

Period Patterns: 16th-Century Tailoring Books

When it comes to garment reconstruction, there are several different resources we can use for reconstruction. Copying from an extant garment is fairly foolproof if you've got good resources on the extant. Drafting from an image is more difficult, but still possible. Drafting from a written description is tougher still.

But of all of these, perhaps the most difficult is drafting from a period tailoring manual. While at first glance this might seem like a treasure trove of resources just waiting to be claimed, there's a bit more to it. It's a treasure trove, sure—but you need the key to the chest.

A Quick Guide To Period Patterning Books & Tailoring Manuals

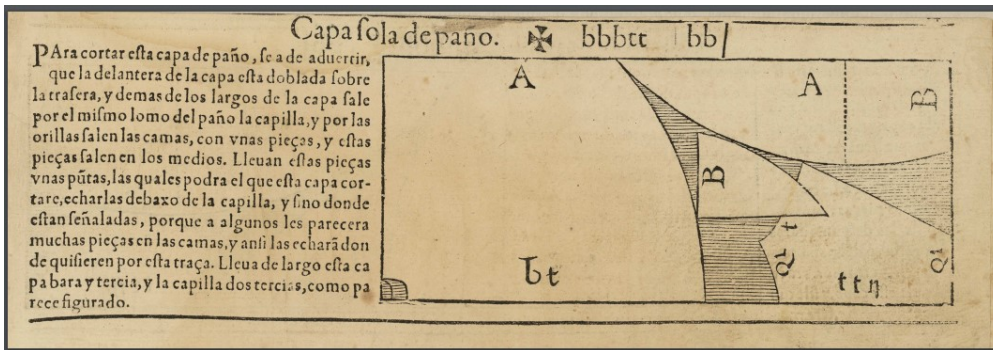
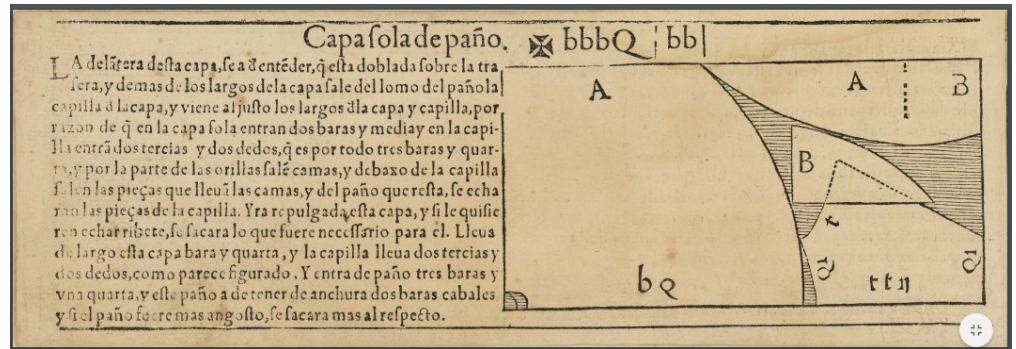
There are several different patterning/tailoring guides that exist. Here's a quick guide to what's what.

- **Juan de Alcega, Libro de Geometria, Practica, y Traça, 1589.** This is a highly complete volume, with all or most of the pages intact. It is also widely available—almost certainly the most widely available Spanish tailoring book. The book itself is Spanish in origin and was written by Alcega with the intention of essentially codifying what most Spanish tailors would already know. The title translates to “Book of tailoring, measuring, and marking out.” Reading it, it becomes clear that the primary purpose of the guide is to help tailors determine how much fabric a given item should require, and how to lay out the pattern for maximum fabric conservation: it is not a tailoring manual in the current sense of the word, where there is extensive focus given to fitting and patterning. This book was written by Alcega and specifically approved by the tailoring authorities of the time.
- **Francois de la Rocha de Burguen, 1618.** This manuscript is in the possession of the Victoria & Albert Museum, and does not seem nearly as widely available as Alcega's. I have not seen it in complete form myself, but what pieces I've seen and what I've read elsewhere indicates that it is a similar resource to Alcega, but with more regional flair. Shapes, construction, etc are generally aligned with those in Alcega.
- **Diego de Freyle, 1580.** This manuscript resides in the Folger Shakespeare Library. I have seen pieces of this manual, and it shares dramatic similarities with Alcega. Complete translation is underway by professionals, and I intend to see if I can secure a more complete version for translation in the near future.
- **Martin de Anduxar, 1640.** Also held by the Folger. Pieces I have seen are generally similar to Alcega.
- **The Leonfeldner Schnittbuch, 1590.** This is a German book, and as such does represent a significant departure from the patterning styles used within Alcega. This book is held in the Stadtmuseum in Linz, although there is also a copy on microfilm kept within the Berliner Lipperheide museum. This book features a lot of interesting things, including patterns for tents! This is part of the recently released (pardon my spelling) *Drei Schnittbucher*, which reproduces it in addition to two other tailoring manuals.
- **Nidermayr (1560 or 1544) and Enns (1590).** I'm grouping these together because I have little information about them. They too can be found in *Drei Schnittbucher*.
- **There are no currently known tailoring manuals from England or France.**

