Ottoman
Turkish Coats

A Short History and Notes for Reconstruction

By Lady Safaya bint Ahmet ibn Abdullah
1. Understanding the Ottoman Turkish Wardrobe

What we refer to as a “Turkish Coat” is really a garment that is common across much of what we think of as the Middle East and Central Asia. Though there are some subtle differences in the exact pattern used, the general concept of a coat fitting close to the chest with a flare at the bottom was exceedingly popular throughout the Silk Road cultures. Please remember here that the “Turkish” culture and people originally came out of the nomadic horseman tribes of Central Asia and spread through conquest. They quite literally influenced and were influenced by the various cultures along the Silk Road.

As the Ottomans came from a Northern region of Central Asia, there really is no surprise that their wardrobe reflects that culture. Early Ottoman history is difficult to document. However, the Ottomans jumped into known history in the 13th century as they migrated into Anatolia (the Eastern area of modern Turkey). It is believed that they were previously settled in areas of Northern Persia and left the area when the Mongols started making their way into the area. Because of this, you see a great influence of both nomadic comfort and Persian sophistication in Ottoman clothing. And, even though the Ottoman Empire and the Persians were almost constantly at odds with one another, Persian styles continued to influence the Ottoman Court.

The keys to this wardrobe is layering. During the heat of a summer day, one could remove layers to feel more comfortable. But, in the cold of winter, adding layers is key to staying warm. It is important to remember that Central Asia may be home to vast deserts, but it is also home to a large number of mountain ranges. The Northern regions that the Ottomans tended to live could get quite cold. So, even a summer day, could catch a breeze cool enough to add more layers.
Both men and women tended to wear garments of similar cut and style, though there are many differences in accessories and socially approved outer wear when in public. A basic outfit would consist of a khamis/gomlek (tunic) and salwar (pants). A man of lower standing would be considered acceptable in just this. However, a man of status would also wear at least one caftan (coat) over the basic garments. As those of us in the SCA are typically playing members of the noble class, it is important to make sure you understand that distinction.

Women, however, were treated a little differently. By the time that the Ottomans arrive in Anatolia, they are a primarily Muslim culture. Jews and Christians continued to live in areas of the Ottoman Empire, but no longer were the majority or the law makers in the region. The Ottoman Turks continued with the Muslim traditions of the time period by requiring a proper woman to wear a loose outer coat, a head scarf and a face veil any time that she is in view of “non-mahram” (marriageable) men, this included going out in public or even in the home when in areas that men would be. These rules are strictly enforced for Turkish and Muslim women.

Though Christians and Jews wore the same basic garments as the Muslims, their women were not always required to cover their faces.

Behind the closed doors of the “harem” (sectioned off part of the home where only women, slaves and male family members could enter), women were free to remove the outer layers and entertain other women. Yet, as women tended to lean toward very sheer khamises, it was also considered proper for a woman to wear at least one layer over the khamis. In the SCA, it is common for most women to wear what would be considered “indoor” outfits that do not have the outer coat, head or face veil.

Part of what makes these caftans so appealing is their wealth of color and patterns. Through much of the Golden Age of the Islamic Empires, people were gaining wealth through their trade between Asia and Europe. As with most cultures, people liked to show off their wealth. Turkish coats were a functional way of doing that. As the coats were already a common aspect of the cultural wardrobe, it became a useful way to show off just how much money a family has. The higher quality of silk or linen, the more elaborate the brocades, the more yardage used of the quality fabrics, the more coats that a person could wear, if they had winter coats trimmed or lined in fur…… these became aspects of luxurious displays, or in many cases a sign of rank.
A typical caftan will be made using a silk brocade or silk satin, then lined with a thin layer of fine quality solid cotton and trimming the inner layer with about 3 inches of silk crepe or silk satin of a contrasting color to the outer layer.

Here you can see a close up of a 16th century caftan from the Topkapi Museum. You can see the elaborate brocade, but where it is folded over, they trimmed the caftan with red silk. But, if you look closely, you can see just at the corner of where the layers meet, is part of the actual lining which is a dark pinkish red cotton.

In some cases, this trim is sewn on a few inches away from the edges and used more like a biased ribbon stripe in a contrasting color.

