriate.

Outerwear is most commonly made from wools, silks or velvets.

Silk was generally worn by the upper classes. It could be sheer, taffeta, brocade or velvet. Silk could be woven with other such as wool, cotton, flax and waste silk. However this was made illegal in many areas of Italy from the 1360's until the late 16th century. (*The Use of Lower Grade Silks*).

Wools were most commonly used by lower classes to the lower noble classes. It came in many different grades ("What Fabric Should I Use?"). The Economy of Elizabethan and some Italian states revolved around wool production.

Linen is commonly used for underwear, coifs and other personal items and household linens (such as napkins, tablecloths etc). While wool was a more popular for outer garments in the 1500's, *Dress in the Middle Ages* mentions linen being used for infants outerwear (p22) and 15th century inventories (Florence countryside) state fabrics of vegetable fibres were used to make outer garments (*Dress in the Middle Ages* p 44).

Faustian (cotton and linen) being made in Northern Italy ('Faustian-a-Napes' was used in Elizabethan England - *QEWU*). Faustian was used for "doublets and for making summer outer garments" (*Dress in the Middle Ages*, p 23). *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* also mentions Faustian being used to make doublets.

Though not mainstream, there has been some mention of cotton being used in Renaissance Europe, mainly by the very rich. *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages 1100-1600*, mentions cotton in a list of merchandise exports, in Venice and Florence (p36) Cotton is known of in Venice, from 1125 (p29) Italian cotton cloth was also mentioned as exports (p64). Cotton is a good modern substitute for fine linen and less costly.

Sewing & Stitches/ Hem

I was unable to find documentation on sewing stitches specifically used in Italy during the second half of the 16thC.

However, I did find two sources on sewing techniques in the medieval or Renaissance period: *Textiles and Clothing* and a website: *Archeological Sewing*.

Linen thread was commonly used for sewing linen clothing and domestic items. This is backed up by evidence in archeological findings and in Great Wardrobe accounts of 14thC. There is little evidence for cotton threads. However, there is some evidence that it was used for clothing for Richard II. (*Textiles and Clothing* p157)

Sewing techniques documented in *Textiles and Clothing* include running stitch, whipping stitch and back stitch. Running stitch was parallel to the material edge and was more common and has been found in examples of 16th C extant clothing (*Textiles and Clothing* p 156). Back stitch appears to have been used where the seams were under more stress such as armholes.

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Stitch lengths of 2-4 mm are documented. Seams could be opened out and overstitched with running stitch.

Hems, especially in wool, were single folded. However, there is some evidence of double folded hems (*Textiles and Clothing* p 157) in a late 14th C find, being on the edge of a woollen cloak. Hems appear to be often 5 - 9mm in depth. There was one example of a folded edge to 25mm depth.

Archeological Sewing is a website (from a West Kingdom Collegium class) which summarises sewing styles and techniques used in archeological finds including Danish, English, Egyptian and Roman.

Common stitches were running stitch, overcast stitch, hem stitch. Less common stitches were back stitch, blanket stitch and herringbone stitch.

Stitches used on wool include flat-felled seams with running stitch, overstitch on seams, sometimes with running stitch as overstitching. Other seams have backstitch, particularly on bias cut seams or areas which need 'stretch'. Blanket stitch was used on raw edges of wool. Hem stitch and running stitch were used to hold a folded hem. Threads documented were linen, wool and silk.

Seams used on linen included running stitch in medieval and egyptian finds. There are examples of medieval seams with running stitch, with the 2 edges being uneven, with one edge folded over and under the other with topstitching - flat felled seam. (p9 on a French St Louis shirt). Generally threads used would be linen.

Silk seams recorded were running stitch and overcast stitch. Edges were often bound with silk. Threads used were usually only silk even when the silk was blended with another fibre.

The problem with both linen and silk is to prevent fraying. As modern day materials are less fulled than period materials they fray more easily, I folded the raw seam edges twice (flat felled). I single folded the seams with 2 selvedged edges. Seams with selvedges were flattened and overstitched with running stitch, as per *Textiles and Clothing*.

Construction

Good books on late period clothing construction are: Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion*, Alcega's *Tailor's Pattern Book*. Earlier constructions from extant findings can be found at Marc Carlson's website: *Some Clothing of the Middle Ages*.

Some lengths of material recorded for making shirts, (English) were as follows: 1522: 3 ells (at a cost of 6/), 3 ells of linen for 2 shirts (at cost of 1/1) and 2 yds of canvas for a shirt for a kitchen boy (at a cost of /8.) (*History of Underclothes*, from p43)

An ell is approximately 1 1/4yds.

From *Suggested Yardages for Elizabethan Garments*. Measurements are in yards for 45 inch (150cm) wide materials.

Mens clothing:

Shirts-all variations, fabric (4) and interfacing (1/2)

Venetians (2-3)

Doublet-plain & noble, fabric & lining (2 1/2-3 each)

Short Capes-1/2 circle, fabric & lining (2 1/2 each)

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Womens' Clothing:

Farthingale, fabric (2 1/2-3)

Upperclass Underskirt (45" fabric- 3-4)

Bodice, fabric & lining - not including sleeves (1-1 1/2 each)

Shift & Partlet, hip length (4-4 1/2)

Shift, ankle length (5-6)

Over-partlet/Italian Partlet (1/2-1)

Both Men and Women:

Sleeves, fabric & lining (1 1/2-3 each)

Long Cape or Cloak, fabric & lining (5-8)

Coif (1/4-1/2)

Caul (1/2-1)

Veils (1-1 1/2)

Ruffs- box-pleated, lace (2-3) or accordian-pleated (.4-6)

Glossary:

cotten - cotton

Ell - 1 1/4 yds or metres.

Camicia - chemise (Italian)

Lockeram - linen cloth of various weights used for under sleeves and household linen (QEWU)

Cambric - fine white linen originally made at Cambray, Flanders.

Lawne - fine delicate linen for making smocks, sleeves and ruffs.

Holland - linen fabric originally made in Holland. Later used as a generic term for linen cloth ranging from fine quality used for shirts for medium weight (linings) to coarser weight used for bed linen and sheets.

Buckram - fine woven material of linen, hemp possibly cotton for inexpensive garments, linings, toiles. Can be starched/gummed to stiffen collars and sleeves.

Rensa - fine linen used for the best Italian linens

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