

Leather Embroidery

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What is it?	Where was it applied?	When was it done?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embroidery is the application of decorative stitching to a surface.• On leather, the stitches are usually satin (simple looping), raised fishbone, or cross-stitch.• The applied material is almost always silk, but also could be wool or linen.• There is evidence for red, yellow, green, white, pink, and natural undyed (none for blue or purple so far).• This presentation covers only embroidery done directly on the leather, not via applique or cloth attached to leather.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scandinavia, Northern Europe, England, Poland and adjacent regions.• Hundreds of shoes (vastly more than all other kinds of items combined).• A few possible purses / pouches, depending on your definition of embroidery.• A few knife sheaths (at least some of which are made of re-used shoes).• 2 doublets (very late period).• 2 pairs of gloves (very late period).• 1 pair of boots (very late period).• 1 belt or baldric (very early period).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This survey covers the period about AD 600 - 1600.• Appears to have been most popular during the 12th century, with preceding and following periods of time as it waxed and waned.• Just after our period we find more gloves and boots and items from other places.

Who made and wore it?	How was it done?	Why isn't there more of it?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We don't know who did the work: Professional leatherworkers? Piece-work by embroidery specialists? Natives? Foreigners? ● People with a steady hand, good eyesight, and good lighting. ● Initially it seems like only the top echelons of society might be able to afford it, however Bergen data contradict this based on finds-locations and the possibility that silk thread was a commodity not a luxury good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Usually by scoring parallel lines in leather and passing the needle through the thickness of the leather. Norwegian designs are usually composed of stripes. ● The thread on Polish shoes passes up and down into and out of the leather. Designs are usually floral or geometric. ● Glover's needles: easy? Boar-bristle needles: more time-consuming? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good question! ● Does it wear too much on other types of items? ● Metal bling works better on other kinds of items? ● Shoe leather is thicker than other items and supports it better? ● It was a cheaper way to show wealth compared to metal, so it's a mid-level way to display status? ● Remember, it takes only one surviving item to prove embroidery was applied to other kinds of leather objects: possibly they just haven't been discovered yet.

Notes:

This presentation is very much a work in progress and not all known examples could be presented in the time allotted, nor reproduced in this hand-out.

The presenter is actively working to collect more examples and better photographs or drawings of embroidered leather. Any leads or suggestions are most appreciated!

The latest version of this survey will probably be presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies next spring as well as the next academy of St. Clare SCA embroidery-only event in Æthelmearc.

Anyone wishing to receive occasional emails about the progress of this project is welcome to contact the author to be put on a list of recipients. Contact Ken Stuart at kps1@cornell.edu.

Fig. 1: a progression of shoe closings. The vast majority of embroidered shoes have a single or triple stripe down the front (vamp).



Fig. 9 Satin stitch.



Fig. 10 Raised fishbone stitch.



Fig. 11 Cross stitch.

Stitch types found on leather shoes in Bergen (after Pedersen, 1992a).

Fig. 2: increasingly elaborate embroidery designs on shoes found in Bergen (after Larsen, 1992: 31).

