



# Anglo-Saxon Embroidery (and Some Weaving)

by

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# Introduction

- This class is about the embroidery (and some weaving) done by the “Early English” between 450 and 1100 CE on the island of Great Britain.
- This time period covers the centuries from the end of the Roman occupation up to the conversion of the pagans to Christianity.
- After you take this class you should have a good understanding about the existing scraps of embroidery we have available to us via archaeological digs.
- You will also see how designs were not limited to embroidery but echoed in other objects as well such as sword hilts and illuminated pages such as the detail from the Book of Durrow carpet page, shown at right.



# A note about terminology

- Scholars are moving away from the term “Anglo-Saxon” and replacing it with “Early English” for several reasons:
  - Anglo-Saxons never called themselves Anglo-Saxons.
  - The term is culturally inaccurate as tribes other than the Angles (from a small district in northern Germany) and the Saxons (from Lower Saxony in northern Germany) were migrating to the island of Great Britain at the time, such as the Jutes (from Juteland, now a part of Denmark).
  - The term “Anglo-Saxon” has been co-opted by white supremacists.
- So, we are turning our backs on the term “Anglo-Saxon”.



# How do we know about Early English embroidery and weaving?

- Grave finds
- Sealed coffins
- Peat bogs
- Remains of fires
- Votive offerings
- Workshop leftovers
- Any environment that allows a textile to survive
- The grave at right is a great example of why items do not survive. The acidic soil has destroyed everything. The only remains are the outline of the skeleton in the sand.



“Sand Grave” at Sutton Hoo.  
Archaeology.co.uk.

# Why do we have so few?

- The formal study of embroidery did not begin until the Victorian era.
- Before that, no one had tried to catalog embroideries or recognize them as a valid way to understand culture.
- Many archaeologists at the time were not trained to value textiles.
- To the uninterested eye, a scrap of Early English embroidery may look like a piece of straw mat or an uninteresting wrapping, something to be ignored and discarded.
- Also, finds are VERY small.



Reproductions of Early English finds by Amie Sparrow – Note: the bottom two extant finds have been lost.

# What finds really look like...



Sutton Hoo Embroidery

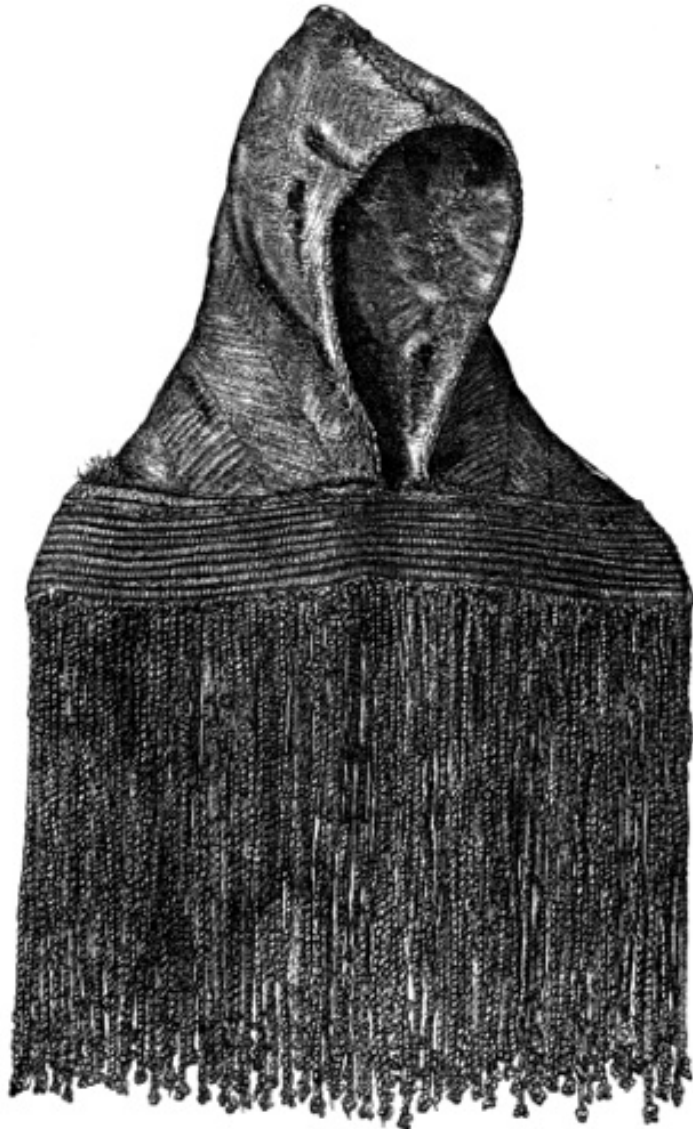


Plate 2. a) Sutton Hoo A (100 × 12–40 mm): Textile with seam covered in embroidery to the left, © Trustees of the British Museum; b) Kempston embroidery (24 × 54 mm), © Trustees of the British Museum.

Kempston Embroidery

If you're a short-staffed archaeologist, what do you do? Deal with a wadded-up textile fragment or toss it aside in your quest for the next sword or brooch?

# Earliest Recognized Find: The Orkney Hood 250-615 CE



- Child's hood made from recycled 2/2 herringbone striped wool twill
- Woven from 9 different kinds of yarn
- Double row of chain stitch over the seams to hide them but also gives the seams strength
- Has tablet weaving on the back
- Unusual feature: long fringe
- Found in a Tankerness peat-bog in the 19th century. Dates to the Late Iron Age.
- Location: National Museum of Scotland



Sample of double row of chain stitch by Amie Sparrow

# “What if...” Card Weaving



- Period weaving is tablet weaving. Inkle weaving is perfectly acceptable for SCA purposes.
- Samples of card woven trim by Mistress Kaleeb the Green-Eyed. 4 forward, 4 backward.



