

From padded tunic to a frock coat. Development of a men's coat and three-piece-suit

Introduction

In this essay I will trace the development of mens coat from simple tunic worn in 11th century, middle ages to the modern suit jacket that has been nearly unchanged cornerstone of European menswear for over 200 years. I will begin with introducing a peasant tunic and it's military counterpart, *gambeson*, that was developed to be worn under chainmail or plate armors. I will then look into how these developed into more defined padded *pourpoints*, *doublets* and *jerkinses* that became widely popular also in civilian use as they gave their wearer chivalrous appeal. I will trace the development of these differently layered garments through renaissance and see how they changed into baroccan *buff-coats* and later on into brilliantly varied *justaucorpses* and the modern coats of 19th century.

Marriam Webster dictionary defines the word coat as "an outer garment worn on the upper body and varying in length and style according to fashion and use". The coat as we know now has, however, developed through many different phases of differently layered clothing that is meant to be worn as a set. For this reason, I will also look into how these *suits*, defined as "a set of garments: an ensemble of two or more usually matching outer garments (such as a jacket, vest, and trousers)" by Marriam Webster, have changed throughout these years.

From late middle ages to beginning of the renaissance

During the time period from 11th century up to 15th century the changes in mens fashions were relatively slow, as the manufacturing of the fabric was slow and expensive. During this time period we can, however, see how simple men's tunic adapted into new and different versions of itself with the increasing prosperity and inventions like buttons and lacing. We can see how the garments, such as *gambesons* and *aketons*, that were earlier used only in context of armory were assimilated into the civilian clothing. Another important development of men's coats during this period was the invention of tailors profession that brought forth new cutting and layering styles of the garments.

The basic garment of 11th century man was a simple usually knee length tunic, that was constructed from rectangle and triangle pieces of usually wool or linen fabric. The sleeves were narrow and the hem flared from the natural waistline. This tunic was paired with *mantles* of varying lengths, *hose* or *braies*, that were the early types of trousers. These tunics were also worn two at a time, with a combination of usually better fitted tunic underneath and a looser sleeved one at the top. Clothing historian Penelope Byrde (1979, 48, 53) writes that the quality and color of the fabric and the length and the decorations of the tunic and mantle indicated the status of the wearer. Longer and more decorated garments of better quality fabrics were for the nobility and upper classes and shorter and simpler clothes were for ordinary wear.



[1] A scene from The Bayeux Tapestry, 1080.

Good examples of the tunics of this period can be seen for example in the famous Bayeux Tapestry [1] from 1080, that depicts the story of the Norman invasion of England in 1066. An extant tunic [2] from around the same period was found with a bog body known as Nederfrederiksmose Man (also known as *Kraglund Man* or *Frederiksdal Man*) near the village Kragelund, north west of Silkeborg, Denmark. Even though the length of the tunic is shorter than seen in the tapestry, the general silhouette is very similar, with slit entry for the head, rather fitting sleeves and hem that flares from the waist down.



[2] *The tunic of Nederfrederiksmose Man, c. 1099.*

With the beginning of crusades at the end of 11th century the demand for better and more functional armory rose. According to the personal research of Alexei Goranov (s.a.) on the armory historians such as Claude Blair and David Edge, the earliest records of quilted protective garments originate from the middle of the 12th century. These garments were one of the firsts to have layered structure, either with several layers of linen cloth or with padding of different sorts of materials and they were designed to be worn either over, under or without chain mail or plate armor. Their function was to "absorb the shock of blows and thus minimize plant trauma" (Goranov, s.a.) Wearing such a garment also diminished the likelihood of fatal injury as cutting and piercing though thick layers of fabric demanded more force.



[3] The pourpoint of Charles of Blois. Before 1364.

The terms for these garments vary not only according to the time period, language and location but also with the historian writing about them. Different names of padded protective garments that I have come across are *gambeson* (*cotte gamboisée*), *aketon*, *hoqueton*, *jupon* (also *gippon?*), *jack*, *jaque*, *pourpoint* and *arming doublet*. Modern writers generally refer to *gambeson* as a padded garment worn over the armor, *aketon* as the padded garment worn underneath the armor and *jack* as a padded garment with integrated metal plates. Terms *pourpoint* and *arming doublet* (sometimes arming coat) are generally used of the thinner and more fitted padded garments that emerged with the plate armors in 14th century (Goranov, s.a.).



