

A 14<sup>th</sup> century Overgown with Detachable Buttons  
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Clothing, Middle Period (1351 - 1450 AD)

## A 14<sup>th</sup> Century Overgown with Detachable Buttons

### The Item

The item is a fashionable late 14<sup>th</sup> century wool overgown with tippets and metal buttons. Similar gowns with buttons and tippets can be seen in late 14<sup>th</sup> century artwork, such as on the english funeral monuments in pictures 1 and 2. The dress was made in 2006. The buttons, pocket slits and tippets were added in 2008. The gown has been put to good use, so there may already be some signs of wear.

### 14<sup>th</sup> Century Gowns

In comparison to many other eras, the medieval period has vast sources on European dress. Information can be found in preserved medieval textiles, from written sources as well as from works of art. However, not every aspect of medieval dress is covered; there is still room for research as well as interpretation. This gown is an interpretation of what a 14<sup>th</sup> century overgown could have been like, based on a variety of sources: archaeological textiles, funeral monuments, wills and account books.

The overgown (*surcot*, *surcotte*, *supertunica*, *överkjortel*) is a part of the robe, the set of garments. It is worn over the so called middle layer, often over a cotte (*dress*, *cote*, *kjortel*, *tunic*, *gown*). Contemporary references name two main types of overgowns: sleeveless, open surcots (*surcot ouvert*) and closed surcots (*surcot clos*) with sleeves. (Geijer et al. 1994, 46.) Sometimes garments in the middle and outer layer were interchangeable, but characteristics such as pocket slits and having short or no sleeves are distinctive for an overgown. (Andersson 2006, 50-51.) In modern costuming terminology this type of fitted overgown is also often referred to as a cotehardie, although historically this term was mainly used to describe an item of clothing worn by men (Andersson 2006, 65.).

### The Pattern

The pattern for this gown has been drafted after the so called golden gown of queen Margareta (Geijer et. al. 1994) (Pictures 3 and 4). The golden gown marks a transition in the cut of clothing, which was taking place at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The construction is different from other contemporary preserved garments. The pattern (picture 5) consists of four pieces, some of which have gores to add width. The most remarkable difference is in the use and setting of the gores on the pattern. Although this dress has gores to add width to the skirt, the gores are not independent pieces of the pattern. They have been inserted only to preserve fabric and are not functional parts of the pattern like many of the gores on the Herjolfsnes gowns. The fit of the gown is achieved more by the tailoring of the pattern rather than with the use of gores. (Geijer et. Al 1994, 22-23 ; Andersson 2006, 46)

The golden gown is currently dated to the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, gowns in sculpture and paintings make it seem plausible that a construction based on four panels has also been used earlier, in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The four panel pattern construction has proved useful in making this sort of buttoned up gown, a garment typical of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The resulting fit and look are similar to that known from art.

The pattern has been adapted to best suit the style of the type of gown in pictures 1 and 2; the neckline scoops lower, the train is shorter, there are pocket slits, the sleeves are short and set differently. The gown has also been fitted so that the hem begins to widen slightly lower than on the golden gown.

The golden gown has long sleeves that comprise of a multitude of small gores. Because this style of dress required short sleeves instead of long ones, I chose another contemporary sleeve pattern, a pattern used for the short sleeves on gown no. D10581 from Herjolfsnes. I drafted the sleeve pattern using the pictures from the latest publication (Østergård 2004, 163) as well as the line drawings from the original publication (Nørlund 1924, 94 ; Picture 6)

The golden gown has traces of a partial linen lining, which covered the torso and possibly consisted of three layers. It may have been an interlining for a now lost fur lining (Geijer et. al. 1994, 75-78). This overgown is also lined with a partial lining that lines the sleeves and the torso of the garment. There is only one layer of linen and no fur, because there was no need to make this gown such a war one. The single layer of linen provides enough support for the tightly fitted upper part of the garment.

### **Materials and Construction**

The gown is made of green wool twill with a partial lining in natural colored tabby-woven linen. The tippets are made of white felted wool. The pewter buttons have red glass beads. The buttons are attached with fingerlooped cords in green silk with brass lace chapes. The fabric, buttons and the chapes are a purchase.

Wool was the most common material used for clothing. Green is a color that is fairly easy to create with a number of natural dyes. A documented medieval practice for dyeing fabric green is by using woad combined with other colourings (Piponnier & Mane 1997, 16-17). This fabric, however, is dyed professionally with modern dyes, but the shade is a vivid dark green, one of the deep shades that became popular and fashionable in medieval society as the art of dyeing developed.