Step 1: What Am I Even Looking At? Or, What Do I Want To Be Looking At?

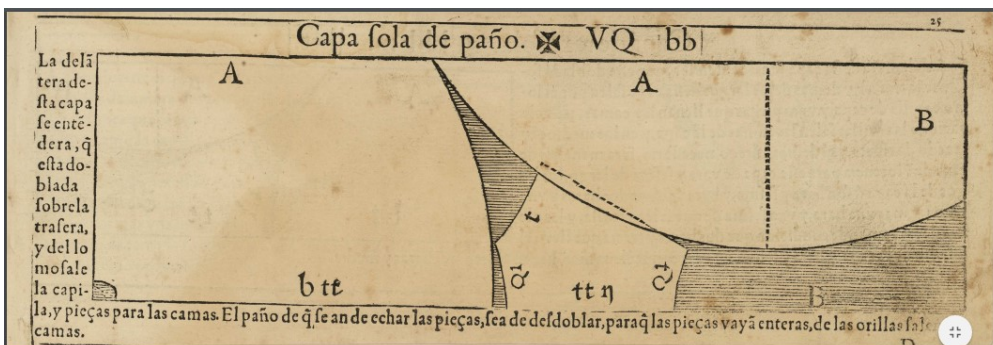
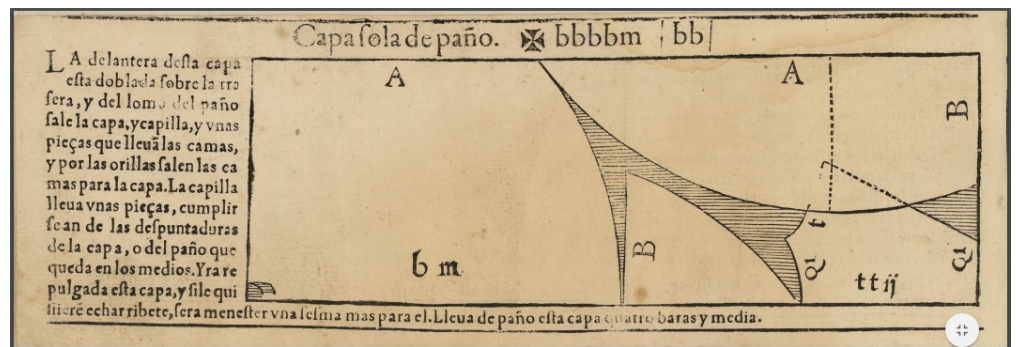
The first step in using a period tailoring manual is to figure out what you're looking at or find what you're looking for. Keep in mind that unless you're able to fluently read the language in which the pattern is written, you're going to be reading a translation (and fluency here doesn't just mean German or Spanish—it means ancient/archaic German/Spanish from the 16th century). Keep in mind that many of these books will have the same actual garment rendered multiple times depending on what quantity of fabric or width of fabric or type of fabric is to be used.

Aww yeah! A pattern for a short cloak made from cloth! That's awesome!



Wait, didn't I just look at this? Well, they do look pretty similar I guess...

Wait, a THIRD one? What? And this one doesn't look much like the other two at all.



WHAT IS THIS MADNESS.

(They're adapting for different sizes of fabric, so that it can be successfully cut from a wide variety).

