

To Tie a Turban

I usually wear a turban at events, and from time to time someone asks me to show him how to tie it. Hence this article.

Sources of Information

I have not found any period descriptions of how to tie a turban. The method I describe below is based on indirect evidence of several sorts. There are quite a lot of surviving pictures from the Islamic world showing people wearing turbans (*Arab Painting*, Richard Ettinghausen, Macmillan, London 1977 is one good source). In addition, there is some evidence, archaeological and literary, on the dimensions of the turban sash—the piece of cloth that you wind around your head to make a turban—and there are surviving caps that might well be intended to go under turbans. For more information on both, see the article on Islamic clothing elsewhere in this volume.

Finally, there are modern people who wear turbans. When I began trying to figure out how to reproduce the effect shown in period pictures, my first step was to go to a Sikh friend and ask him to show me how he tied his turban. The result looked quite different from what I had seen in the pictures—but it turned out that a slight modification of what he was doing fixed that.



Figure 1: Turban cap



Figure 2: Starting—the tail



Figure 3: Starting first circle

How I Tie My Turban

1. Put on a turban cap. This is not essential, but it makes it less likely that stray wisps of hair will show when you are finished. [figure 1]
2. Take a strip of cloth about 20" wide and 15 yards long—I usually use light cotton. Lay it over your head, back to front, with the end about eight inches below the back of your neck—this is going to be the tail that appears in some, but not all, period pictures of turbans. [figure 2 shows it from behind.]
3. Put your left hand against the cloth high up on your head, so as to anchor the cloth there. [figure 3] In most of these pictures, I am wrapping the turban with my right hand, often out of the picture, and holding down parts of it with my left hand.
4. With your right hand, wrap the cloth in a slightly tilted (i.e. almost horizontal) circle around your head. You have to do it in such a way that the circle is roughly a circumference of your head, imagined as a (very approximate) sphere—in other words, tightening the circle shouldn't make the cloth slide.



4: Starting 2nd circle



5: Starting 3rd circle



6: After 3rd circle

The circle is precessing around your head, so that the low point is farther around each time. The first circle has its low point behind your head. Figure 4 shows the situation after one circle. Figure 5 shows it after the second circle; the low point was at the left side of the head. Figure 6 is after the third circle; the low point is at the right temple. My left hand (shown) is holding down the cloth near the low point.



7: Starting a tilted circle



8: Ending a tilted circle



9: A more tilted circle

5. Once you have gone around several times, start tilting the circle—shifting it closer and closer to the vertical as you go—still precessing. You are able to do that because the earlier, more nearly horizontal, wraps provide a mass of cloth to anchor the low point of each circle. Figure 7 shows the beginning of a tilted circle, with the low point anchored under the bulge of cloth at the left side of the head. Figure 8 shows a later circle being anchored below the bulge of cloth over the right ear. Figure 9 shows an even more tilted circle, about to anchor at the back of the head. Figure 10 shows one of the last of the tilted circles. Notice that all of the turban except the very top is now made up of wraps of cloth.



10: Ending tilted circle



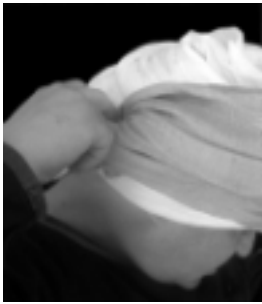
11: Starting horizontal wrap



12: 2nd horizontal wrap

6. When you are down to the last two feet or so of cloth, wrap it horizontally around your head to hold everything together (Figures 11, 12), and tuck the end under one of the previous wraps to hold it (Figure 13).

7. You are finished, except for one thing—the turban is too low over your forehead [Figure 14]. So take the whole turban and tilt it back a little until your forehead is clear [Figure 14].



13: Tucking in the turban end

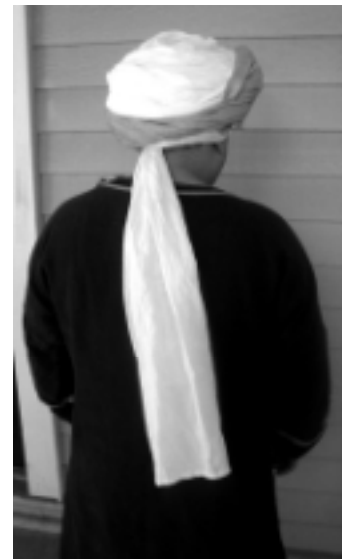


14: Wrapped



15: Finished: front view

Period pictures often show a horizontal colored band around the turban. To get this effect, add a turban end—a last two or three feet of colored cloth for the part of the turban that wraps around in steps 11-13. My classy turbans, such as the one shown here, are white with a gold silk end—but suit yours to your tastes.