*** It is important to note here that there are several types of coats that are used in Ottoman wardrobes. As there are only minor differences in basic construction, I will continue from this point to specifically talk about the caftan as it is the most basic and versatile coat. I will re-address the differences with other coats in a later section.

2. Fabric Selection and Design Patterns

Many of the exact fabric weaves that were used in period are no longer known as there are only references to them in documents with no descriptions. However, through extant fragments and garments, we do know enough to get a picture of what was common in “courtly” clothing.

As mentioned before, clothing was a way for people to show off their luxury. So, as would be expected, members of court would wear the most expensive and luxurious fabrics for formal occasions where they would be seen. The everyday clothing of many would still be as fine as possible, but perhaps a few steps down in cost.

The most commonly used fabrics for a standard caftan would be silk, silk satin, silk brocade, satin, cotton, wool, mohair, velvet, and velvet brocade. Winter coats and ceremonial coats commonly were lined or trimmed with furs.

A typical caftan will be made using a silk brocade or silk satin, then lined with a thin layer of fine quality solid cotton and trimming the inner layer with about 3 inches of silk crepe or silk satin of a contrasting color to the outer layer.
The most highly sought after fabrics were brocades using large amounts of gold or silver thread, such as the brocade used in the previous image. Only those with very deep pockets could ever dream of having a caftan where gold or silver was wrapped around 2 silk threads and then woven into a fabric where the metallic thread was the background and colored threads were the pattern. That is some very expensive fabric. So much so that later in Ottoman history, the gold and silver was becoming increasingly rare and expensive causing this type of fabric to disappear rather quickly.

Though there are several examples of this metallic brocade, I suspect that those particular caftans were spared because of their rarity and luxury within the royal treasury. At those prices, it was far more common to find brocades of color backgrounds with gold or silver designs, or brocades without gold or silver at all. So, when you start to look at pictures of extant garments, please don’t get discouraged by the selections of color over gold thread.

In fact, don’t stress out over finding 100% silk brocades. I know from experience that it is difficult and expensive to find 100% silk brocades still made using period fabric patterns. As a wonderful Laurel pointed out to me once, sometimes it is better to get the pattern of the fabric right rather than the content of the fabric. If you can find a period pattern printed on cotton, go for it. If you can find a perfectly period pattern that is woven into upholstery fabric or a brocade from Joann’s of questionable composition, well, just don’t wear it around fires. But, if you really want to get as close to period as possible in fabric choice, then you might want to start with solid silks, wools, and cotton. Solid colors were very commonly used as were solid fabrics with appliqué designs to a lesser extent until after period.

For color choices, you can not go wrong with turquoise, red, yellow, white, gold, and silver. There is a definite tendency to see a lot of those colors in the extant garments and remnants. However, there are some remaining examples and historical references of green, blue, purple, pink, peach, and other colors as well. Generally speaking, the Ottomans loved bright colors. So, feel free to expand your selections as is appropriate to what you find and what you like. Now, I will also note that black does make for a dramatic color selection in many cases (I am currently working on a coat with a brocade of black background and red and teal pattern), however, please know that the Ottoman Turks viewed black as a solemn color denoting misfortune. It is commonly worn at funerals and such. If you see a manuscript of people wearing a lot of black, it most likely either a funeral, a group of women (dark color tendencies), or not an Ottoman Turkish manuscript. Black was the color of choice for earlier Persian courts (as a sign of continued mourning for the death of Ali and Hassan) and the tradition did continue with some other communities around the Middle East.

Though the Ottomans did still trade and sell Chinese and Persian fabrics within their own markets, they were somewhat partial to the fabrics woven around Turkey and Damascus. There is a wide range of patterns that can be documented. Here are some of the more common patterns woven by Ottoman Turkish weavers.
There is a great deal of freedom within these styles to add, combine and create. There are also other styles beyond what is shown, such as geometric patterns, a pinstripe plaid or three dots design. Stripes seem to be a less desired pattern within the Ottoman court, but still present. There are extant examples of children’s caftans and shoes with stripes, but not adult caftans. Also other courts in the Middle East do show an interest in stripes. Paisleys, are one of the few patterns that I have not found used by Turkish weavers in our period. They are however documented to Persian fabrics within the 16th century. Paisleys may not have been very popular with the Ottoman Turks, but we do know that they continued to sell and buy Persian fabrics. So, the case can be made if you really want to have a paisley coat. One thing to note though, is that period paisley fabrics had one large paisley repeated facing the same direction, unlike the modern patterns that have many all twisting in different directions.

