

WOOL EMBROIDERY on WOOL or LINEN

For beginners and those with limited time, this is a practical guide to embroidering tunics (as an alternative to tablet-braiding), or embroidering furnishings such as hangings or cushions. Silk and gold-work is more ambitious and needs experience. It should also be borne in mind that silk was possibly more costly than gold, so whoever could afford the display was definitely advertising their wealth and status, and of those warriors who belonged to the upper layers of society, only the richest could have afforded this show of wealth.

Evidence for Embroidery

When it comes to secular embroideries, the archaeological evidence is scanty, and in the main confined to high-status items. Manuscript illustrations depict embroidered hangings and cushions, but only hint at embroidery on secular clothing and its wearers are the elite. Writings describe embroidered furnishings, but for clothing mention only costly gifts between rulers or work produced for rulers.

This does not mean nobody else embroidered their clothes or furnishings, merely that they were not buried in state (thereby giving textiles a better chance of surviving the intervening centuries), were not drawn in any great detail by the artists, and detailed written descriptions of their clothing or furnishings went unchronicled. Wool embroidery on wool or linen, however, was within the means of many people then. For us it is also the easiest and most practical way to achieve a pleasing result in the time available.

MATERIALS

Wool Thread

Tapestry wool, though widely available in craft shops, is unsuitable for Saxon and Viking embroidery because it is by far too chunky for the period, and also too fluffy. Hand-woven 2ply, vegetable-dyed wools are the ideal, but if not available to you, then use:

Appleton's Crewel Wools (2 ply). Not every craft shop stocks this product, but there are quite a few web suppliers, and if you need a colour chart, then: <http://www.lenhamneedlecraft.com>

If ordering over the web is not an option, then un-ply tapestry wool and re-ply it as a more tightly spun 2 ply. Describing this method would take up too much space here, so ask the society's wool experts how to do it.

Equipment

A steel needle with a long eye gives the best results. This type of needle is allowed in the Living History Encampment; spectacles, modern scissors and thimbles are not, but can of course be used at home.

Garments:

Embroidered bands are usually placed at the neck, cuffs, and hem (and down the centre front on high-status ladies' cyrtels). Embroidery does not much like being washed in a washing machine and often responds by ruckling and the colours could run, especially in too hot a wash. To minimize the risk do the embroidery on detachable bands that can be removed before washing. These bands can, but do not have to be, of a contrasting colour to the main tunic. A further advantage of detachable bands is that when the tunic wears out, the bands can be sewn onto a new one.

STITCHES MOST COMMONLY USED

Outline and Stem and Split stitch, and **Laid-and-Couched** work. **Chain** stitch takes more thread than split stitch, and was used sparingly in silk embroidery, except where the donor wished to display wealth (gifts to the church or royalty). Since wool was cheap by comparison, chain stitch may have been used more often in wool embroidery. Satin stitch is as rare as hens' teeth, so avoid it except for eyes and the like.

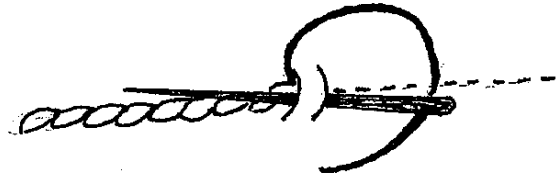
Suggestions for which stitches to use where

Stem or outline stitching can be used for the entire work, but when it is kept for outlining the motifs, and the infilling is carried out with split stitch, the result looks sharper. Also, split stitch covers the surface very efficiently, as does laid-and-couched work (though the latter is not usually found on clothing, so may possibly have been used mainly for hangings such as the BT).

NB. If using a dark wool to outline your motifs, avoid black..

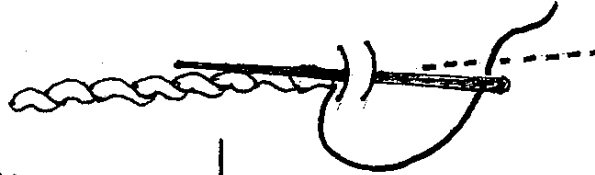
Outline Stitch

This stitch was used both for outlining and infilling motifs. Unlike illustrated in many embroidery dictionaries, bring the needle back onto the line of stitching, as drawn.



