

Why wear undergarments?

Why wear undergarments? 1. To keep your outer garments protected from body oils and dirt. 2. To keep your skin protected from the rough fabric of your outer clothing.

We know that the undergarments were changed daily at least for some of the nobility,¹ and it is also known that they weren't worn to sleep in. In art you generally see naked people in bed. And besides, they would be really uncomfortable to sleep on!

What was worn?

The 12th and 13th c. men's underwear, known as **Braies** or Breeches were a long legged full garment, shaped somewhat like pantaloons with a long flap at the top that is rolled down called the *coulisse*². I have found no good pictures of the 12th C. Braies, but I am basing my design on the 13th. C. versions, assuming that the design did not change much as the outer garments have not changed that much either. 14th C. Braies seem to have straight legs and less fabric, although they still roll down at the hips. The length also shortens later in period.

The other under-garment is the **shirt**. The shirt seems to appear in art only few times in the 12th and 13th C. There are only two shirts that are shown in the Old Testament Miniatures, and about 10 figures wearing braies and no shirt. (this does not mean they weren't wearing undertunics - there is pictorial evidence of this, but they would be taken off with the Super tunic presumably. There are mentions of the Shirt in literature and art, although more often in the 14th and 15th C. The shirt appears to have slits at the sleeve, and short sleeves. The slits help the sleeves fit better under the tight fitting sleeves, allowing for better movement at the elbow.

Braies are made of white linen, or woolens for lower classes. The medieval shirt was made of wool, linen, hemp and, for the wealthy, occasionally silk³ Over the Braies would be **Chausses** (separate leggings footed or not, tied onto the braies at the hips. On the head goes a **coif**, made in 2 pieces and tied under the chin.

How do Braies affect the other clothing?

Note that the fit of the 13th c tunic as worn with the braies is somewhat specific. The tunic must be very tight fitting in the upper arm and upper chest, and flare to a very full skirt starting mid-chest. If the tunic is baggy in arm or chest, it will look fine worn with modern underclothes. However, when worn with the appropriate braies, the wearer looks heavy. Since the artistic style and image of beauty of the 12th and 13th C. in art is to have an elongated torso and look tall and thin, you see the problem. You would think the rolled down coulisse riding low under the belly would make the wearer look fat at all times, but with the proper fitting tunic, belted with a thin belt right below the coulisse, it actually makes the torso appear thinner and elongated. I believe that this is one reason for the coulisse (to shape the torso- much as women's undergarments do today...) Another reason for the coulisse is that the belt holding the braies up is what the chausses and the leg of the braies is tied to. When you put the pressure of the strings holding on your leg coverings at 2 points of a girdle, it really digs into the hips and hurts. But with the girdle inside the coulisse, it becomes padded and thus is much more comfortable to wear.

¹ From a poem temp. Richard II, a needy gentleman made the excuse " I would have gone to church today but my breeches and shirt are not clean." Willet and Cunnington

² French, a deep tubular hem. Willet and Cunnington

³ Willet and Cunnington

How to make and wear the Braies:

The pattern I based my braies on came from the Clothing of the Norman Knight, Thomas Ball. This pattern can be cut out of a contiguous piece of cloth with minimal wastage. To find the proper fit I looked at the pictures (mostly in the "Old Testament Miniatures", circa 1250.) of men wearing braies. For this period they are baggy, long, have voluminous folds, and hang at a sharp angle at the hem.(note Figure 4) All these support the triangular pattern.

What I did:

I made one, measuring the thigh pieces very carefully. And tried to put it on. No way. I had to add strips in the legs. The measurements I have given on the pattern fit myself and my Lord, pretty average sized people. He is a 34" waist and one of us has a 25" thigh.

My pattern makes the coulisse (the rolled down flap) somewhat shorter than the one picture we have of it opened out instead of rolled up.⁴ The cutting plan would have to change to make this larger, but it could be done using a lot more fabric. I feel that the length of the coulisse could have differed from garment to garment, as the length of the hems on shirts and tunics changes often in the same period as well. So go ahead if you're brave and make it bigger!

After piecing it together- the next challenge was to figure out how it would be put on- belted where and with what... I ruled out the idea of a casing at the waist line or at the top of the coulisse- to put one at the waist line would mean appliquing a band of fabric around the middle of the braies to run a cord through. This does not go along with any other sewing practices of the time that I know of, so it didn't make sense to do it that way. To put a casing at the top of the coulisse doesn't make sense as in this pattern the coulisse is triangular and doesn't make a contiguous straight top. Another issue- if you sew the edges of the coulisse together, you can't get to the cord to tie the chausses on. You can leave the bottom part open slits and sew the top together, but how would you roll it down? So I decided to leave that open all the way- which makes more sense due to the shape of the trapezoidal top.

Well- how do you put the things on then? I tried using 2 girdles, one around the waist to hold up the pants while rolling down the coulisse- and one in the top of the coulisse to roll it down around. This worked OK but seems overkill to keep track of and use 2 loose belts every time you put on your underwear.

I decided just the girdle just at the hips would do, since we have left the coulisse sides open, we have handy points to use that we can tie together to give you a knot to roll down, eliminating the need for a second belt.⁵ To do this, I wrapped the front trapezoid around to the back, and brought the back corners forward, tying them at the chest and then rolled down the coulisse.(See model figures 1 and 2).

So what about the waist? I decided that an "in and out" running pattern of threading a belt through button holes would be period appropriate, and did this at first to tie on the braies. After making this twice and realizing it takes as much time to make the button holes as it does to make the whole garment, and they have to fit in a particular placement and number, that it really isn't necessary. The girdle also touched the body on every "in" part and was uncomfortable.⁶

⁴ figure7 shows the flap hanging down. Old Testament Miniatures, 1250

⁵ Fig 1 shows something that looks like a knot at the front center- perhaps backing this up.

⁶ although figure 3 Shows what appears to be this method.

So on my third pair I just attached a cord at the center back to help the wearer find it and tie it around the hips. This gives you a really even pleating and bunching of the fabric that you don't get with the in/out running method.

Then you start rolling until you have cinched up the rear and crotch into pouches. The legs will twist as you get it cinched up tight enough. The roll will sit very low on the hips, below the belly.(model C.)

Then, to finish putting on the braies, take the tail of the slit back leg (leave the back leg center seam open about 10") and tie it to a cord, which is then tied to the girdle at the waist of the braies. To find the braies belt you have to pull apart the fabric of the overlapping coulisse pieces at the hips. Tying up the legs tightens them up and allows you to poke all that fabric down inside your snug fitting chausses without any bulky bulges.

Note in Figure 2 that the braies seem higher in the back then in the front- this happens naturally with this pattern as seen in model F.

Important things to note- I used about 2 yards of 60" linen to make these. Also, when sewing the crotch pieces together, leave part of one seam open (see pattern) for obvious reasons. This is an adaptation we added, assuming that the farm hand in the field is not going to take 7 minutes to put on his braies every time nature calls.



Model A

B

C

D

E



F



G (back)

Bibliography

Old Testament Miniatures, illuminated book belonging to the Pierpont Morgan Library, NY. Also known as the Maciejowski Bible c.1250

The History of Underclothes, C. Willet and Phillis Cunnington, Dover, 1992

The Winchester Bible, Claire Donovan, 1993

Medieval Art, Europe of the Cathedrals, Georges Duby, 1995

The Book of Costume, Millia Davenport, 1948

20,000 Years of Fashion, Francois Boucher, 1965