

The attached document was submitted in support of an entry into the SCA Arts & Sciences competition known as “Ice Dragon” held April 13, 2019, in the Barony of the Rhydderich Hael (see <http://www.ice-dragon.info/>).

Many thanks to the individuals who judged this and all entries and provided feedback on them, as well as to those who organized and staffed the event.

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A 14th-Century Man's Purse

This fine men's leather purse boasts two large interior pouches, one sporting an internal fabric side of high-quality, blood-red linen allowing for expansion to hold all one's winnings at dice, whilst the other offers dual pouchlets of supple sheepskin on top of its capacious holding area.

One of the inside pouchlets happens to exactly match the dimensions of a certain modern device, keeping it handy for quick use, and the other sports a tabbed drawstring allowing easy access into its depth when pulled open, and frustration to thieves when closed.

A finely wrought brass buckle secures the entire bag and its contents during riding, dancing, and bouts of gaming. This purse will, no doubt, emphasize the wearer's high sense of fashion, quality, and good taste, sure to impress all who gaze upon it.



The exemplar for this purse comes from the 14th century Dordrecht in The Netherlands.

Leather: vegetable-tanned cow dyed black with atramentum, modernly known as vinegaroon or vinagroon. Undyed veg-tanned sheepskin was used for internal pouchlets.

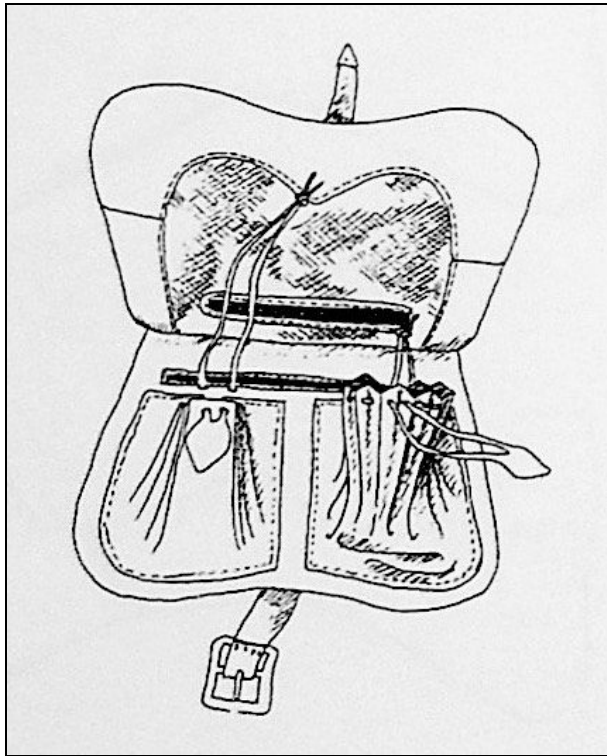
Thread: linen, hand-waxed with beeswax.

Buckle: brass, purchased online.

Cloth: linen.

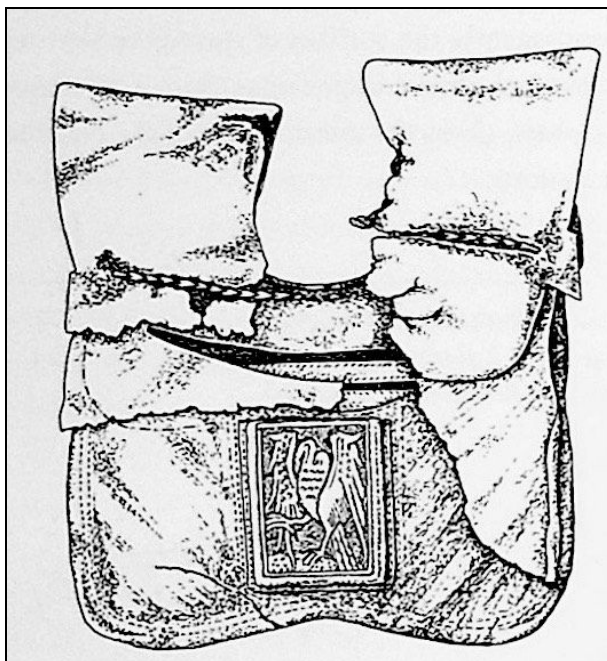
The Pattern

The basic pattern for this purse comes from the various examples illustrated in *Purses in Pieces* (Goubitz, 1991). Amongst those many options of cut and configuration, I chose to make this one have a cloth-panelled pouch on the inside of the front flap, a leather-sided pouch on the inside of back flap, and two pouchlets attached to the front of the back pouch.