When you are looking for a fabric, remember, if you find a fabric that looks really close, but not quite, feel free to give it a try. However, if you are doing this for an Arts and Science project, perhaps getting as close as possible would be recommended.

So, when you are looking at making a Turkish outfit, think about these things. Remember the purpose of your outfit, court appropriate may not be war appropriate. Hugely wide pants were made of silk to show off just how much money you have that you can afford that much silk to cover your legs. This is not as effective in thick linen or wool. Five coats on a woman was common in colder weather, not as common in the summer, and if she did wear that many in the summer it was to show off to other women, not be comfortable. People who could not afford the elaborate silk brocades, did wear solid silks, linen and wools. So, don’t feel that you need to dress like the Sultan, make your choices based on what you can afford effectively. Enjoy picking out fabrics for your Turkish outfit. But please keep in mind that period Turkish coats loved to play with bold color selections, mixing fabric patterns, and mixing coat lengths.
3. *Patterning a Basic Caftan/Coat*

Ok, so let’s look at how these coats are made. The best examples of extant Turkish coats, are found at the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul. It is very important to pay attention to who was supposed to get the specific coat though. Unfortunately, most of the remaining coats on exhibit are made for children and men. So, women may want to add a little to the pattern to flatter their curves. Here is a classic example.

![Image of a classic example of a Turkish coat](image)

From this, you can see that these coats use geometric pieces to create sleeves, and gores. As this is a child’s caftan for a young boy, it has no gussets. For adult women, you will want to add in gussets to give extra room for your chest area. Also, this coat only has gores added to the sides. Side gores do not give as much flare in the coat and is not as flattering on the backside. It is common for women in the SCA to add a third gore in the back to give more flare. At this point, I do not have documentation on the gore in the back from extant references. So, please view this as a modern adaptation. I will say, however, that from experience, the gore in the back is needed to obtain the smooth flow of fabric that you typically see in period illustrations.
One thing that you will want to think about is whether or not you want to line the coat. As you see in this image, women commonly would tuck the corners of their coats into their belts or sashes. It was another way for them to show off more color and more fabric, as well as having a practical aspect. However, if you wish to do this, you will want to use both side and back gores to give enough flare in the coat to be able to do this elegantly. If however, you would prefer to not tuck in the corners and you are wishing for the coat to be an under coat, using only two gores is completely appropriate.

Additionally, there are typically two other gores attached at the front panels of the caftan. This allows the fabric to cross over itself when folded, but it will provide more modesty when walking or sitting.

Here are some important questions to ask before you start:

- How many coats are you making?
- Where will this coat fit into that wardrobe? (example, a long under coat meant to have other coats over it, a loose over coat to keep you warm…)
- How many Gores spaces would you prefer, 2, 3, 4 or 5?
- How flared do you want your Gores?
- How long do you want your coat to be?
- Do you want to line and/or trim this coat?
~To Start With~

You will need to get some basic measurements of the person who will wear the caftan.

A. Width of shoulders:__________
B. Waist:__________
C. Chest over breasts:__________
D. Length of arm:__________
E. Width of arms eye:__________
F. Bicep:__________
G. Wrist width (over hand/duck):__________
H. Waist:__________
I. Distance from Arms eye to waist:__________
J. Desired length of coat:__________
K. Preferred flare for gores:__________

**Body Panels:**

Most Turkish caftans in the SCA are made with 3 spaces for gores. This does provide the most flattering flare for most body types. However, it is also period to make a coat with only the side spaces for gores. This is better if you want to be more authentic or great if you know for sure that you will use this coat as an under coat only.

\[
K = \left( \frac{A}{2} \right) + 1 = _______
\]

\[
L = J + 1 = _______
\]

\[
M = A + 1 = _______
\]