# Kempston Fragment (600s CE)

- Found in a copper alloy box in a cemetery at a gravel quarry near Kempston, Bedfordshire. Probably female grave. The fragment was possibly kept by her as a contact relic (a relic that has touched the skin of a saint).
- Chain stitch, split stitch, stem stitch. Silk floss on wool.
- 24 mm x 54 mm (~1" x 2 1/8")
- This style appears similar to the art on the Great Gold Buckle found at Sutton Hoo .
- Found in 1863/64 by a private family.
- Also similar to the borders of the carpet page from The Book of Durrow, c. 680 CE.



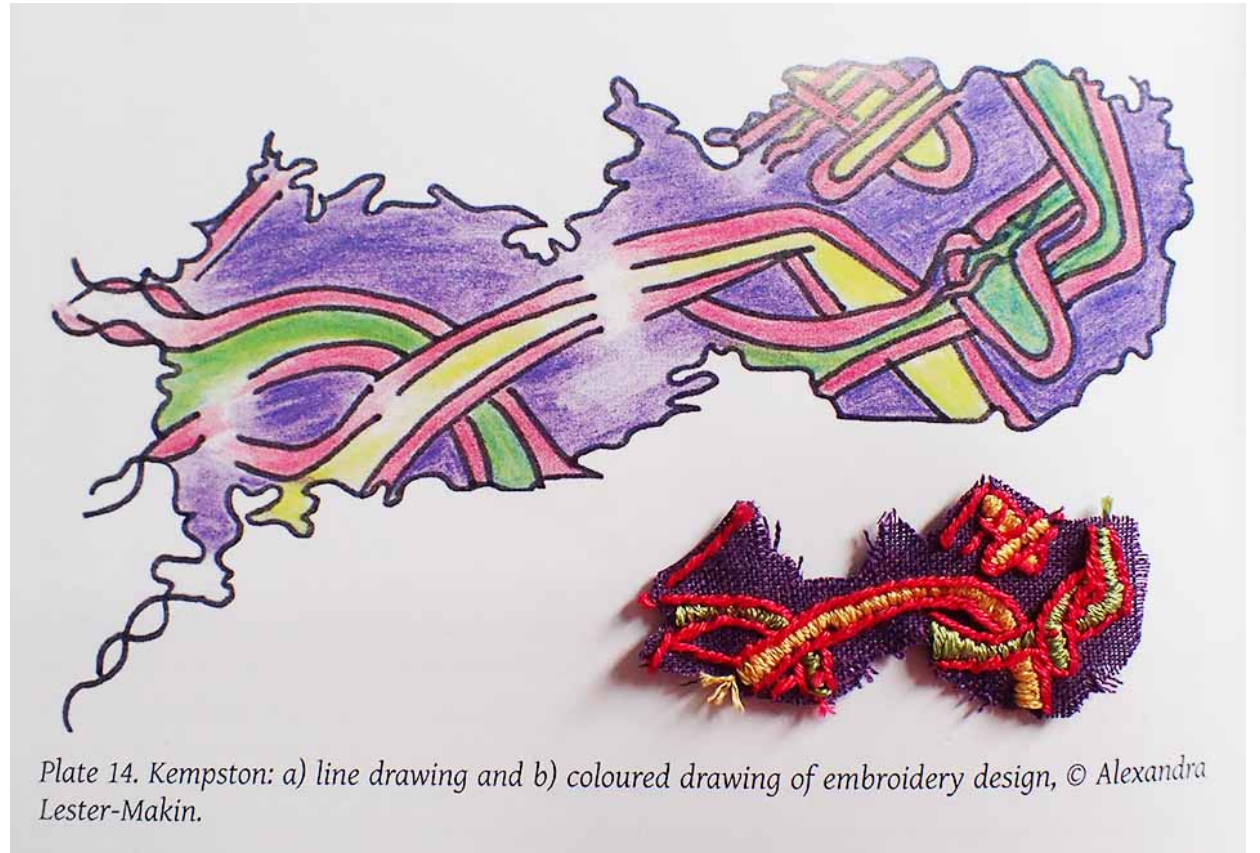
Reproduction of the fragment by Amie Sparrow.  
Silk on linen.



Sutton Hoo Buckle

# Let's talk about scale

- You must be wary of photos in books. Sometimes they enlarge the scale of the embroidery and provide you with no information about size next to the image. This is a photo of the embroidery in the book next to the reproduction that I made at actual size.



# Worthy Park (Mid-500s – Mid-600s CE)

- Fragment is lost.
- Maybe an accessory worn on the belt that was laid behind a knife. Inhumation burial. Gender undetermined.
- Possible leaf & scroll pattern. Silk thread. Satin, stem stitch = 1 mm.
- Fabric 25mm x 15 mm (~ 1" x 5/8") – size of embroidery not given.
- Fabric 20x20 threads/cm.
- Found during 1962-1979 excavation.
- Unfortunately, conservation methods at the time rendered all the textile fragments still adhered to any metal (swords / spears / shields / knives) unusable for examination.



Reproduction of the fragment by Amie Sparrow.  
Silk on linen.



Leaf and scroll carving from the Priory Church of St Mary and St Hardulph, Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire, England, carved 700s-900s.

# Sutton Hoo (500-600s CE)

- Burial mounds found in Woodbridge, Suffolk, England.
- Sutton Hoo A excavated in 1939. Coins indicate that it may be the grave of King Raedwald who died in 625 CE.
- Sutton Hoo B in 1983-1991. Burial believed to be female.
- At this time, embroidery was done at the village level by women who were taught by mothers and female relatives.
- Expertise was high. Average stitch length is 1mm.
- The sewing thread of the Sutton Hoo garment is the same dyed thread as the garment textile was woven from.