A folded-open purse illustrating the layout of the two main pouches and the pouchlets on the internal inside flap. The internal outside flap has the cloth-sided compartment. After Goubitz, fig. 27b, p. 26.

One of the two pouchlets can be drawn closed by pulling a tabbed thong one way and then opened by pulling it in the opposite way. The other pouchlet remains open and serves for quick access to a modern device.



A purse with a decorated pouchlet designed to hold a wax writing tablet. After Goubitz, fig. 34a, p. 30.

The idea of the open pouchlet came from a surviving purse that had one designed to hold a wax tablet, making it readily available for the wearer's use.

That one had it centered between two other pouchlets, whereas mine has it to one side, for access even when the purse is closed.

Taking the Black

Vegetable-tanned leather is a light brown, but I wanted a black pouch. Rather than simply buying and wiping on a modern black dye, I decided to try making and applying my own atramentum. In this case, specifically, I made “vinegaroon,” which is a period-plausible concoction that does not merely color the surface, but rather changes the leather’s nature chemically as it is absorbed into the leather.

I followed the steps provided by Lord Snorri skyti Bjarnarson from his exhibit in this competition last year. Namely, add bits and pieces of steel to vinegar and let them sit for a month or more. Then soak the leather in the resulting liquid (an hour in this case), remove it and let it soak for an equal time in a neutralizing bath of baking soda. To finish, apply neetsfoot oil to re-soften the leather.



Ready to dye, and soaking in the vinegaroon.



After an hour in the vinegaroon, and after drying.



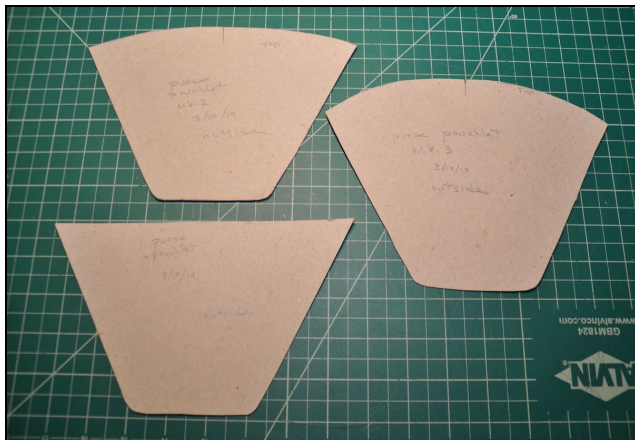
Adding the Pouchlets



Sizing the pouchlet for the phone and after attachment.



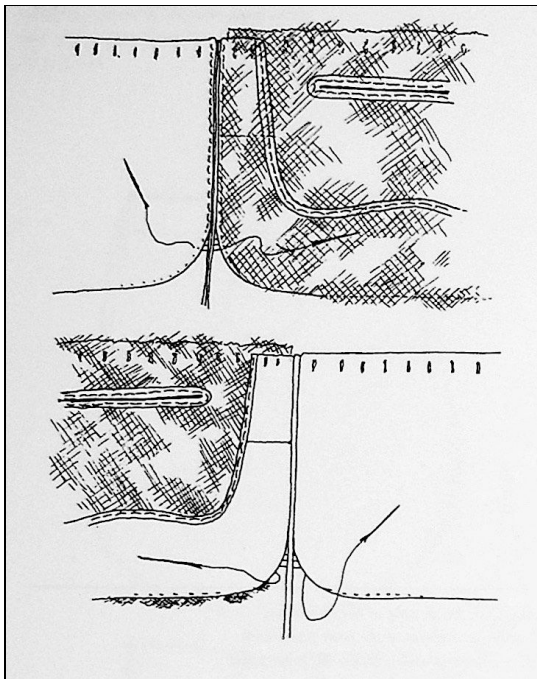
The drawstring pouchlet attached and then threaded.



Several tries at shape and size were needed for the drawstring pouchlet. The rear view of the pouchlet flap after both were attached.