**Sleeves:**

\[
P \text{ (short sleeve option) } = P \text{ (your desired length) } + 1 = _______
\]

\[
Q = G + 3 = _______
\]

\[
R \text{ (long sleeve option) } = E + 1 = _______
\]

\[
S = H + 1 = _______
\]

See gussets for O measurement.
Gussets:

Gussets are the key to making this a fitted coat. This is where you get that nice tight fit across the abdomen. Please note that the shape drawn below is consistent with most women’s gussets. However, the shape may end up being more square or even reversed depending on body type.

\[ O = \frac{[(C \quad \quad) - (A\quad \quad \times 2)]}{4} + 1 = \quad \]

\[ U = I\quad \quad + 1 = \quad \]

\[ W = \frac{B\quad \quad - (A\quad \quad \times 2)}{4} + 1 = \quad \]

Gores:

\[ X = J\quad \quad - \frac{1}{2}F\quad \quad - I\quad \quad + 1 = \quad \]

\[ W \text{ (from gusset section)} = \quad \]

\[ Z = \frac{Y\quad \quad}{2} + 1 = \quad \]

***Please note that when cutting your back gores, W should equal 1 inch. For your front gores, W should equal ½ inch. For side gores W will follow the given equation in the Gusset section.

Notes on Measurements Given:

- All measurements are based on a ½ inch seem allowance.
- Please remember that Z is a bottom hem line, it will most likely need to be trimmed before hemming as you will want a curved cut.
- Please do a mock up garment out of cheap cotton first to make sure that your measurements are correct.
- If you don’t have very much fabric, you can manipulate your gores to keep up with space (opting for 2 side gores, choosing to not have front gores, or even going with slits instead of gores) and/or opt for a slightly shorter coat.
- The average person should be able to get a short sleeved, thigh length caftan from 2 yards of 60 inch wide fabric, 3 yards of 45 inch wide fabric. For a short sleeved, long length caftan or a long sleeved, short length caftan you should add an extra 1- 1 ½ yards of fabric. A long sleeved, long length caftan will add an additional 1 yard. If the fabric has a pattern with direction, you may want more. As always an extra yard or two is nice to have just in case.
Piecing Things Together

Please remember that this diagram is only half of your coat. You will duplicate these pieces. Sew each half all together as shown, then sew the two halves together connecting the two back body panels and back gores (if you have them). I have found that the fabric will stay smoother and not pucker if you sew the biased (angle cut) edge of the gores to the straight cut of the body panels, that way when you get to the end and sew the two gores together, you are sewing two straight edges. Once this is done and all pieces of the shoulders and back are together, lay the caftan out flat to mark and cut your neck hole. Now, you can sew the sides in place by starting at the wrist/arm end of the sleeve and going straight down to the end of the gores. Finally, you can finish off hems as needed.

To make your neck hole, there are several options available. The easiest is to measure the circumference of your head, then use a compass to draw a circle the size of your head onto a piece of paper, cut out that circle and pin it to your coat while it is flat (before sewing the side seems), please measure and make sure it is centered and only about 2 inches over lap with the back body panels, then trace the circle with chalk and cut out that circle. This should provide you with a basic round neckline on the coat.

If you choose to line your caftan, cut and sew your lining just as you would a caftan. If you want to trim the coat, you may want to add the trim to the lining before attaching it to the outer caftan. But, before you hem anything, turn your lining inside out and pin it into place with your caftan. You can then hem both garments together. Personally, I find it helpful to reverse the two garments and sew the front opening and neck lines together, then reverse the caftans into their intended directions and top sew the bottom hem and sleeves together. I have also found it helpful to tack the lining to the caftan along the shoulders and in the armpit. This just helps the layers hang together smoothly.
4. Period Variations

Now that we have had a chance to look at the some of the history and how to make a basic caftan. Let's look at the variations of the Ottoman Turkish Coats.

~Variations of the Basic Caftan:

More than just fabric selection and number of gores, there are many variations that you will see just in using a basic short sleeved caftan.

Most commonly, the caftans are lined with some kind of colored trim on the inside. However, there are examples of just using the trim for color, without the extra lining. Also there are coats that have fur lining or fur trim. Like the one shown here. Furs were commonly used as a sign of rank or prestige. Concubines for example would not get coats or caftans with fur trim until they reached certain levels within the hierarchy, and fur lined was even higher up. Also, different types of fur were commonly signs of rank within the military or public office.