Wool was used by rich and poor alike, but there was room for social differentiation in the weaves, processing, dyeing and origin of the wool. The poor had clothes made with coarse home-woven wool, while the more affluent members of society wore clothes of broadcloth, imported from the leading towns of the wool industry, such as Leper and Kortrijk. Broadcloth, a fulled and overclipped wool fabric, was the most valuable and fashionable. This gown is made of a non-fulled wool twill, a fabric that was far less exclusive and fashionable and cost about half as much as broadcloth did. (Andersson 2006, 199-203) This choice of fabric may be slightly off in a gown in such a fashionable style and cut as this one. Unfortunately this was the only kind of 100% wool fabric available in local fabric stores at the time I began working on this item, a time before I had discovered online fabric stores. The fabric has its benefits, though. Compared to a felted wool, the looser weave is relatively comfortable to wear in even in feast halls with central heating.

The seams are sewn with running stitch, which was the most common seam type found in extant medieval garments (Crowfoot et. al. 2001, 155) Most of the seams have been finished by flat-felling the seam, a technique known from the Greenland textiles (Østergård 2004, 98). This creates a strong seam that is able to take the stress of a tight-fitting garment. The hem has been hemmed with two rows of running stitch. The buttonholes and the eyelets have been done in buttonhole stitch (Crowfoot et. al. 2001 164, 170).

Using both linen and silk thread on the same garment is a medieval practice. The more valuable silk thread which was used on the more visible stitches such as on buttonholes and eyelets. Linen thread, which was the most common thread used for sewing, was used in the less visible seams. (Newton 1980, 136; Crowfoot et al. 2001, 152) On this gown, most of the seams have been sewn with natural colored linen thread waxed with beeswax.

The most visible sewing on the buttonholes and the holes for the button stems were done in green silk. A silk cord is also attached to reinforce the edge with the buttonholes. The pattern for this cord, as well as the cord attaching the metal buttons, *a round lace of V bowys*, is dated to 1475 (Swales & Williams 2000, 27). Cords and braids done in different techniques, such as braiding or tablet weaving have been used to both finish and strengthen the edges on extant medieval textiles both from London and Greenland (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 152; Østergård 2004, 104-107.).

The neckline and the front opening have been reinforced with a facing done in a narrow silk ribbon, which is now inside the lining. This technique, known from the London excavations, prevents stretching and helps the neckline keep its shape. (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 158-160)

Pocket slits are predecessor of pockets: cut into the overdress so that the wearer has access to bags and pouches hanging from the belt worn under the overdress. Pocket slits are also useful in keeping your hands warm as well as providing a way to lift the hem gracefully (see Picture 1). There are several examples of pocket slits in extant medieval garments: some are cut into the garment, others are placed in a seam (Østergård 2004, 173, 180). The edges of pocket slits have been finished with a braid (Østergård 2004, 173) or ribbon (Andersson & Franzén 1975, 28, see picture 7). Both of these techniques give a neat finish without requiring the edges of the slit to be turned under too much, which would lead to unwanted gaping in the slit. On this item, the slits were cut into the garment for optimal placement. The material frayed easily, so the slits have been finished with both a ribbon and a cord, to provide as neat of an edge as possible and still minimizing the possible gape in the slit.

### **Tippets**

Tippets (also *tipits*, *tappets*, *manicottoli* etc) are an interesting feature of 14<sup>th</sup> century fashion. Since c.1340, they appear in art as white (though not always so) strips hanging from the back or from the side of the sleeve, typically in fitted fashions like this overgown. They can be seen as an evolution from the earlier pendant sleeve. There are no archaeological finds to provide us with conclusive evidence on what tippets were like, so most interpretations are based on depictions in art. Tippets are not listed separately in household accounts or wills listing clothing and accessories, which implies they were a part of short sleeved overgowns instead of a separate accessory. (Netherton 2005, 121)

It is also uncertain what tippets were made of. Some tippets are depicted in art so that they seem to be made from a material that is obviously fur, but on others the material is harder to determine. In her article, Robin Netherton (2005) provides many good arguments for fur being the norm as material for tippets, based on depictions of tippets as well as a logical development in fashion evolution, tippets developing from the fur-lined pendant sleeves. I chose not to make fur tippets because of personal ethical objections to the fur industry. Netherton (2005, 130) also agrees that while fur was the most common material, there may have been exceptions. I used white wool fabric, which I felted. Being able to leave the felted edges unturned resulted in a nice look, with the tippets falling neatly without bulky seams. Wool also repels stains, so the white tippets have remained white for good number of years.