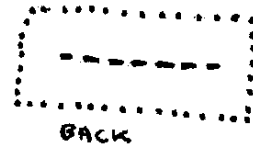
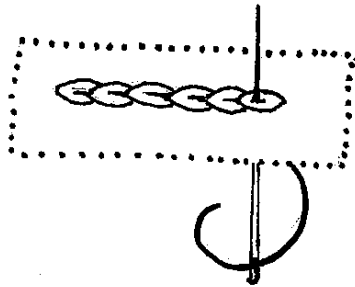
Stem Stitch

This stitch was also used both for outlining and infilling motifs. As with Outline above, bring the needle back onto the line of stitching, as drawn.

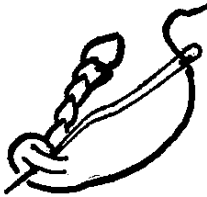


Split Stitch

This stitch was used both for outlining motifs and infilling. It is economical with thread in that most of it shows on right side of work.

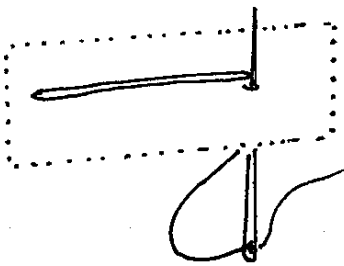


Chain Stitch



Laid-and-Couched Work

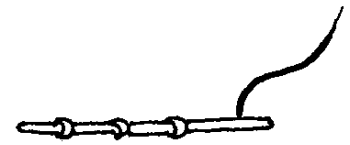
As on the Bayeux 'Tapestry'. It is good for covering larger expanses, such as hangings. (Laid Stitch is also sometimes known as Surface Satin Stitch)



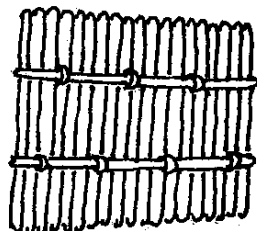
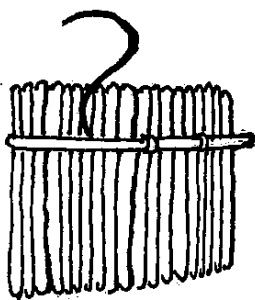
LAI D STITCH