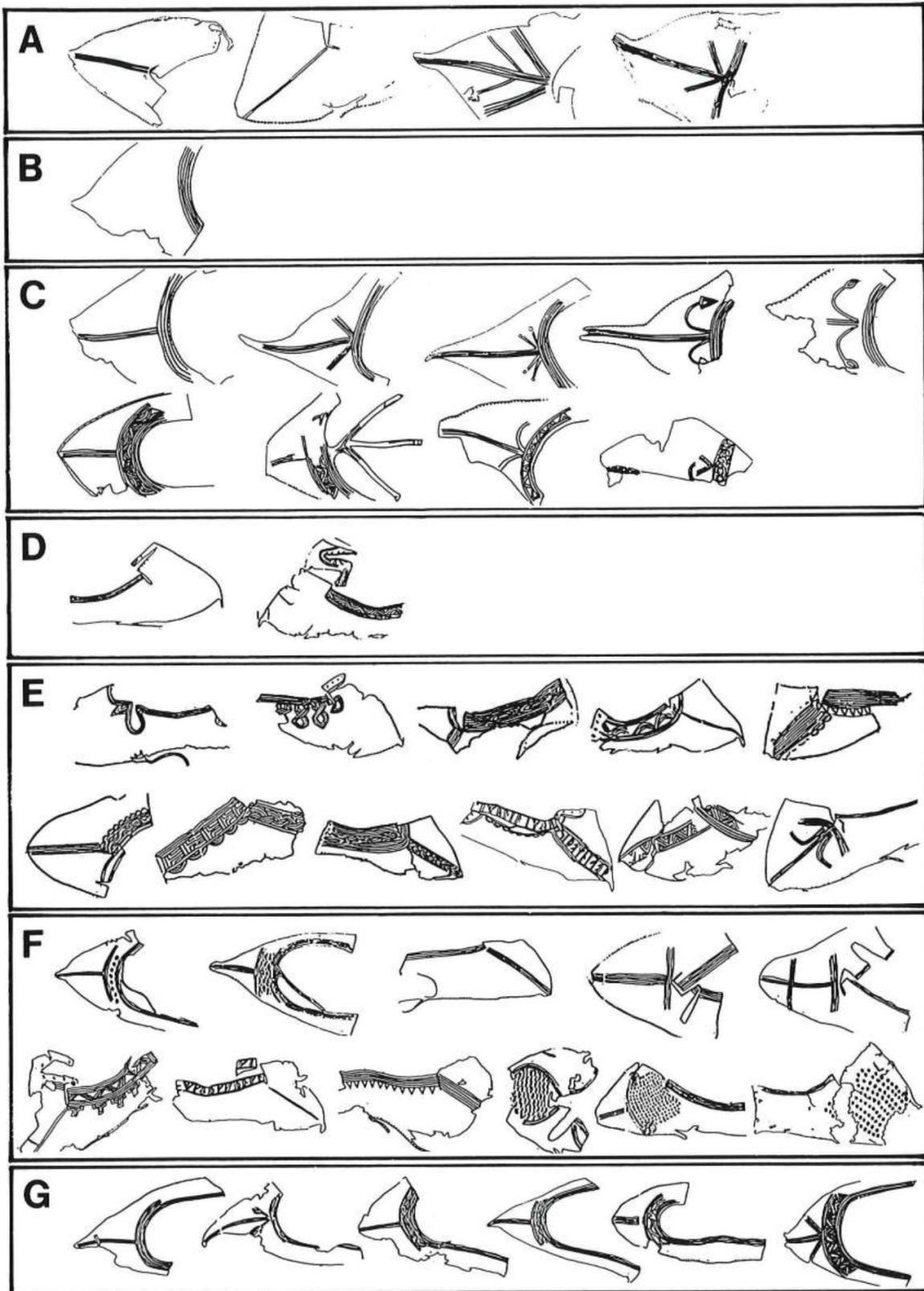


Fig. 3: details of surviving Norwegian embroidery showing scoring of the leather, satin stitch and raised fishbone stitch (after Swann, 2001: 60).

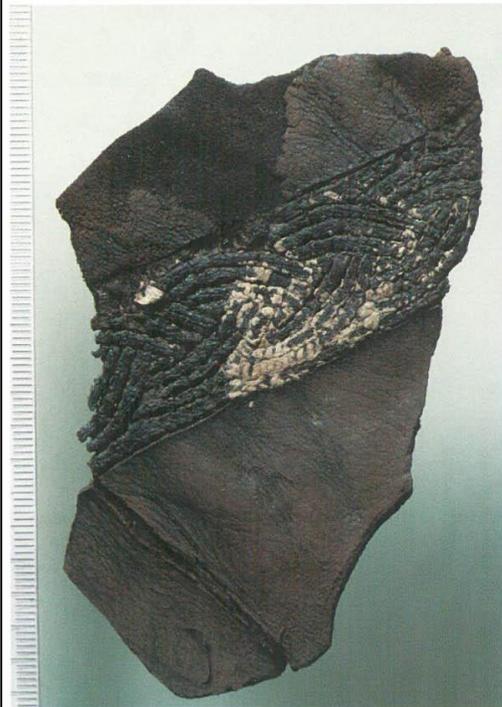


Fig. 61. a-d details of the embroidery showing scoring of the leather, satin stitch and raised fishbone stitch. Bergen Museum, Bergen, Norway.

Fig. 4: an embroidered shoe from 12th-century Bergen, Norway, with a runic inscription and decorative elements (image from <http://www.unimus.no/foto/imageviewer.html#/?id=12751816&type=jpeg>).



Fig. 5: the author's reproduction of a runic-scripted, Latin-phrased, silk-embroidered, skewed-toe shoe from Bergen, Norway; the originals date to the later 12th century, with the runes spelling out "amor vincit omnia" on the right foot.



Fig. 6: some examples of Polish shoes with embroidery. The application and designs differ significantly from the Norwegian ones.

<p>Dated to c.1125-c.1150 this shoe from Gdansk still has some preserved geometric embroidery on the vamp, as well as clear evidence for a strip from ankle to toe. Top image after Ceynowa and Trawicka, 2016: 29; detail made from zooming in on it.</p>	<p>Also from Gdansk, and dated c.1125-c.1150, there is an openwork shoe very different from others both in style and use of embroidery to decorate it. Top image after Ceynowa and Trawicka, 2016: 32; detail made from zooming in on it.</p>
	
	

Fig. 7: a fragment of a third shoe from Gdansk dated c.1125-c.1150. Top image after Ceynowa and Trawicka, 2016: 31; detail made from zooming in on it.



Fig. 8: at least two embroidered doublets survive from Europe. These photos are screenshots from two websites (see sources for URLs).

Metropolitan Museum of Art website: “The delicate silk embroidery and the use of gold and silver metallic yarns are additional indicators of its high quality.”

Antiques Trade Gazette website: “It is a luxurious creation, made from padded natural chamois leather which is quilted overall and embroidered in blue silk and applied with gold braid with scrolls and fleur de lys.”