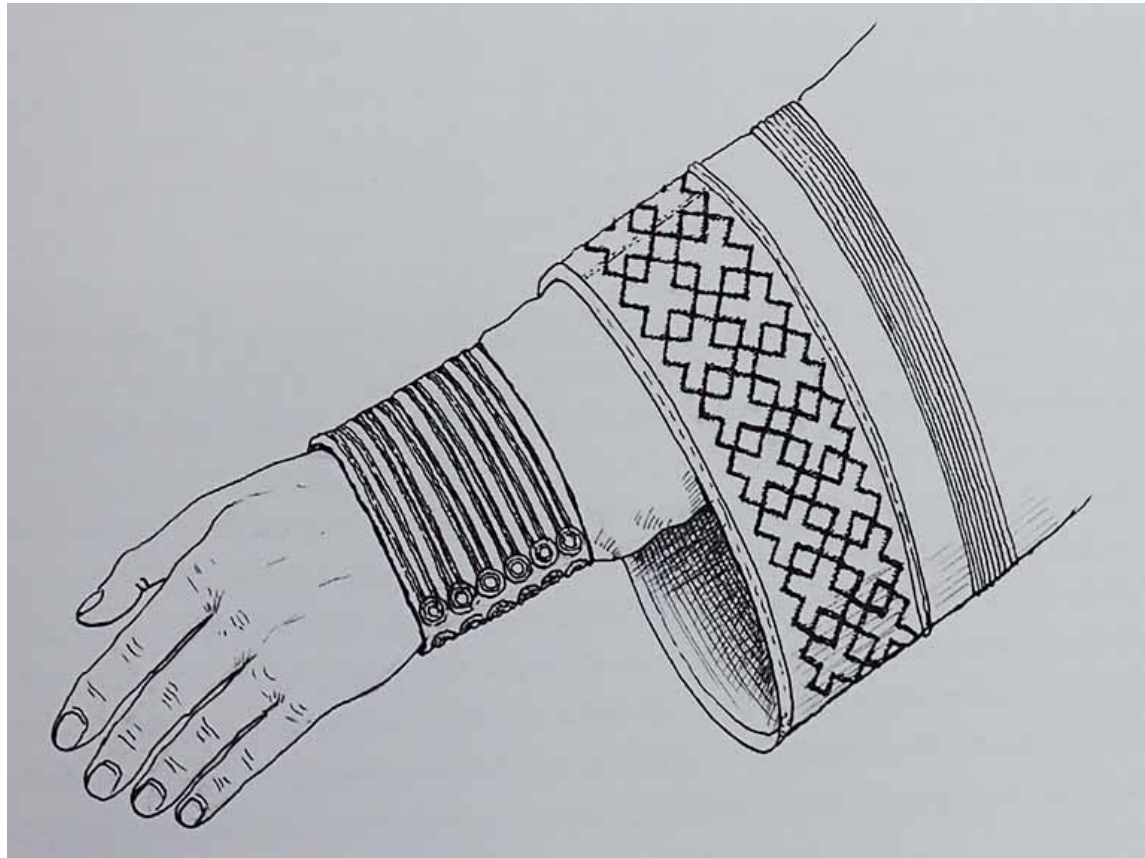


Sutton Hoo Mound 14, 1939

# Sutton Hoo Embroidered Sleeve (500-600s CE)



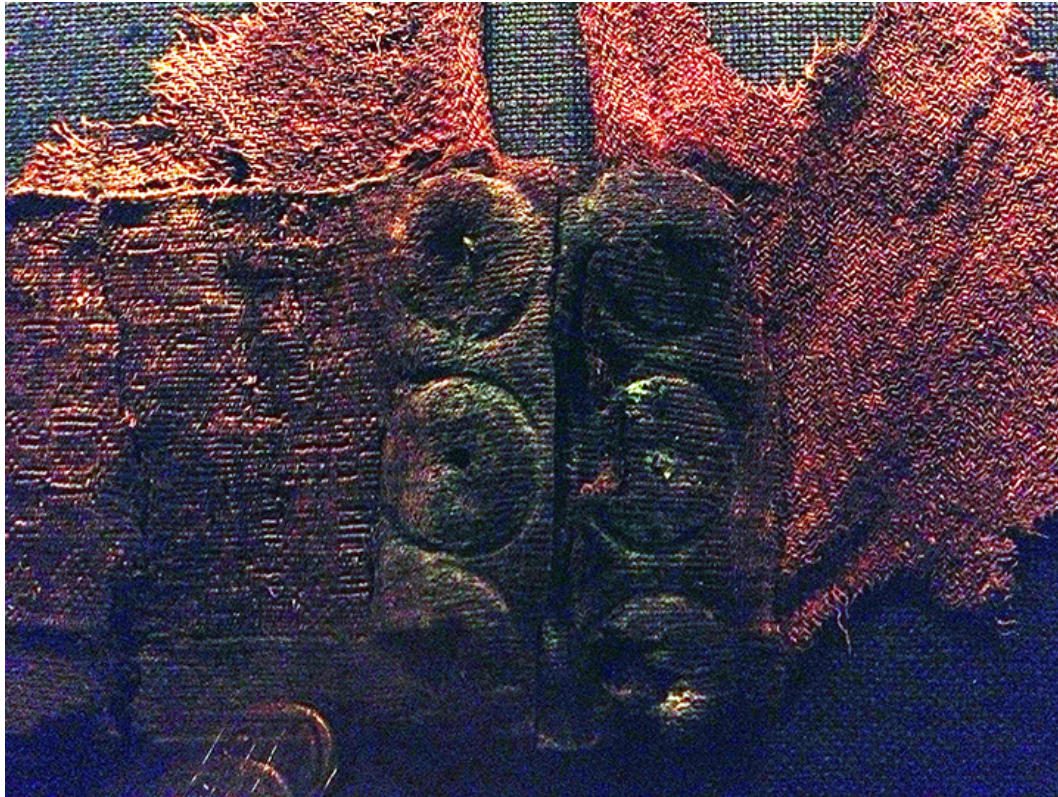
- Reproduction by Anne D'Everaux, 2021
- Wool-blend floss
- Stem stitch on crosses, chain stitch for the bars