[4] The pourpoint of Charles VI that he wore assumably when he was nine or ten years old. c. 1378-1379

Pourpoints of Charles of Blois [3] and Charles VI [4] are one of the few extant padded defensive garments still existing. Medieval clothing researcher Tasha D. Kelly (2013, 153) estimates that the latter dates to either 1378 or 1379. Kelly wrote an extensive paper on its' construction after examining the original garment in detail. According to her research "pourpoint means "quilted garment" in modern parlance as in the historical context" (Kelly, 2013, 156). Kelly also provides the definition of *pourpoint* from a French dictionary, *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français 1330-1500*. The dictionary defines *pourpoint* as a "tight stuffed and quilted tunic covering the chest and descending below the waist" (Kelly, 2013, 176). She also brought into attention "that though there were a number of clothing-related guilds in Paris in the fourteenth century, the pourpointiers

were honored with their own guild in 1323 specifically to specialize in the skilled creation of padded, quilted garments for men” (Kelly, 2013, p. 156).

When looking at the general development of fashions of 14th century, the advancing cutting and sewing techniques become evident as the garments become more shaped according to the wearers body. Better fit is acquired with more elaborate patterns and closures of buttons and lacing. The simple tunic of the previous centuries starts to gradually become tighter. *Cote-hardie* is a new term for a tight fitting, usually buttoned tunic, that was worn by both sexes during this time period. During the first half of century only the upper body and sleeves become tighter. Then Between 1350's and 1380's the tunics become shorter and tighter even from their hem and the chest becomes more defined and bulky. Kelly (2016) speculates that the trend of bulbous chest that is evident in both extant *pourpoints* was most likely started by the contrast of concave bellies of slim, well built men and their need to accommodate better movement of ribs and arms as seen in the first garment. I believe that as this became the desired silhouette of a man, the clothes started to build towards this silhouette by adding more shape and volume to the chest area that can be seen in the *pourpoint* of Charles VI.

As the skills and techniques to create more complex garments advanced, gambesons, *pourpoints* and such were assimilated into the everyday wear and the clothes of the civilians by the end of 14th century (Boucher, 1987, 182-183). By taking elements of clothing associated to soldiers and knights to the everyday life, men were able to associate themselves with chivalry, strength and status, all of which were desirable qualities of a man.

By the 1390's and the turn of the century, the tight fitting fashions reach their end and these short and form fitting upper body garments of men change from outer garments to be worn under looser and bulkier, often fur lined gowns called *houppelandes*, of which lengths varied greatly throughout the century. For this reason it becomes difficult to follow the development of *pourpoints*. Clothing historian François Boucher (1987, 196) describes that *pourpoints* remained in use at least for the first half of 15th century as a tight fitting, semi structured undergarment to which *hose* are attached. It is, however, unclear when the garment worn with this purpose came to be known as a *doublet* in stead of *pourpoint* as their uses, both of the terms and as a garment, overlap. Referring back to the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Francais 1330-1500* and the definition of *pourpoint*, the change of

term to doublet must have happened when the length of the garment settled on the waist rather than below it. Either that or then this is purely a question of language as English sources are more common to use the word *doublet*. Byrde (1978, 47-48) also refers to this garment as a *doublet* or as a short tunic after the later half of 14th century.

As the crusades accumulated wealth and brought new trade routes, larger quantities of more elaborate fabrics became better available to the growing European city states, which reflects in the generous new clothing styles. The focus in mens fashions became the elaborately pleated and fur lined overgarments [5] that derived from the *houppelandes*. One of these types of garments is a *jerkin*. This century marks as the one when different layers of mens visible upper body garments become distinctively different by their cut, aesthetics and purpose.

Jerkins of the century were often fur lined and made from luxurious brocade fabrics. They had sleeves, unlike in the next century, but they were oftentimes only decorative as it was fashionable to have open cuts from where the under layers, the *doublet* or even the *chemise*, undershirt, could be seen. Later in the century the clothing options increased when it became possible to wear the skin tight doublet without an overgarment (Byrde, 1979, 23). Before 1490's not covering the *doublet* was considered indecent. A short loose coat like tunic was also fashionable overgarment of the end of the 15th century that forebode the *simar-coat* of 16th century.