### **Detachable Metal Buttons**

The earliest buttons used for closing garments are known from a 9th century Far-Eastern costume that had been brought to Sweden. The use of buttons on European clothing gained popularity and spread to continental Europe in the early 12th century. The tight-fitting fashions of the 14th century made buttons an item of fashion. Buttons from the medieval period were made of cloth, bone, composite sheeting or cast from metals such as lead, pewter, bronze or tin. (Egan & Pritchard 2002, 272)

Preserved medieval gowns (Nørlund 1924 Nockert 1997, Østergård 2004, Geijer et al. 1994) have no fastenings such as buttons or laces, and were worn by being pulled on over the head. Paintings, miniatures and sculptures present us with more variety of fastenings used on gowns.

There are several examples of medieval metal buttons in European museums. There has been fairly little academic interest in medieval buttons, so research is hard to come by (Egan & Pritchard 2002, 272). Cloth buttons have been found still attached to the edge of the garment. All metal buttons have been found separately, so there is no evidence of how and where they were attached. (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 169, 172)

After purchasing a set of pewter buttons made to resemble button 1379 (Egan & Pritchard 2002, 275, Plate 7 A ; Picture 8) from the London excavations, I first attached them onto a sleeve - on the very edge of the fabric, just as I would do with cloth buttons. However, since the buttons have long shanks, a characteristic known from many of the more ornamental medieval metal buttons, the shanks hung out of the buttonholes and made for an ill fit (Picture 9).

A set of eyelets, without signs of the wear of being used for lacing, has been excavated from London. This as well as the long shanks on the metal buttons have lead to theories about metal buttons being detachable; usable in several garments, attached by setting the shank through an eyelet hole and passing a lace down the garment, through the shanks. Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard and Kay Staniland determine that the buttons on the statue of the female weeper from Edward III's tomb (Fig 2.) were probably attached this way. (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 172)

Testing out this theory, I placed the eyelets at the same distance from the edge as they were on the strip of eyelets excavated from London. The corresponding buttonholes were placed at the same distance from the edge as a buttonholes on a sleeve also excavated from London. (Crowfoot et al. 2001, 172) I pushed the buttons in place through the eyelets, fastening them with a silk braid pulled through the shanks. Attached this way, the buttons fit as they should and work marvelously.

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## **Picture Sources:**

Picture 1: Crowfoot, Elizabeth; Pritchard Frances; Staniland Kay (2001) Textiles and Clothing 1150-1450. Boydell Press, Woodbridge. Page 181, fig. 157.

Picture 2: The Medieval Combat Society  
Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Female Civilian Costume Monumental Effigy and Brass Timeline  
<http://www.themcs.org/costume/14th%20century%20Female%20Clothing.htm>  
(Retrieved on 10.7.2009)

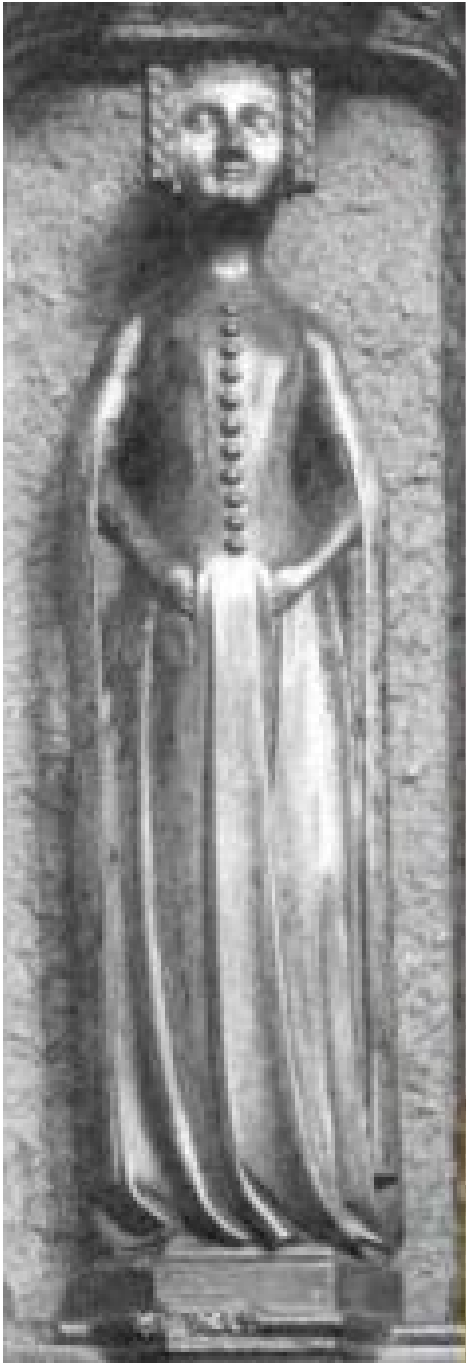
Pictures 3, 4 & 5: Geijer, Agnes, Anne Marie Franzen & Nockert, Margareta (1994) Drottning Margaretas gyllene kjortel i Uppsala domkyrka. Queen Margareta in Uppsala Cathedral. Pages 70, 22-23, 109

