

# Construction And Finishing Techniques For Late Period Clothing

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There were a wide variety of techniques used for constructing clothing during the SCA period. Some of these are very similar to the modern techniques that we are familiar with, while others are not. Often, these techniques are only possible when sewing by hand. This class will make use of a combination of machine and hand sewing to make garments with a reasonably period appearance.

The techniques discussed are those that I have found most useful in my own experience. At the end of this handout there are some links to information that I have found helpful. I have not done any extensive research on early period clothing, so the scope of this class will only cover 15th and 16th century clothing.

## Lining And Edge Finishing

Virtually all garments aside from chemises and other undergarments were **lined**. Linings provide extra warmth, decoration, and a way to keep the raw edges of seams hidden and protected. Generally, the outer shell and lining of the garment are made separately, then sewn together around the edges. Any interlining that is required to give the garment weight or stiffness is attached to the outer fabric, and those layers are treated as a single piece during assembly. A loose basting stitch around the edges of the outer fabric and interlining will keep the layers together until the shell is assembled. The shell and lining are placed with wrong sides together so that all seam allowances are turned inside. Once the shell and lining are put together, they must be attached to each other at the edges.

The typical method used by modern home sewers is called **bag lining**. The outer fabric and lining are placed with right sides together, sewn around the edges, and turned inside out either through a gap left in the seam or through another opening (collar, sleeve, etc.). The edge is then pressed flat (fig. 1.1). This method is quick, and leaves no machine stitching showing, but it has some problems. The main difficulty arises when the garment involves a heavy outer fabric or a stiffened interlining. When all of the layers are turned under, the resulting edge becomes very bulky (fig 1.2). It is also hard to turn such a garment inside-out, especially if it is padded or boned. The other down side to bag lining is that, once the lining is attached, it is very difficult to alter the shape of

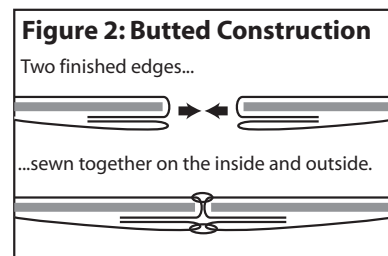
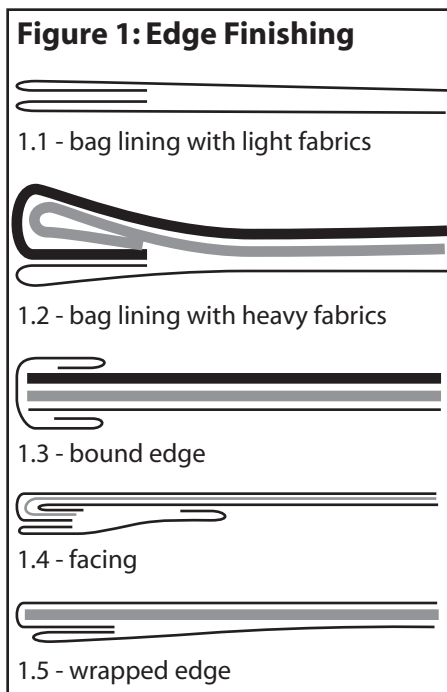
the edges of the garment. If the edges are left raw until the very end of construction, then alterations to fit can be achieved at later stages.

A **bound edge** fixes these problems and can also provide a decorative element. Instead of placing the shell and lining right side together and turning them inside out, they are placed wrong sides together and basted at the edges. Then a strip of light weight fabric is sewn over the edge (fig. 1.3). This strip may either match the outer fabric or be a different or contrasting color as desired. First, the binding strip is placed right side down on the outside of the edge to be bound. It is then sewn to all the layers. As this stitching will not be seen, it may be done by machine. At this point, the edge can be trimmed close to the line of stitching to produce a narrow binding at the edge. The strip is folded over the edge, turned under, and sewn to the lining by hand.

Bound edges are also useful on lighter weight fabrics to give stiffness and stability to an edge. Placing a cord inside the binding strip can also add a further degree of stiffness. This can be useful at lacing edges to prevent puckering.

Sometimes the look of a bound edge is not aesthetically pleasing. In this case, the edge can be finished with a **facing** instead. As in binding, a strip of fabric is sewn to the outside edge, but instead of being folded over the edge of the other layers, all the layers are folded under and the strip is then sewn down on the inside (fig 1.4). The facing can match the outer fabric or lining, or even be a contrasting color. As with bag lining, this is not suitable for garments that involve many heavy layers.