Several caftans still exist where the front panels and gores are shorter than the back panels and gores. As you can see in this image, the caftan is the red velvet, and it is trimmed in a goldenrod colored satin. To achieve this look, the side gores are not attached, but rather remain split up the sides to the hips, and all edges are trimmed. This looks especially lovely when worn over a longer sleeved, long length entari.

Also, you can split gores so they slit to the knees on longer length caftans to give more range of movement when using only 2 gores. Additionally, another option with your basic caftan is to curve your gussets and gores more to create a more fitted and flared look, like you see depicted on the cover of this handout, or page 14 or 18.
~Various Types of Sleeves

As you start to look at Ottoman caftans and coats, you will notice a wide range of sleeve styles. Some are specific to the type of coat and others are not.

With basic caftans, typically, they are made with short sleeves. However, you can also have an extra pair of long sleeves that will attach to the caftan for extra warmth or show of luxury. Also, it is common to see the edges of the sleeves cut into curved patterns that allow the short sleeve to reach closer to elbow length without getting in the way of the bend of the arm. Here is a perfect example of both options.

Here are some side view basic sleeve shapes that I have commonly seen used in period garments.
With longer sleeved caftans, you will generally see 6 options.

1. There are sleeves like the ones shown on the previous page that are attached rather than sewn into the garment.

2. There are long straight or sleeves that are sewn in and are cut to the correct length of the person's arm like a standard longsleeve coat or dress would be. These can be tighter fitting or wide and slightly flared like a longer version of the blue caftan sleeves seen here.

3. There are long straight sleeves that are completely sewn together, but are longer than the arm and pushed up over the hands. In this image you can see the yellow longer sleeves that have been pushed up under the blue caftan.

4. There are sleeves that are made extremely long and sewn together down the seam except for a split in the seam around the elbow that allows for the wearer to put their arm through.

5. There are sleeves that are made just a few inches longer than the person's arm and split at least part way up the arm to be closed with buttons and allowing those extra few inches to be folded back like a cuff.

6. There are sleeves that are excessively long and sewn all the way up the seam with a slit available in the front shoulder for you to put your arm through.
~Variations on the Neck Line:

One thing that I have noticed is that the Ottoman Turks really preferred a basic round neckline. Sometimes, it appears that people would un-button the top buttons of the caftan and fold the neck in to create more of a V shape. There are also some signs of there being shallow V necklines that do not dip much farther than a standard round neckline. And, though I have found no extant examples of Ottoman coats using this style, there is evidence in Ottoman manuscripts of some wrap over coats similar to Mongolian coats.

With that said, I have found documentation that many Ottoman caftans had some kind of raised collar around their neckline. When a collar is not used, it appears that the many of the necklines are finished off with a bias strip cut from the same fabric as the outer part of the caftan, or tucked and top stitched down like the other seams.

~Various Types of Coats: (survey of the most common)

- Yelek/Vest- A yelek was a kind of thigh length sleeveless vest. So, far, I have only found documentation of women wearing this garment. Though, that does not discount the possibility of men wearing them as well. The yelek is a great first layer garment to be worn over the khamis. It easily allows for more layers to be added over and removed as you warm up without risking immodesty. These garments do have button closures.

- Mintan/Short Coat- The mintan is typically a straight long sleeve coat that comes to the hips only. I have yet to find clear documentation of this coat during our period.

However, I do see several illuminations of men wearing a slightly longer, long sleeved coat under their caftans. Likewise, I can see clear evidence of women wearing a longer layer similar to a yelek. Though as their over caftans are long sleeved, it is difficult to tell if it is a yelek, a mintan, or a short caftan.
Ceremonial Caftan/Great Coat- There seems to be some confusion on the difference and definition of the terms Ceremonial Caftan and Great Coat, even by the scholars. To the best of what I can tell through the various readings, a “Ceremonial Caftan” is a caftan or coat that is given to an individual as a token of respect, fealty, or advancement from the Sultan or someone of power. Commonly these coats would be given in ceremony and worn for some time after the honor and again at significant courtly occasions.