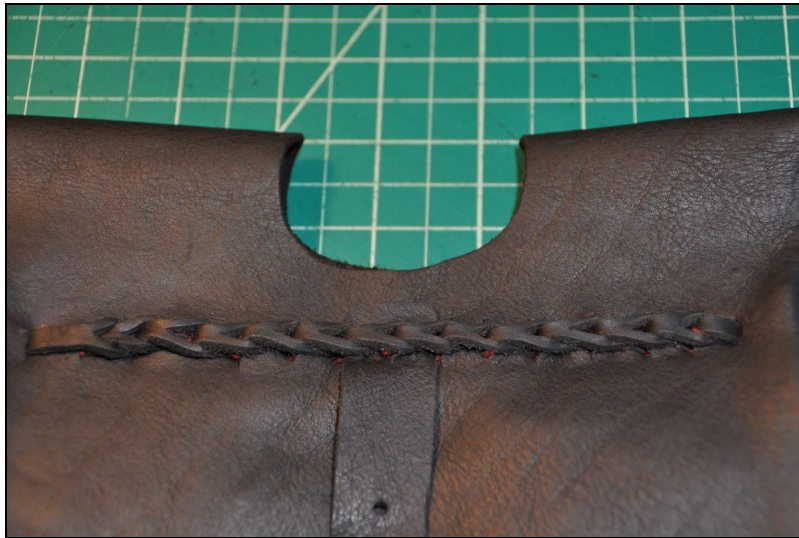
The Cloth-Sided Flap

According to Goubitz, p. 26, the cloth of the flap's interior ran all the way to its edges. To reproduce the archaeological findings, I stitched the linen to the leather framework on the inside edge, and then also caught the outer edge of the trimmed linen when the side was attached to the back flap, before turning it.

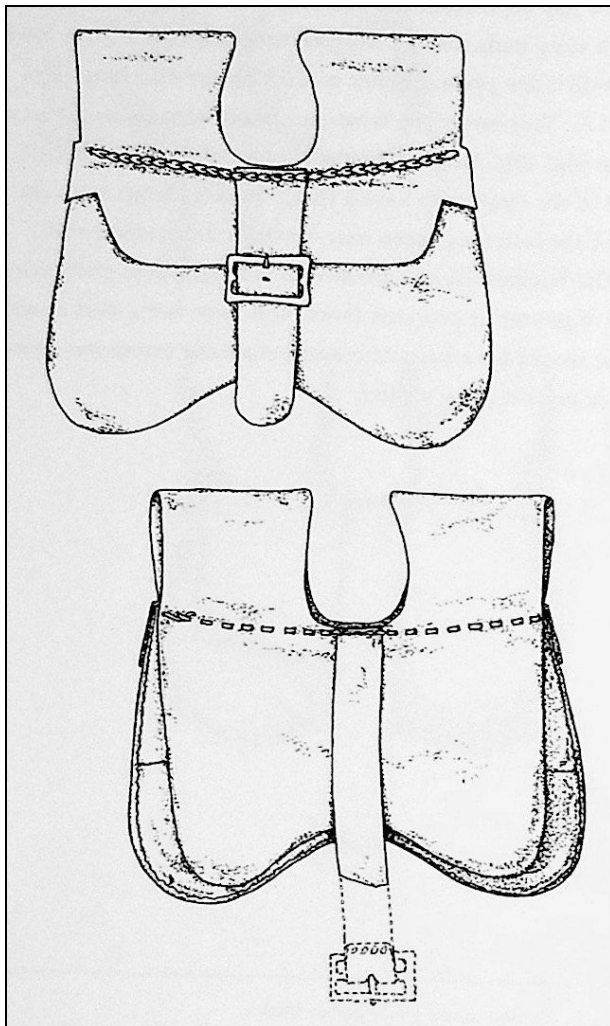


An illustration of a surviving purse with its cloth panel running to the edge of the leather flap. After Goubitz, fig. 27a, p. 26.

The Final Binding Seam



The final closing seam that holds the two flaps together and forms a space for the belt is created from a strip of leather that goes back and forth through both flaps while at the same time looping back through itself as it also passes through slits cut lengthwise in itself at each passage. The binding seam also attaches the fastening strap.



The strong seam used to finish the purse. After Goubitz, fig. 21a, p. 22.