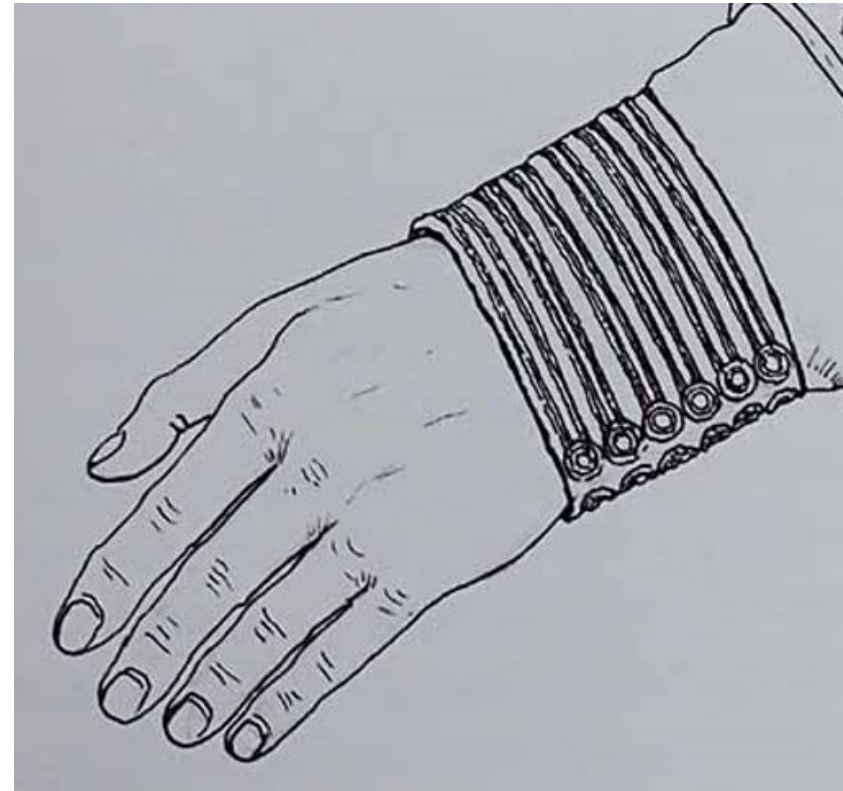
Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England AD 450-700, pg. 185.

# Comparison of Migration Era Tunic from Högom, Sweden to Sutton Hoo Cuff

- Burial is estimated as 500 CE. The shadow of the buttons on the left are mimicked by embroidery on the sleeve cuff on the right.
- This example shows the through-line from one culture in Sweden, to the Early English culture in Great Britain.



Sundsvall Museum, Sweden



Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England AD 450-700

# Dover Woven Cuff Trim (525-675 CE)

- Showing you my research mistakes so you don't make them. This image from the Dover Museum is very old and very problematic.
- The weaving on the cuff is more Celtic in origin than Early English.
- Reproduction by Baroness Geneve Wölfelin.



Dover Museum, Dover,  
Kent, England



Woven trim detail



# Queen Arnegunde's Cuffs (c. 570 CE)



Cuff, at left,  
found in the  
Basilica of St.  
Denis, France

Reproduction by  
Baroness Ceara  
Shionnach, 2012  
(below)

- Goldwork on silk.
- Even though this is not found in England, this is during the Migration Period when people were migrating from other places and bringing their knowledge with them. The Basilica of St. Denis is 223 miles from the coast of England. If similar embroidery was made in England, it would have been for high status people.





# Queen Bathilde's Shirt (c. 680 CE)

- Tunic of Merovingian Queen held at Musee Alfred Bonno, Chelles, which is 230 miles from the coast of England.
- Shows influence of Byzantine Empire.
- This is not Early English, rather, Early English adjacent.
- Made during the late Migration Period.



- Silk embroidery on linen.
- Chain stitch. Possibly split stitch, too.

## Embroiderers in Period (who were not queens or saints)



- Eanswitha (Enn-switha) is the first female embroiderer documented in an 800s charter. Granted a life-long lease for a 200-acre farm by the Bishop of Worcester.
- Aethelswith (A-thel-swith) documented in a will in the 1000s. Her mother willed her land to the church if her daughter did not marry. Aethelswith did not. Instead she worked as an embroiderer on an estate on church land.
- Leofgyth (Lay-off-gith) embroidered goldwork for the King and Queen. Listed in Domesday Book, 1086.
- Aelfgyth (Alf-gith) is also documented in the Domesday Book.
- Liveva, Ingrith documented in an 1134 inventory, Liber Eliensis, for Ely Church. They provided embroidery for the church.

# “What if...?” Fiskerton Sword (800s CE)

- Fiskerton sword found in River Witham, Lincolnshire, England, in 1954 by a boy.
- Metalwork on the sword shows similarities to Oseburg “H” embroidery found in a burial in Oseburg, Norway dated to 834 CE.
- Caveat: There is a theory that Oseburg H is woven. See bibliography for online Oseburg textile photos.
- Design inspiration only.



Photo by Dr. Daitlin Green

Pattern drafted and cuff embroidered by the Amie Sparrow, 2021. DMC thread on linen. Colors are speculation.