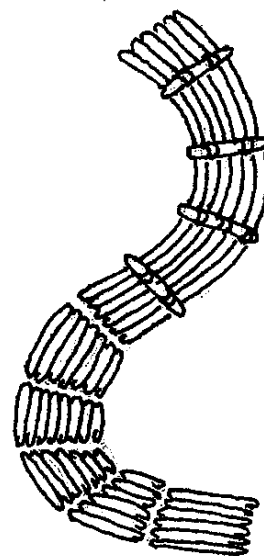
BACK



COUCHING



LAI D + COUCHED



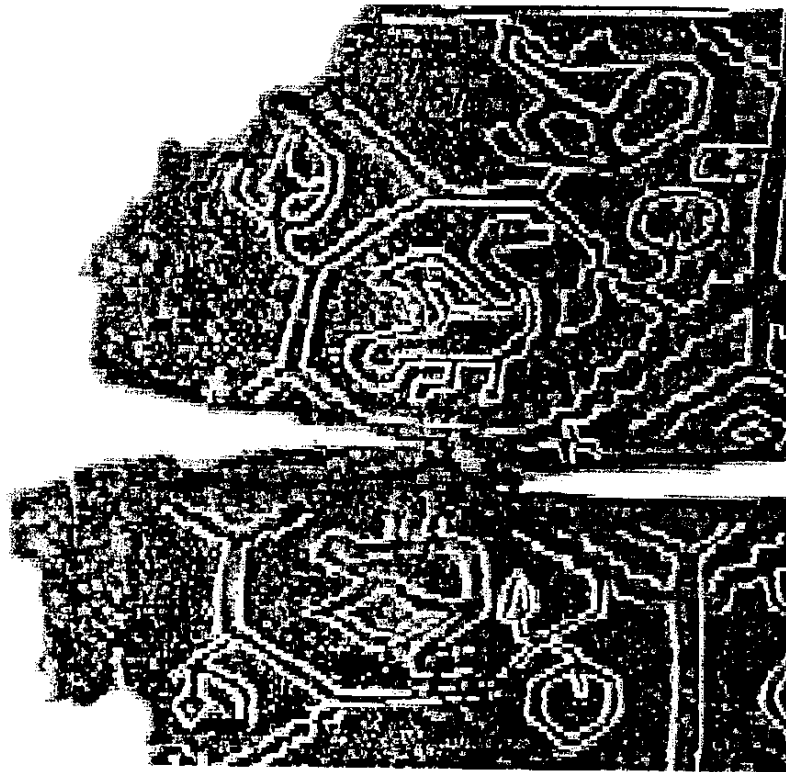
CURVE

DESIGN SUGGESTIONS

Saxon embroideries were distinguished for simple interlaces, foliates, animals, birds, acanthus, fruits and flowers.

The Llan-gors tunic (9th-10th c) (found in a part of Wales with royal Irish connections) was of fine-woven linen (c.25 threads/cm), and the embroidery, which shows Byzantine influence, was executed with 2 ply silk thread for the motifs and a shiny, unplied one filling the background. Thread-counted stem stitch was used for the lion motifs, laying three across the linen and back under one. There were three different embroidery designs:

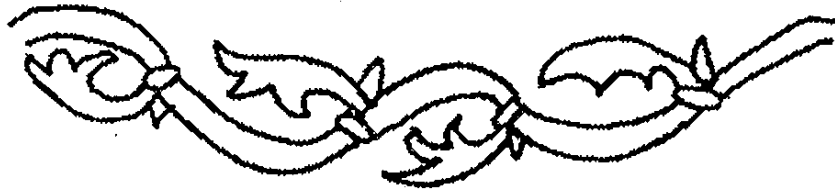
- border with pairs of confronted lions (there is disagreement on whether this was embroidery or soumak weaving),
- a geometric design of triangles,
- a main design of hexagons composed of vine-scroll and enclosing two different types of bird, all set against the unplied-silk embroidered background (illustrated below).



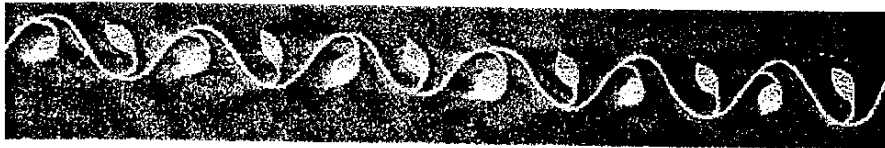
Unfortunately none of the original colour was preserved in the textile, making the design very difficult to see without assistance. It is picked out here with superimposed white lines. The total area shown is roughly 9cm tall by 7cm wide (3.5 x 2.8 inches).

For the beginner and those with limited time, a simple basic wave design (next page) is useful, in that it can be embellished with either fruit or leaves or birds or animals, according to taste and skill. For ideas, see the source list next page, and the Bayeux Tapestry. Stonework is a useful source because the designs translate into embroidery more easily than manuscript borders. Avoid anything that looks like a fleur-de-lis in your design as this was a later motif.

For typical Viking embroidery designs, see websites 1 and 2 next page.



10th century Mammen embroidery. Twining vine about three-quarters of an inch wide with continuous S-curves, sharing an affinity with both Byzantine and Anglo-Saxon acanthus motifs. Similar to some of the standard foliage design elements of the high feudal period. (Carolyn Priest-Dorman, see website 1 below)



embroidered by Jane Stockton.
(see website 2 below)

Sources - Web

1. <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/capriest/asvembroid.html> (also has interesting and useful information on Viking works of the needle, and many other useful articles)
2. <http://medieval.webcon.net.au/index.html> (this too is a very good site to explore)

For Stonework: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/corpus/index.php3>

Sources - Books

- D.M. Wilson, 'Anglo-Saxon Art', Thames & Hudson (lots of useful illustrations)
- E. Wilson, 'Early Medieval Designs' British Museum Pattern Books (excellent but out of print, may be obtainable online)
- E. Coatsworth, 'Stitches in Time: Establishing a History of Anglo-Saxon Embroidery' Journal of Medieval Clothing and Textiles, Vol. 1; Boydell & Brewer (text only)
- G. Owen-Crocker, 'Dress in Anglo-Saxon England', revised edition 2004, Boydell Press

- Don't hesitate to pounce on the society's embroidery gurus at shows or online for help and advice....
- You can also gain Test points with embroidery.....