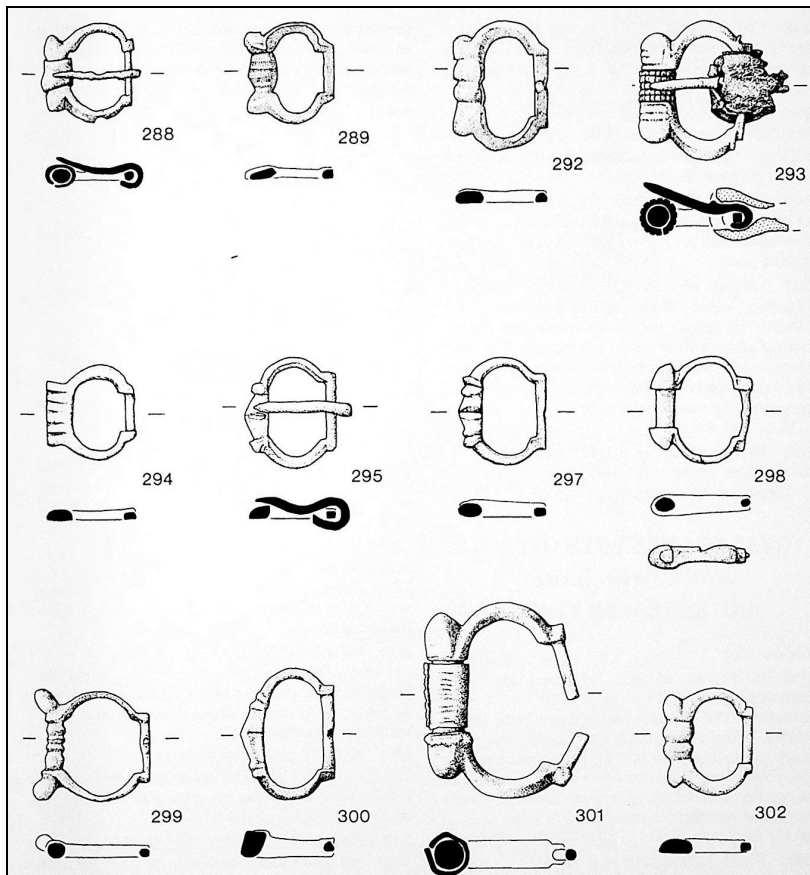
(Other patterns for the final stitch have been found, but I liked this one the best. See Goubitz, fig. 19, p. 21 for more examples.)

The Strap and Buckle

This type of purse is often held closed by a strap and buckle. The strap consists of two parts, the rear and the front. The rear holds the buckle and the front has the holes for the buckle's tongue.

Buckles could be made of base metals or more valuable ones and examples of various designs have been found attached to purses (Goubitz, 21).

I chose brass for its aesthetic appeal. I purchased it from an online re-enactment supply merchant. It generally resembles several found archaeologically from this period.



Various buckles resembling the one used on this purse. After Egan and Pritchard, fig. 44, p. 73.

Open for Business

Here's the interior of the purse after final assembly. The linen has become a bit stained a wrinkled after pressing that side to force it to lie flat after turning. See "Learning Points" below for more information about that aspect.



The finished purse, worn with bollacks dagger.

Learning Points

This is my first attempt at dying leather as well as making a complex pouch (one that has more than just a folded-over piece of leather with slits in its flaps). It is reasonable to expect that some lessons were learned whilst making it.

First, vinegar stains other materials, such as bath towels and tea towels. Permanently. This can upset other members of the household.

Second, I need to leave more space when attaching pouchlets and the cloth panel to its interior pouch.

When I attached those components, I thought I had left enough “seam allowance” in their placement such that they would be away from the edge of the purse when it was turned.

That turned out to not be the case, however, so that the pouchlets’ edges run right along the purse’s edge. The result on the cloth panel was even worse: the leather barely turned and the narrow leather edge stayed upright rather than lying flat.

The pouchlets were left as-is, but in order to alleviate the cloth-panel’s edges, I soaked that half of the purse in water and then laid it flat on a cutting board. I then carefully placed a 12”x11”x3”, 40-pound slab of marble on top of the wet side to flatten a part of it, and applied a piece of wood and two strong clamps to compress the rest.

This compression did the trick. It flattened out the edges to give the desired shape to the panel. It took some careful placement of the stone and clamps, and poking and prodding of the purse, in order to ensure that all edges would be weighted properly and then dry flat.

Unfortunately the wet vinegar stained the cloth of the panel. See lesson #1 above. But otherwise the process did work as desired.

Next time more seam allowance will be left for the pouchlets and panel (or thinner leather will be used to ensure flatter turning), and only old towels and rags will be used anywhere near vinegar.



References

Egan, G. and F. Pritchard. 2002. *Dress Accessories 1150-1450*, rev. ed. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, UK.

Goubitz, O. 1991. *Purses in Pieces: Archaeological Finds of Late Medieval and 16th Century Leather Purses, Pouches, Bags and Cases in the Netherlands*, 2nd ed. SPA Uitgevers, The Netherlands.