# “What if...?” Abingdon Sword (Late 800s – Early 900s CE)

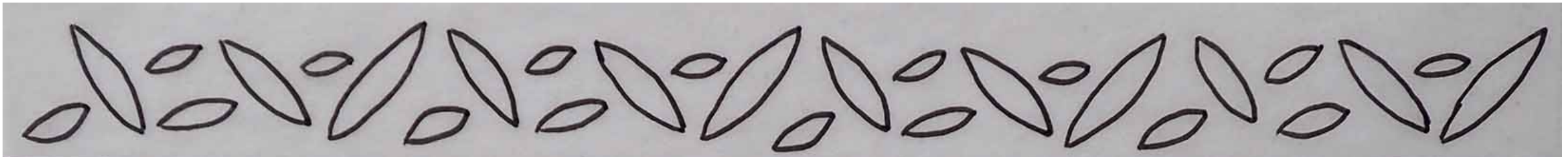
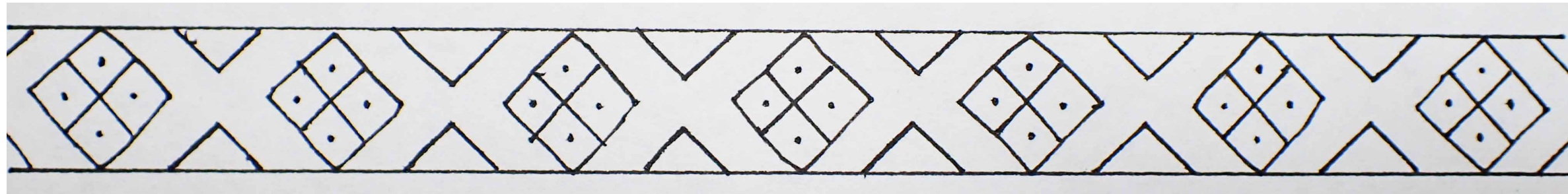
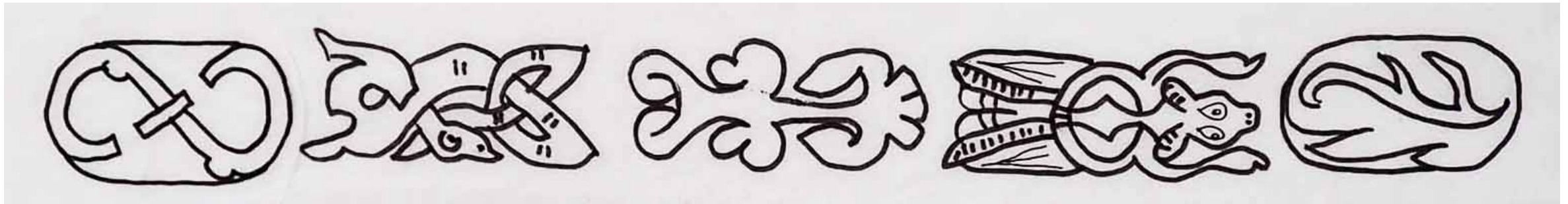


- Found in 1874 at Bog Mill, near the town of Abingdon on the River Thames in Berkshire, England.
- “The style of leaf used next to the figure of the eagle on the upper guard has also been identified on early tenth century embroideries from Durham, on the back of the Alfred Jewel and a number of other objects dating to this period. The pommel incorporates two outward-looking animal heads, with protruding ears and round eyes and nostrils, now fragmentary.” – Text from Ashmolean Museum



# “What if...?” Fiskerton and Abingdon Sword Hilt Patterns (800s CE)

- These are options. Use them with care. They are not documentable in any sense other than that they were used on an Early English sword. Patterns by Amie Sparrow.



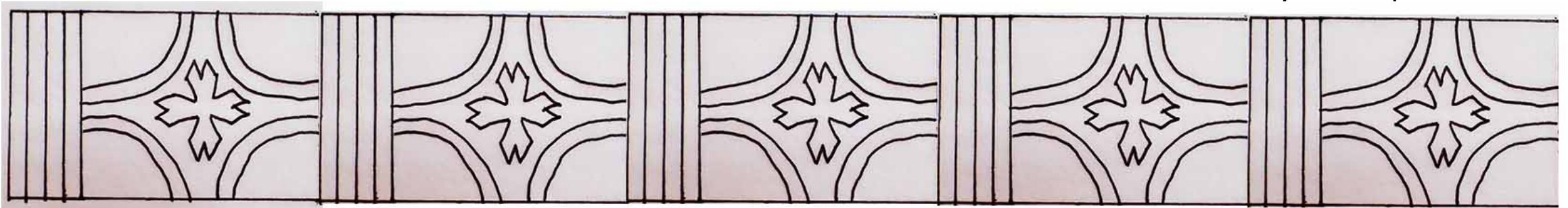
# What if...?: Gilling Sword (800s CE)



- Discovered 9 April 1976 by nine-year-old Gary Fridd on the north side of Gilling Beck, in Gilling West, North Yorkshire.
- This is design inspiration, not a documentable piece of textile. Use it with care. It is not documentable in any sense other than that is used on an Early English sword.

York Museum

Pattern by Amie Sparrow





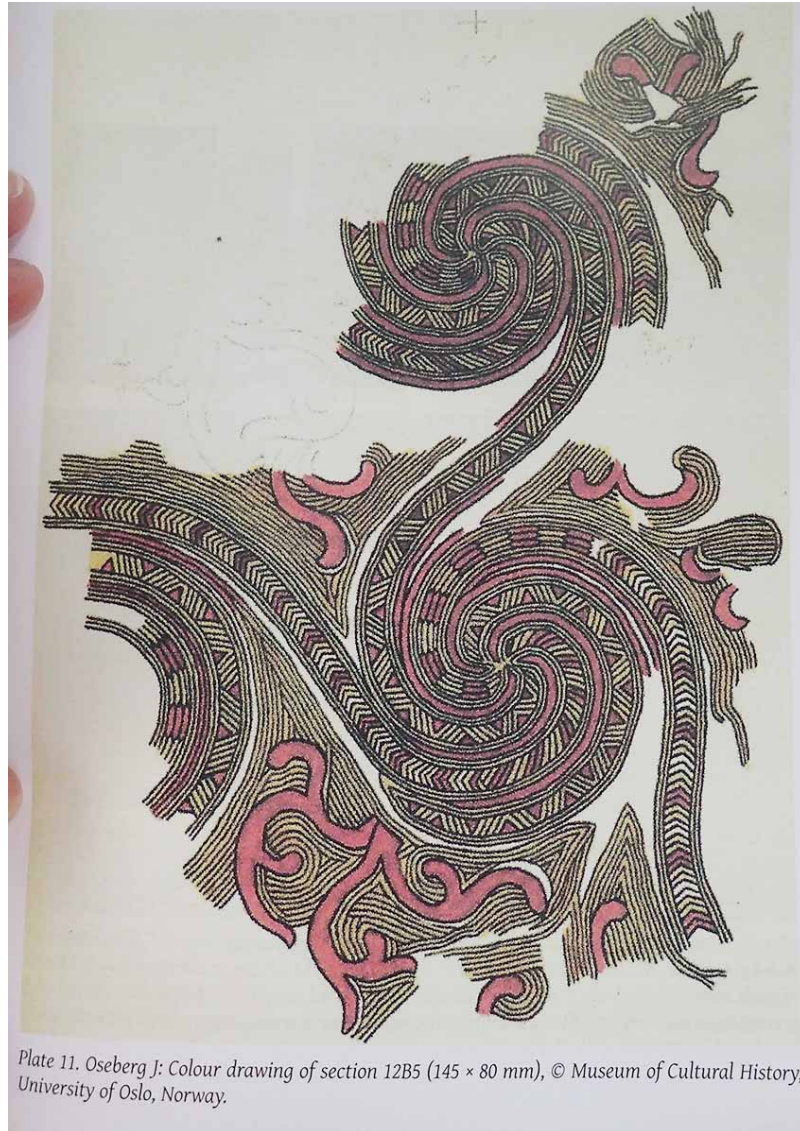
## Llan-gors (890s CE)