For a heavily interlined garment where a binding is not appropriate, you can use what I call a **wrapped edge**. In this method, a relatively light fabric is used for the outer layer, cut slightly larger than the interlining. This is wrapped over he edge of the interlining and tacked down to the back side of the interlining. Then the lining is turned under and stitched down (fig 1.4). This is very useful for covering boned bodices or heavily stiffened collars.



## Butted Construction

Most seams can be sewn by placing right sides together, sewing the seam, and then pressing it flat. Sometimes, however, this is not the best way to attach two pieces of a garment. For stiffened garments like a boned bodice or corset, it may be easier to make each section separately and then attach the finished pieces together. Other pieces, like doublet collars and shoulder wings, may be difficult to attach in one piece with the rest of the garment. It is also useful for finishing shoulder seams and attaching gown straps.

In these cases, the edges to be attached should be finished in whatever method is most appropriate and then **butted** together and attached with an overcast stitch. I usually use a wrapped edge, so that only the outer fabric is showing at the seam, though sometimes I will use a bound edge on a corset. Attach the two pieces first on the inside, making sure to ease in any excess fabric as you go. Then finish the outside of the seam with as small a stitch as possible (fig. 2).

This type of seam is as strong or stronger than a normal seam, and is easier to take apart if necessary for future alterations.

## Eyelets

Late period garments often require a great number of **eyelets** for lacing bodices closed, attaching sleeves and hose, or holding codpieces in place. A hand worked eyelet is as sturdy as any metal grommet, more attractive, and easier to install through multiple layers of fabric. The only tool needed to create an eyelet is a sharp awl, wide enough at the base to create a hole the desired size. A common scratch awl from your local hardware store is generally sufficient. Buttonhole or hand quilting threads are recommended, as they are very strong, and coated so they do not tangle easily. It may be hard to find these types of thread in many colors, so if you are trying to match a particular color you may need to use normal sewing thread or embroidery floss.

Once the position for the eyelet has been marked, pierce the hole with the awl. Twisting the awl is often necessary, though be careful not to break more threads than necessary. The goal is to spread the threads of the fabric apart so that it is not weakened. Next, sew around the edge of the hole with an overcast stitch to stabilize the layers and begin to pull the hole open. Depending on the fabric, you may need to reinsert the awl one or more times to keep the hole from collapsing. Generally, all sewing can be done from the front side of the garment, though if the area is especially thick you may need to pass the needle entirely through the hole and start your stitches from the back side.

Once the first set of stitches is done, go around the entire hole with a buttonhole stitch, keeping your stitches close together and drawing the knot of each stitch toward the center of the hole. Again, use your awl to keep the hole open as you go.

If your fabric is light or you simply want to add extra strength to your eyelets, you can reinforce them with a metal ring. Solid rings of small gauge wire are ideal, though leftover mail rings work fine in a pinch. The technique is the same, with the ring placed on the back side of the eyelet. I have found it easiest to work from the back side of the garment when using a reinforcing ring. In addition to adding strength to the eyelet, the ring also makes it easier to make a larger hole, as the fabric is pulled outward toward the rigid ring.

## Buttonholes

While eyelets are often more numerous, **buttonholes** are usually more visible. The first step is to cut the slit for the buttonhole, only as large as necessary. Using common sewing thread, go around the entire hole with a small running stitch to stabilize the layers. This line of stitching should be very close to the edge of the hole. Next, go around the edges of the slit with an overcast stitch. This will keep stray threads from the cut edge contained and make it easier to catch all the layers with the binding stitches.

Finally, go around the hole with a buttonhole or blanket stitch. Be sure to pull each stitch toward the edge of the slit so that the knots will line up along the edge. Buttonhole thread is obviously the best choice for this, though your choice of colors may be limited. If you need to match a specific color, embroidery floss or thin crochet yarn will work. Heavy linen or silk thread is also a good choice if you can find it. Coating your thread with beeswax will make the sewing easier and strengthen the finished buttonhole. At the ends of the slit, you can either curve your stitches around to make a fan shape or make a bar by placing a few stitches that span the two sides of the slit and then working buttonhole stitches over them to make a squared off end.

## Useful Links

**The Renaissance Tailor** ([www.vertetsable.com](http://www.vertetsable.com))

The "Demonstrations" section of this site shows many useful techniques.

**Archaeological Sewing**

([heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html](http://heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html))

A detailed survey of different construction techniques found in historical garments.