Once you are comfortable tying a turban this way, try experimenting—preferably after looking at some period pictures. It is clear from the art that there were a variety of different ways of tying a turban in period—what I have described is simply a way I have found that works well to reproduce the effect shown in some period pictures.

In particular, the Sikh style of turban—which you can see not only on modern Sikhs but in Mughal art from late in our period—is done the same way as mine, but without the precessing. You do your first circle with its low point under the right ear. The second with its low point a little higher. The third a little higher still. Eventually the circle is flat. You tilt it a little farther, making the low point above the left ear. Keep tilting it until the low point is as low as with your first circle, but on the opposite side of the head. Now start flattening the circle again. Continue until you are almost out of cloth. Then anchor the end around the part of the turban above your forehead, where all the circles cross. The visual effect doing it this way is quite different, although the basic logic of what you are doing is almost identical.

A Turban Cap

I have seen period Islamic caps in the Field Museum in Chicago and the Cleveland Museum of Art; one from the latter collection is shown on p. 234 of Atal, and I believe there is also one in Rogers. A cap from the former collection is shown here. The cap shown in Figure 1 is a simplified version of the same design. One important difference is that my cap is made of a single layer of plain cloth, whereas the period ones appears to be quilted—silk on cotton in at least some cases—with ornamental designs. Finally, in the period cap there is cording on the seam joining each pair of triangles.

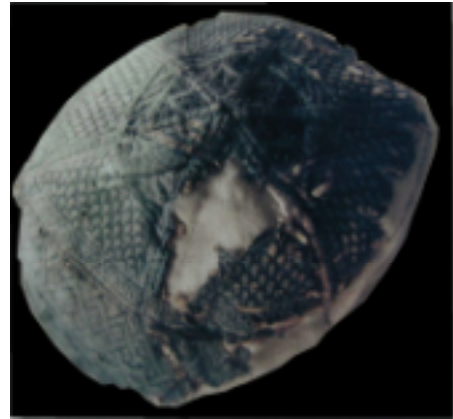
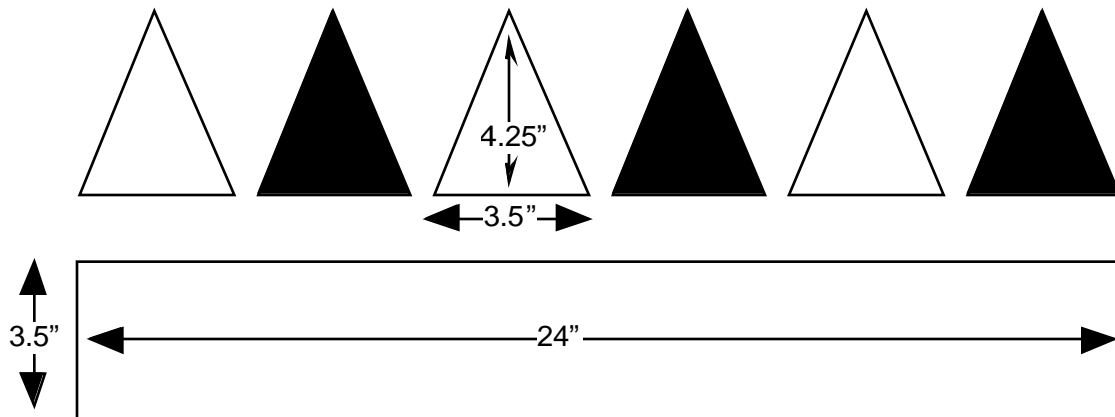


Figure 16 shows my cutting pattern, not including seam allowance. Assembly should be obvious from Figure 1. The one tricky point is that the total width of the triangles (not including seam allowance) is 21" (six triangles, each 3.5" wide), while the total width of the rectangle they are sewn to is 24". The discrepancy is solved by small tucks in the top edge of the rectangle, designed to make the band of the cap a little tighter at the top than at the bottom. I'm not sure this is essential, but it seems to work.



16: Cutting pattern for my turban cap, not including seam allowance.

Sources

Early Islamic Textiles, Clive Rogers Editor, Rogers & Podmore, Brighton 1983.
Renaissance of Islam Art of the Mamluks by Exin Atal, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 1981.