Step 2: Making Sense of The Letters

So if you were looking at the patterns on the last page, you'll see that there are markings on the pieces. Those aren't the traditional markings we might be used to on our patterns, the markings that show which piece goes where. These markings actually show you what size your pieces will be...once you decode them.

The decoding that follows is for the sizing given in Alcega's pattern manual, which focuses extensively on the Castilian *bara* (sometimes spelled *vara*). I haven't tested it with any of the other Spanish ones, although I have a theory it would quite resemble accuracy. The trouble is, the units of measurement can absolutely change over time and from place to place, making it very hard to use this system from within Alcega anywhere else. I'm going to cover the Alcega "key" here—you'll need to track down the keys for any other fabric pieces on your own! Great credit is due here to researchers who have done this work before me, most particularly The Honorable Lord Jack Bandyard, whose calculations in this matter helped me confirm my own. His article on the subject is well worth the read: <http://www.chesholme.com/~jack/handouts/ells.pdf>

Name	Symbol	Amount	In Inches	In Yards
Bara	b	1	33	.916
Medio	m	1/2	16.5	.458
Tercio	t	1/3	11	.305
Quarto	Q	1/4	8.25	.229
Sesto	S	1/6	5.5	.153
Octavo	o	1/8	4.125	.114
Douazo	d	1/12	2.75	.076

Alcega lifehack: you can tell the overall amount of fabric expected for use in any given pattern by looking at the letters following the cross right at the top of the pattern in the book. That's the total needed. The first set of letters is the length, and the second is the width.

Step 3: Making Sense of The Letters as Marked

Now that you know what marking means what, you can start to understand what Alcega means when he puts them together—because rather than using his numbers, he had to squish os and ds and all other manner of things together and make you figure it out. And just for good measure, he threw in some marking letters to indicate which side connects where.

- **When a bigger letter is followed by a smaller letter, add.** tS = 1/3 bara plus 1/6 bara.
- **When a smaller letter is followed by a bigger letter, subtract.** St = 1/3 bara minus 1/6 bara.
- **When two of the same letter are written together, add.** bb = 1 bara plus 1 bara
- **V means 5 baras. X means 10 baras.** Thanks, tailoring conventions of the 16th century.

Step 4: Make Piece With Piecing

Virtually every pattern in Alcega's manual has some piecing. Piecing means that, rather than cutting one long pattern piece as we might today, the Renaissance tailor would cut what he could and then sew together other smaller pieces to finish out the garment. This is not surprising; back in the day, fabric conservation was the name of the game. Alcega represents lines to be cut with **black**, while **dotted** means it should be pieced.

Step 5: Understand What's Missing

Alcega's patterns only show the large bits, almost as a rule. The assumption is that smaller things—tabs, trim, other details—will be made from extra, and so are not included in the cutting layout at all. You'll need to get them wherever you can.

Step 6: One Size Fits All

Alcega's patterns also have no sizing. They're generic, one size fits all. However, this problem is fairly easily corrected! All you'll need to do is use the chart on the page before this one to reverse-engineer the measurements in inches, and then decide how you want to adjust those measurements. However, it's also important to keep in mind that...

Step 7: Tailoring and Adjustment Were Expected

Alcega didn't figure that these patterns should be cut out, pieced together, sewn, and delivered to the customer exactly as-is. There are many places where he gives options should a longer garment be needed, or other adjustments be required.

So, What Can Alcega Really do for Me?

Unless you're a Spain enthusiast like me, you probably don't want to go through the hassle of finding his book, translating everything from Spanish, decoding the numbers, and figuring things out like that.

That's okay—I feel that way too sometimes.

So instead, if nothing else, use Alcega's manual to help you understand what the shapes of the pattern pieces might have been at that time. How were they cutting them? How did the sleeves generally work? That alone isn't going to yield you a pattern, but it's something you can do with minimal knowledge of the Spanish language, and it can have a massive benefit. It can even be helpful when you're working on an item that isn't listed by Alcega at all. You can more thoroughly understand what the cut might have been, how the neckline might have been structured, and that'll help you get it right.

So go forth! Read Alcega! Play around with the things you see. The entire manuscript is scanned for free online thanks to the Biblioteca Nacional de Espana: <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?pid=d-1096539> And of course, please let me know what you think!

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Shire of Nithgaard, Kingdom of Aethelmearc

Class first taught at Pennsic 45, 2016

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