Picture 6: Nørlund, Poul (1924) Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes: an archaeological and historical study. Page 94

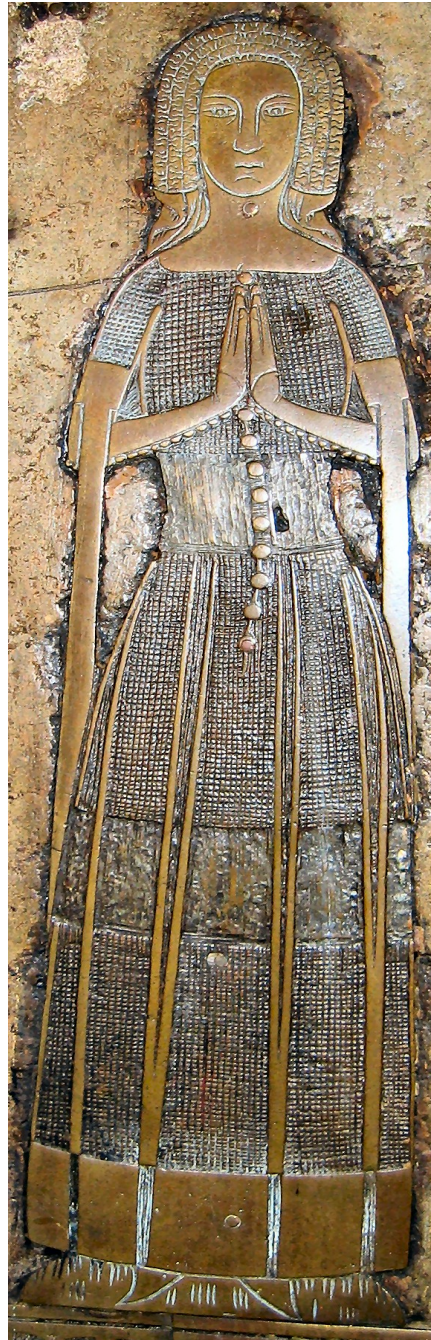
Picture 7: Andersson, Aron and Franzén, Anne Marie (1975) Birgittareliker. Page 28

Picture 8: Egan, Geoff & Pritchard Frances (2002) Dress Accessories c. 1150-1450. Plate 7 A.