[5] *The Conquest of Charlemagne (det)* by Tavernier, c. 1460



[6] A portrait of Gaspard, Francois and Odet de Coligny, anonymous, 1540 - 1560.

16th century and the rise and prime of doublets

16th century continues the trend of ever more wealthier Europeans that gain their riches through colonizing land all around the globe. Firearms and seafaring technologies are developed that put colonizers in advantageous position towards the native people of Americas. New trade roads bring heaps of lustrous materials like pearls and gold which started accumulating as the wealth of the European nobility, which in turn can directly be seen in their extremely decorated and extravagant fashions of the privileged.



[7] Fencing doublet. Between 1540-1548.

Building right on top of the styles of the previous century's loose overcoat fashions, the combination of new wide shouldered *simar-coat* and previously known *jerkin* and *slashed doublet* combo became a popular style of the first half of the 16th century, but the *jerkin* was first of these to be dropped out. The 3-piece suit of the mid century can be seen in the French woodcut print [6]. The three men are wearing wide *simar-coats* with fur lined collars, short, tight sleeved *doublets* and *trunk-hose*. This gave a typical square silhouette of the time.

By the later half of the century the desirable silhouette became slimmer and more triangular. The *simar-coats* went out of style and *the doublets* started to be worn either



[8] Giovanni Battista Moroni, *The Tailor* 1565-1570.

without overgarment or with a new, more sculpted *jerkin*, that was more similar to the form to *the doublets* than previously. The *peascod belly* was distinctive shape of the doublets of this era and it became the most pronounced in during the 1570's and 1580's. This might be due the developments in firearms and the new style of plate armor that was shaped the same way as it deflected bullets better than flat or more naturally round chest armor. The extant *fencing doublet* [7] shows an example of more subtle peascod belly from the style's earlier stages.



[9] *Doublet without its' detachable sleeves* from ca. 1580.

The painting of a tailor [8] depicts the softer silhouette of an everyday *doublet* with small decorative slashes of a civilian. The shape of the peascod belly is also evident. The shape of the stomach became more flat towards the end of the century and the center front lapels became more pointed. Which can be seen from the green extant *doublet* [9] from 1580. This development continued over the turn of the century.



[10] Louis XIII of France 1616.

17th century and the reform of 3-piece-suit

Ever more powerful and wealthy European nobility.

Lustrous details, embroidery, lace and ribbons decorated the rigid wasp-waist silhouette of the first two decades of the 17th century, all that can be seen from the portrait of Louis XIII of France [10] from 1616. This painting also shows the fashionable sleeve type where the sleeve is cut open for the front and the undershirt can be seen. This sleeve type was prominent up until 1670's when the new type of male suit was established.



[11] French doublet, early 1620's.

The extant cavalier style *doublet* [11] from the early 1620's was longer and pointier from the front while the waistline rose on the sides and back of the garment. The lapels in the hem became larger and reduced in number starting to resemble a hem of a coat. Towards the 1630's the fabrics became plainer as the notions of style changed. According to Byrde (1978, 66) the attention shifted towards the quality and cut of the fabric from the extravagant forms of decorations. This development is clearly seen in the portrait of James Hamilton [12] from 1629. In the portrait *the doublet* is decorated by only slashing, but the cut of the garment and the entirety of the look is elegantly refined.



[12] James Hamilton, 1st Duke of Hamilton, 1629.

The wars throughout Europe during the 1640's and 1650's brought once again the influences of military dress to fashions of men. Leather *buff-coats* and *buff-jerkins* (similar but only without sleeves) became a prominent alternative for the elegant silk *doublets*. These garments were made from stiff leather that was used as a protective garment much in the same way as earlier gambeson were used. Their shape was developed with the *doublets* of the period and their high waistline, but the paneled lapels became unified and longer for better protection.



[13] Prince Rupert, Count Palatine, c.1637.



[14] Buff coat 1630-40.

Example of this type of *buff-jerkin* can be seen in the portrait of Prince Rupert [13] from 1637. He is also wearing his *jerkin* half buttoned in a relaxed manner, which creates an interesting combination of military elements and the flourishing silk garments of the cavalier style. The extant *buff-coat* [14] of the same period shows the same open fronted sleeves which denotes that this was not worn exactly under armory but as a utilitarian garment of other sorts.