- Found in 1990 by archaeologists in Brecon, Wales, in waterlogged silt. Textile was charred and fragile.
- Located in the Museum of Wales, UK
- “The base material was a very fine plain-weave linen. Silk and linen threads have been used to decorate the textile with birds and other creatures within a framework of vines, and with borders containing repeating patterns or lions.” – Museum of Wales
- Size roughly 9cm tall by 7cm wide (3.5 x 2.8 inches).

# Oseberg "J" (830s CE)

- Ship burial at Oseberg farm, Norway.
- This is an example of how embroideries have similar patterns to other artwork in the period.
- New research suggests that the Oseberg textiles were made in Germany.



Fetter Lane Sword Hilt, Trustees of the British Museum



# Oseberg Weaving (830s CE)

- Samples of Oseberg weaving by Mistress Kaleeb the Green-Eyed.
- Pattern found on an internet search.
- Pattern from Collingsworth.



# Maaseik (má-psych) Embroideries (800 CE)

- Eight embroideries which are believed to have originated as decorative bands probably from secular garments given to the shrine of the sister saints Harlindis and Relindis at Aldeneik, Belgium. Believed made in Early England.
- Stitch length 3-5mm, which is more than twice the length of average stitch length of 1mm for embroidery in that period.
- The gold thread on the Maaseik has cattle-tail hair as the core, which is a little abnormal. It's possible that local goldsmiths saw imported gold thread with a silk core and figured out how to make it with a locally available core.
- Base fabric is undyed tabby weave linen.
- Made in a workshop by several different embroiderers.
- For a detailed technical analysis and history of these embroideries, please view <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYnSuCF8huM> by Dr. Alexandra Makin.



# Maaseik Embroidery (con't)



Original



Reproduction by Vadoma, approximately 25 hours



# Mammen Embroideries (900s CE)

- Discovered in 1868 in Denmark.
- Chamber-grave of a man who was buried in the winter of CE 970-971.
- Threads: red, blue and yellow.
- Stitch type: close rows of stem stitch.
- Motifs: human masks, vines, herringbone stitches, leopards, birds, unidentified beasts.

<http://heatherrosejones.com/mammen/>

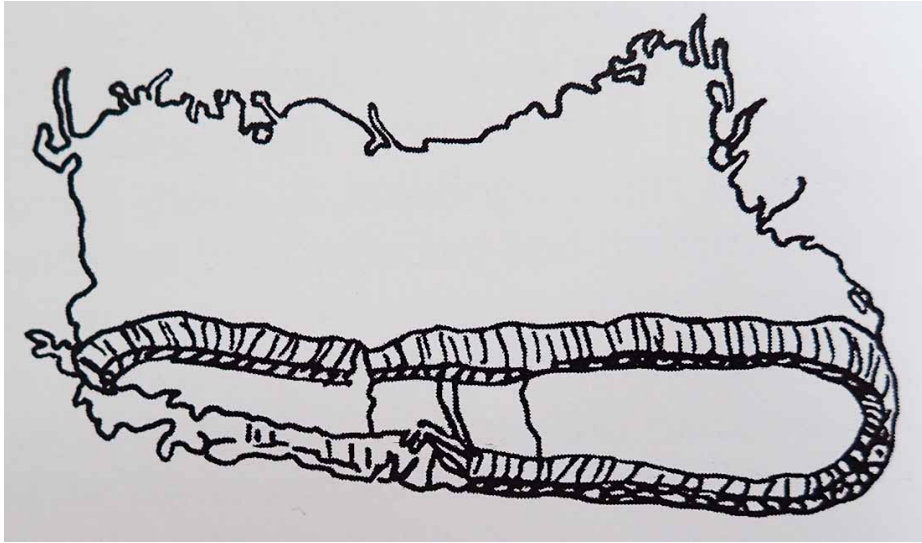
# Relic Pouch (c. 975 CE)



Made by Amie Sparrow from published drawing

- Purple twill silk pouch 33mm x 30 mm.
- Embroidered with chain stitch. Color of embroidery thread not given.
- When the pouch was opened, plant material fell out, which was either the relic itself or wrapped around the relic. Could have been linen, a clipping from the garment of a saint or something that had touched the saint's body.

- Found in a commercial setting in Coppergate, York, during 1976-1982 excavations.
- Last held at Yorkshire Museum. Currently lost.



Lost Art of the Anglo-Saxon World, pg. 8



Made by Amie Sparrow

## York B Cuff (900s CE)

- Found at 28-29 High Ousegate, York, England. Currently lost.
- Fabric is twill, thread is wool.
- Looped stitch used to bind raw edge.
- Textile 92 x 45mm, embroidery 160 x 5mm.
- Colors in the sample are speculation.