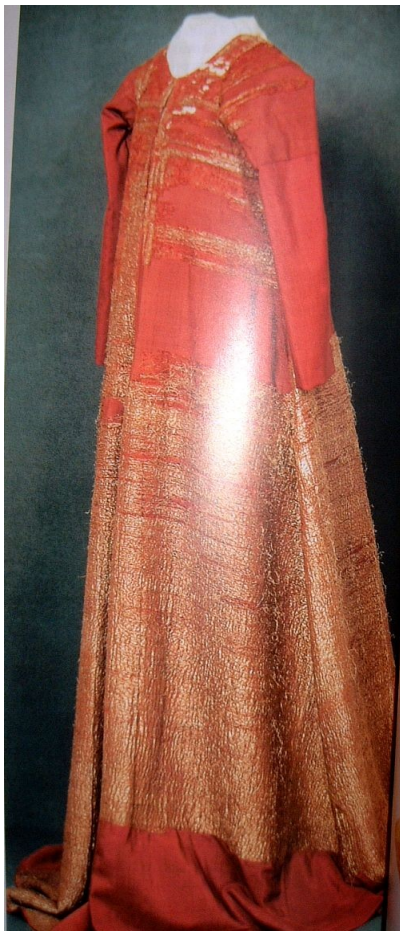
**Pictures:**



*Picture 1: Joan de la Tour weeper  
from the tomb of Edward III, c  
1377-86.*



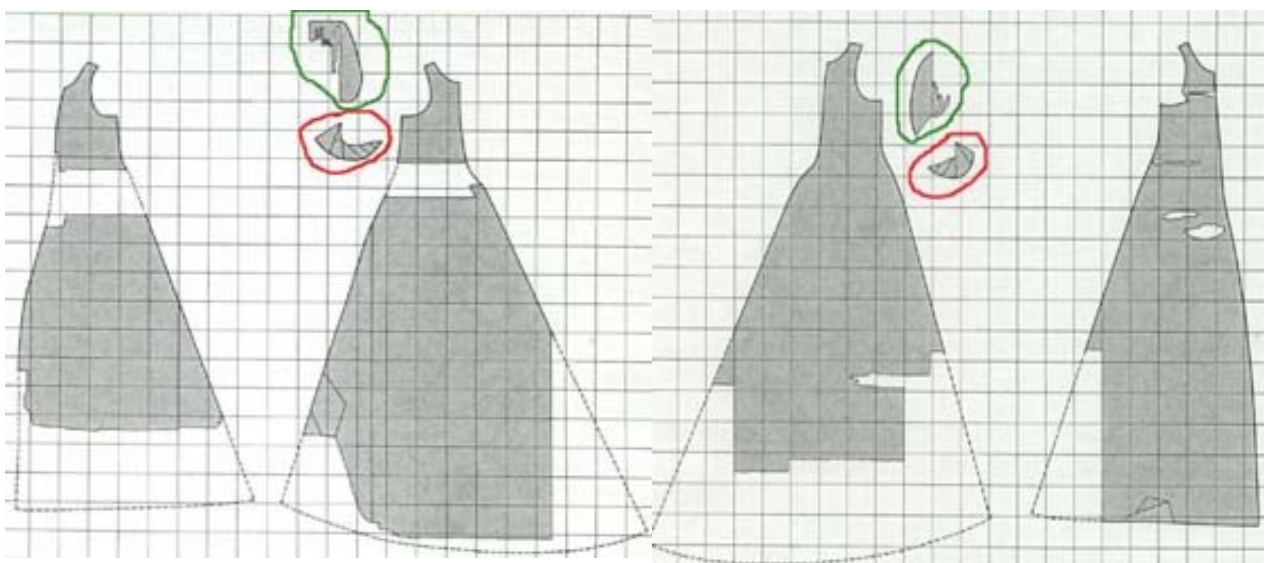
*Picture 2: Funeral brass of Maud  
Foxley ca 1378*



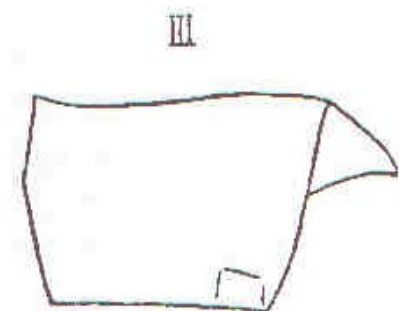
*Picture 3: The golden gown of Queen Margareta*



*Picture 4: a reconstruction of the golden gown*



*Picture 5: The pattern layout of the Golden gown - the sleeve pattern that has been left out has been circled* Left to right: back pieces, front panels, back panel



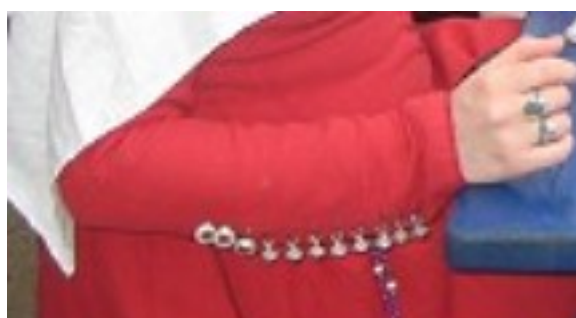
*Picture 6: Line drawing of a short sleeve from Herjolfsnes*



*Picture 8: A button excavated from London*



*Picture 7: Pocket slit (inside) from the Mantel of St Bridget*



*Picture 9: The buttons on a sleeve*