The “Great Coat”, however, is intended to be the outer most official coat of status in a man’s wardrobe. For common everyday wear in upholding his office, he would wear this coat. The “Great Coat” could be one of the individuals own purchase of lesser quality materials than his “Ceremonial Caftan”. So these two coats are commonly identical in construction and intention, however, hold significant differences in usage. I have found no evidence that either coat were worn by women.

The above image is of a “Ceremonial Caftan” commonly these are made out of rich brocades or luscious wools trimmed in fur as fitting the honor of the person to receive it. Also, they are commonly sewn with the front gores starting closer to the neckline for a more flared over size garment. They are also seen with or without buttons, but do include the excessively long sleeves with slits at the shoulders for the arms to come through.

The second image is of a higher ranking Janissary wearing one “Great Coat” complete with the very long sleeves and buttons, and a lower ranking Janissary is covering him in a similar brocaded “Ceremonial Caftan”.

The most distinguishing features of these coats are the excessively long sleeves, shoulder slits for the arms, and larger front gores that start closer to the neckline rather than at the waist line.
• Woman’s Outer Coat- As mentioned earlier, women were held to strict rules of modesty when in areas that a “marriageable” man may see them. The outer coat worn by women when in public was a similar cut to a basic caftan without any extra curves, and a little extra width to refrain from being too form fitting. Long straight or slightly flared sleeves were used. They were commonly solid, darker colors, and made of linen or wool. You will find some regional variations.

• Entari- Entaris are meant to be a middle layer only. They are constructed in a similar way as a caftan but have no buttons. They can be short or long straight sleeves. The importance to not having the buttons is that an entari can be worn under other layers that do have buttons. Those over layers will help to keep the entari close, or it can be pinned. But, too many layers all with buttons running down the center of the chest will become a wardrobe challenge.

• The Basic Caftan- This one has already been covered at length. But here is one more image where you can see several of the variations applied in combination.
5. Finishing Touches: Adding Closures

Typically when making a caftan, you want it to close. The pattern is meant to be a garment that is form fitting to the chest and waist. There are basically 2 options on style with this. One is to sew a series of buttons to the end of one side of the coat opening and sew a chain of cording to the other that allows the opening to just meet or overlap slightly. The other option which is very common is the use of woven cords that are applied in rows across the chest. On the outer end of the cord is a small tassel where it ties off. On the inner end of the cords, one side will connect to buttons, while the other side will form into braided loops. This style later becomes highly used in military uniforms around Europe, giving it a term called “Military Braids”.

Both options are perfectly acceptable. I have not seen anything yet that resembles the Chinese style frog appliqués, nor have I seen anything resembling a hook and eye/cloak clasp, or laces in Ottoman Turkish clothing. I will say however, that I have seen some images of Persian and other Central Asian cultures that do show some similarity to the methods of the cloak clasp/hook and eye or the Chinese frogs. So, if that is what you are most comfortable with, I personally don’t see an issue with them. If, however, you wish to remain more period to Ottoman Turkey, then it would be best to avoid them.

At this point in time, I have only found one book that discusses the method used for making these “Military Braids” for Ottoman caftans. This book documents both simple flat braiding techniques as well as card weaving as the methods of choice. However, finger-loop braiding is also documented within the region, so the case could be made.
For buttons, they used a wide range of styles. In my readings and my travels, I have seen some simple round wooden buttons, cylindrical wooden buttons, pearls, small metal drop shaped buttons, round decorative metal buttons, fabric buttons, and woven buttons.

The woven buttons seem to be the most unique to the region and takes the most instruction on how to do them. I wont go into detail on them here. However, to help you understand, they are typically a round wooden bead, that is wrapped with thread and then woven through the thread with more thread. Sometimes using multiple colors, or as in the bottom, right image below, using only one color.
6. Bibliography and Resources

Bibliography of Information Presented:


Smithsonian Institution. Style and Status: Imperial Costumes from Ottoman Turkey: Catalog of exhibition Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution October 29, 2005– January 22, 2006

Citation of Images Provided:

Extant Fabrics and Garments by:


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Manuscript Images by:

http://home.earthlink.net/~al-qurtubiyya/16/kultur-16.html