# Cuthbert Embroideries at Durham Cathedral (909-916 CE)

- Given as gifts from Queen Aelfflaed (d. 916) to Bishop Fristhestan (909-931).
- This is a great example of how the nobility interacted with the church. An expensive gift of gold-embroidered vestments would confer great political power to the Queen. It would be the medieval version of a “Charm Offensive.”
- So, if you like doing fancy church embroidery in your SCA persona, you can have the backstory that your persona is making it for the church.
- Sadly, it is believed that because of various political machinations of the King, the Bishop never received the gifts. 😞

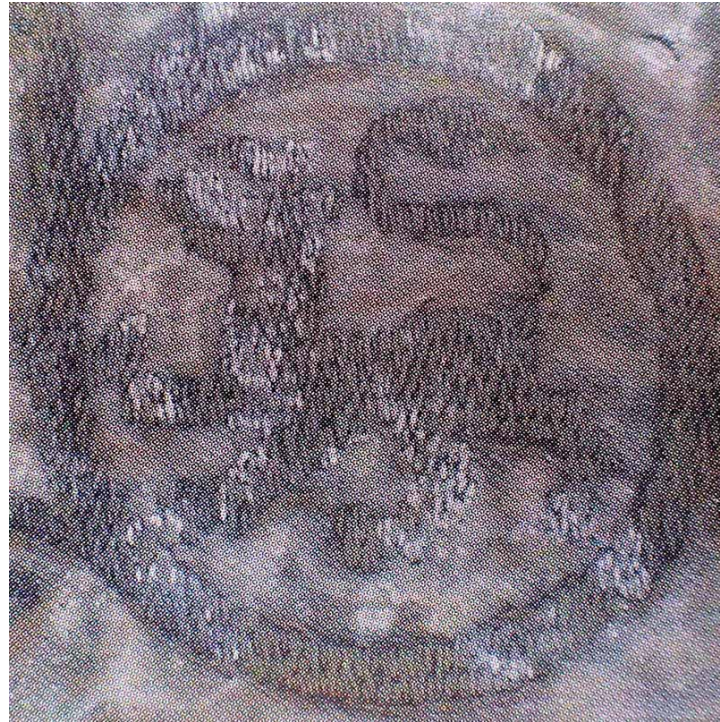


Cuthbert Mantiple Recreation Project

By Dr. Alexandra Makin

# Cuthbert Embroideries at Durham Cathedral (909-916 CE)

- Laid work in silk and metal.
- It is a transition from Bayeux Tapestry to Opus Anglicanum.
- The rondel below uses the underside couching technique.
- For more information about the Cuthbert Mantiple, see Dr. Alexandra Makin's videos about her reproduction of a small image on the mantiple using funds from the Janet Arnold Grant. (See Bibliography.)



Durham "G"



Durham "E" Cuthbert Mantiple



# Bayeux Tapestry (not really a tapestry) (~1068 CE)

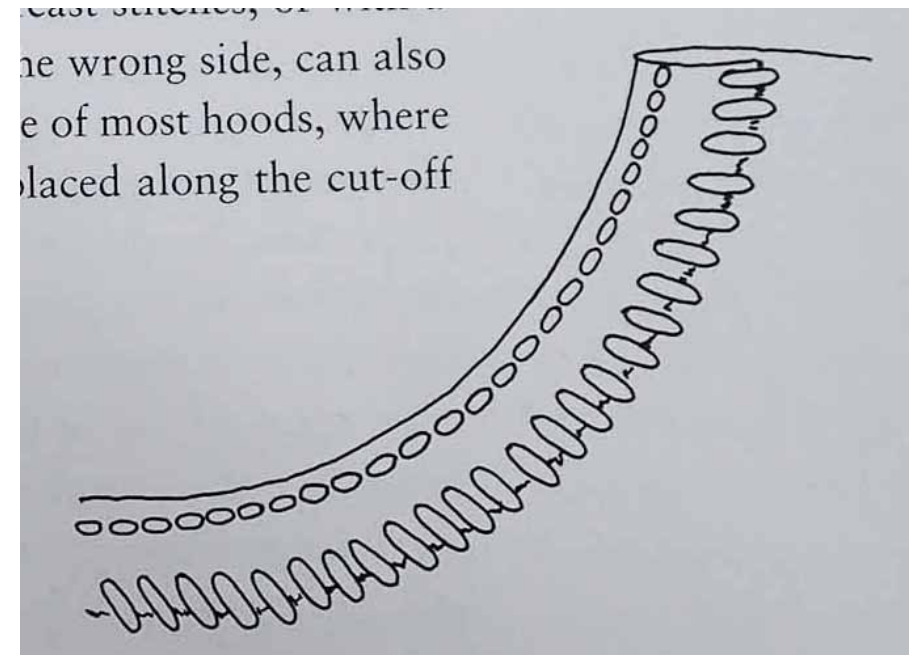
- The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth nearly 230 ft long x 20 in tall. It depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England. It is thought to date to within a few years after the Battle of 1066. It tells the story from the point of view of the conquering Normans but is now agreed to have been made in England.
- The original embroidery is wool on linen.
- Because of the length of loose threads, this is not a great stitch for clothing.



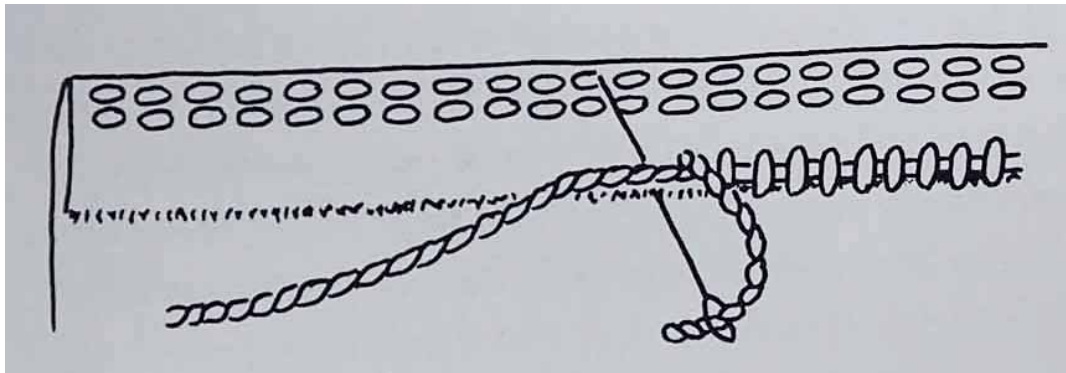
Sample Bayeux stitch by Mistress Kaleeb the Green-Eyed

# Norse Greenland (990 -1450 CE)

Woven into the Earth, pg. 97. "Figs. 62 & 63: A hem with overcast stitches sewn on top of one or more (filler) threads that cover the raw edge, was prevalent in Norse Greenland. This type of needlework can be found along face openings on hoods and in neck openings; almost always seen together with one or two rows of stab stitches placed some few millimeters from the outermost edge."