What is interesting with these *buff*-garments is that they smoothed out the silhouette of mens overgarments which led to the alteration of the composition of mens 3-piece-suit. From late middle ages mens suit was formed from some sort of doublet, upper tunic or mantle and hose or breeches, but in the later 1660's doublets and cloaks started to be placed by *waistcoats* and *coats* (Byrde, 1978, 70). This transformation was complete by the 1670's and the basic form of the components of male 3-piece-suit have remained unchanged, though frequently modified, ever since.

As the knee length *coat*, in the French known as *justaucorps*, and the *waistcoat* became the standard of sophisticated man's outfit, the waistline lowered and the importance of *breeches* diminished, contrary to the earlier decades of the century. The *justaucorps* had wide hem and it was usually worn closed, leaving the *breeches* and the *waistcoat* completely hidden. This can be seen in the



[15] Luis Francisco de la Cerda, IX duke of Medinaceli, 1684.

portrait of Luis Francisco de la Cerda [15] from 1684. The buttoning style changed by 1685 when the customs changed and the *coat* was fastened only at the waist, which revealed the *waistcoat* underneath (Byrde, 1978, 76).

Justaucorps was the standard type of mens coat throughout the 18th century though it went through slight alterations in its fit, the width of the hem and decorations. However it is worth noting that term *justaucorps* was only used in France. I didn't find a specific name for this style of coat in English.



[16] English coat of a man, c. 1730-1745.

18th and 19th century and the modern coat

The silhouette of the *justaucorps* became more refined in the 18th century. The skirt was still voluminous, but the fabric was collected to the back of the coat with curved center back seam and two pleated wedges on the sides as seen in the extant English coat [16].

The shape of the coat and the waistcoat started to become more swept back though more elaborate cutting techniques after the 1750's which can be seen from the apple green extant coat [17] from 1770's. The silhouette reached its slimmest after 1780's as the tails of the coat started to be cut without additional flare. The result of this development is evident in the darker green extant suit of the last decade of 18th century.



[17] Coat and a waistcoat, English c. 1770.

The last two decades of the 18th century brought new ideals of returning to the natural life delivered by the enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau. The French revolution in 1789 only served to speed up this process. Byrde (1978, 80) discusses this further by connecting the vogue for more practical country and sporting wear and the emergence of '*frock*' to this period.

The frock coat of 18th century originates from the riding coats of working class, that had a cutaway front for better fall of the skirt while riding and a small turned down collar. It was adapted into French fashions in 1790's and the striped extant coat [18] is a good example of how the country clothes were rendered for the bourgeois class with intent of appearing classless, with poor success.



[18] A frock coat, probably French, c. 1790-95



[19] A formal suit, probably French, c. 1790-1800

The toning down of aristocratic fashion ideals, evident in the French formal suit [19], paved the way for the next century's societal changes, where the businessmen became the most important members of society. Men's coat fashions became more sombre and natural in color with subtle details and new tailoring techniques were developed. The extravagant embroideries and decorations were still evident in English formal court suits, but they were left out of everyday wear, and eventually from the formal suits too. Brent Shannon (2006, 28) describes this change as a "the Victorian notion of a "Great Masculine Renunciation," in which middle-class males abandoned ornamentation and sartorial display for a sober, plain costume, idealized a practical, business-minded manhood immune to vanity and unconcerned with outward appearance".

The 19th century men's wear remained rather unchanged throughout the decades. There were slight differences with the tailoring styles, patterns and colors that corresponded to



[20] A dress coat, c. 1830-40.



[21] A morning coat, 1894.



[22] American frock coat 1840's.

the fashion styles of women of the period, but comparing to the drastic changes of previous centuries, there was nothing major. Different basic coat types that are still in use in modern day were established. These were the *dress coat* [20], which is now more commonly known as the *white tie* suit, *morning coat* [21] resembling the modern suit jacket and the *frock coat* [22], which after 1815 meant a coat that had a vertical seam at the waist and a full hem that overlapped in the front and a vent at center back. The new *frock coats* could be single- or double-breasted.

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