Neckline finishing by Amie Sparrow



# Embroidery Stitches Used in Period

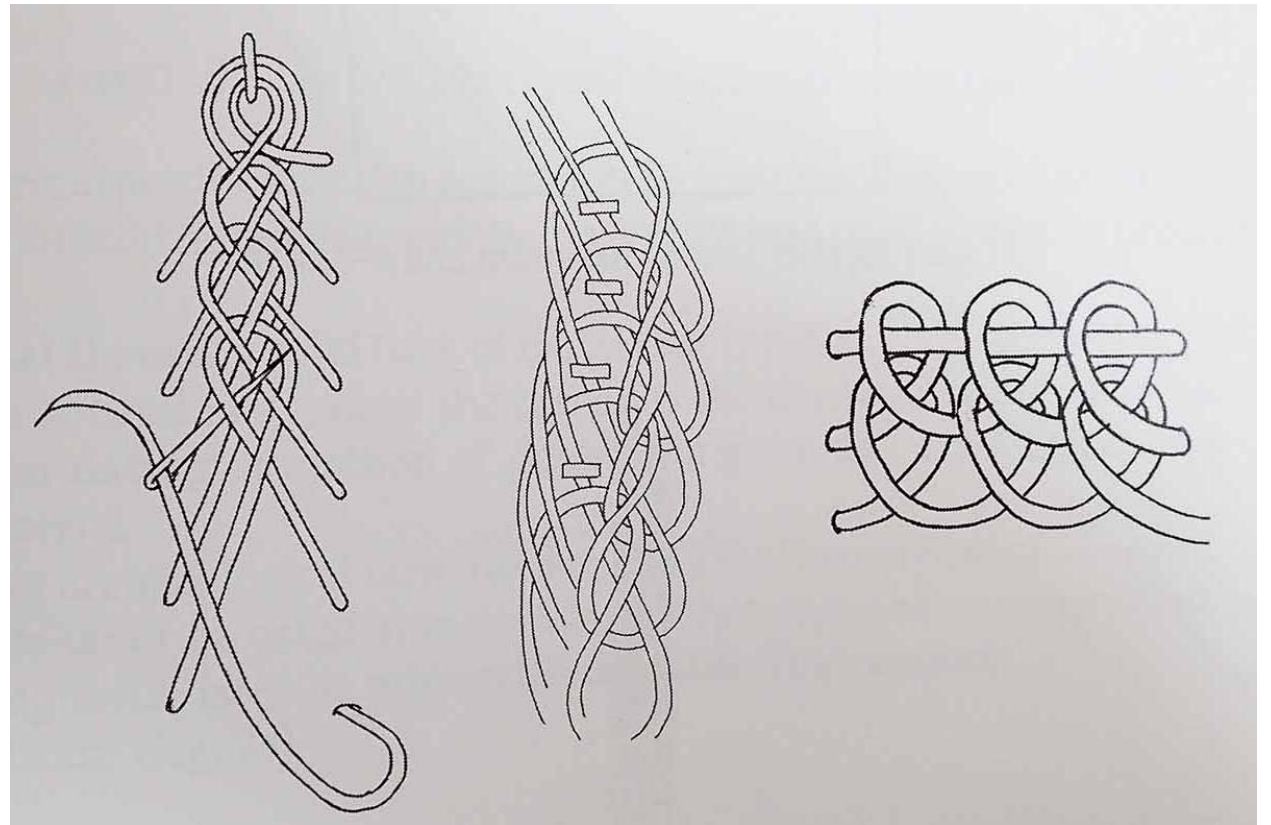
- back stitch
- buttonhole
- Bayeux tapestry stitch
- chain stitch
- couched work
- counted thread work
- gold-work
- laid-work
- looped stitch
- plait stitch
- running stitch
- satin stitch
- seed stitch
- Soumak
- split stitch
- stem stitch
- underside couching

# Stitches (continued)

- When Looped stitch is done to scale, it looks like woven trim. Loop stitch will twist when used as a method to finish the raw edge of a sleeve cuff. The twist is seen in the example below, left.
- The diagrams below are blown up to show how the stitches work. When executed, they would be done more tightly.



Dublin Loop Stitch sample by Amie Sparrow



Lost Art of the Anglo-Saxon World, pg. 199.

# Tip, Tricks, Advice



- Don't believe in non-shrink embroidery wool, ever.
- Back your fabric with freezer paper before using a lightbox to trace designs on fabric.
- Tracing with color pencil may work better for you than a mechanical pencil because it has a wider, softer lead.
- Beware of using washable ink markers used for quilting. Sometimes the ink doesn't wash out.
- Embroider sleeves before sewing them together. Once a sleeve is sewn shut, it is nearly impossible to embroider.
- Remember to leave seam allowances when laying out embroidery.

# Questions?



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  - Part I – The Origin Story <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwJiqxvX8n4>
  - Part II – The Materials <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4k4E0Ghal0&t=1s>
  - Part III – Stitches <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IsVoVpADio>
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# Model Credits

- Slide 3 – Meisterinde Karen Larsdatter
- Slide 18 – Lady Elysse Meredith