Fig. 9: the Met has a direct-leather embroidered pair of gloves they list as 16th century (not on view currently), with high-resolution photos: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/119576>



Fig. 10: like gloves, many fancy boots appear shortly after our period, however an unworn one from 1582 has survived (after Swann, 2001: 95.)



Fig. 11: this knife sheath from Bergen, Norway, clearly shows signs of embroidery, but it was re-used from a shoe. BRM 0/45983/01 (after Hansen, 2005: 190).



Fig. 12 an early-period belt or baldric from France.



The belt of Césaire d'Arles, 6th century, as displayed and usually oriented (after Lacanaud in Guyon and Heijmans, 2001: 91).



The "belt" with pieces repositioned and reoriented to suggest its use as a baldric (after Volken and Goubitz, 2020: 36).

Step-by-Step Example of How to Embroider Leather

- 1) Draw or trace a design to the shoe upper while it is flat. The design can be impressed or scratched on with an awl or other sharp metal tool, or just incised without marking. (Drawing with pencil, pen, or marker runs the risk of the line being too wide and showing outside of the embroidery.)
- 2) Using a very sharp knife, incise the design in the leather. You must not cut through the leather, but you must cut deep enough to be able to access the thickness of the leather from the side, from one incision to another. The exact depth will depend on the thickness and softness of the leather, the diameter of the needle, and your dexterity. Practice these steps on scraps of the same leather you will use for this project so that you get a feel for its resistance to the knife.



Scored lines ready for embroidery (left) and the scored lines pinched to show their depth, which allows the embroidery needle to pass from one to another through the thickness of the leather (right).

- 3) Apply the thread via needle passed in loops around the leather between two incisions. In terms of starting and ending a piece of thread, I pass the needle perpendicular to the first and last stitches, leaving a length of thread within the thickness of the leather so that no knots are visible in the embroidery. (The needle should be a tiny glover's needle, or possibly a boar's bristle.)
- 4) In terms of mechanics, I simply push/pull the needle through often relying on a ring thimble on my middle finger for leverage. If my fingers are sore, or the distance the needle must go is long, or the leather is tough, one can use small pliers to push/pull it through the leather. I have tried making holes with a very fine awl when using a boar's bristle, and that works perfectly well, but greatly adds to the time needed for a project because exchanging tools on every stitch makes delays and offers a chance for fumbling them or tangling the silk thread. Making a series of holes with an awl prior to applying any thread does not work well because the holes close as new ones are made.



Close-up of the middle seam being added with a satin stitch (left) and close-up of the right seam being added next (right).

- 5) Needles: I have been using a #6 glover's needle so that the blade-like tip cuts the leather as it passes through. Finer #8 and #10 needles work as well.
- 6) Queue up some audio books, podcasts, good music, etc., and get to it.



Close-up of the left seam being added (left) and the embroidered area seen from the inside of the top of the shoe where no stitches have come through (right).

Sources and Further Information

Antiques Trade Gazette website, accessed April 13, 2022: <https://tinyurl.com/5edfszpy/> [One doublet: "It is a luxurious creation, made from padded natural chamois leather which is quilted overall and embroidered in blue silk and applied with gold braid with scrolls and fleur de lys."]

Ceynowa, B. and E. Trawicka, eds. 2016. *Every Step Leaves a Trace: Historic Footwear from the Collection of the Archaeological Museum in Gdansk*. Gdańsk.

Coatsworth, E. and G. Owen-Crocker, 2018. *Clothing the Past: Surviving Garments from Early Medieval to Early Modern Western Europe*. Brill, Boston. [Chapter 9: Footwear: Shoe, Boot, Slipper, Patten.]

Egan, G. and F. Pritchard. 2002. *Dress Accessories, 1150-1450*. Boydell Press, London. [A single purse, probably made from recycled leather. "As a further decorative touch the pouch was embroidered on the front and back with small knots worked in cross-stitch using silk thread."]

Grew, F. and M. De Neergaard. 2001. *Shoes and Pattens*. Boydell Press, London.

Guyon, J. and M. Heijmans. 2001. *D'un Monde à L'autre Naissance d'une Chrétienté en Provence, IV^e - VI^e Siècle*. Musée de l'Arles antique, Arles. [A catalog of early Christian items from France, including one possible embroidered leather belt or baldric.]

Hansen, G., 2005. *Bergen c 800-c 1170 the Emergence of a Town: The Bryggen Papers*, Main Series No. 6. Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke AS. [Contains sections on showmakers and leatherworkers, including some nice photos of an formerly embroidered shoe and knife sheath. Available for free PDF download at [https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive.](https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive/)]

Hansen, G., 2015. "Luxury for Everyone? Embroideries on Leather Shoes and the Consumption of Silk Yarn in 11th-13th Century Northern Europe" in *Textiles and the Medieval Economy: Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles 8th-16th Centuries*, pp. 86-103. A. Huang and C. Jahnke, eds. Ancient Textiles Series Vol. 16, Oxbow Books, Oxford, UK.

Larsen, A. 1992. *Footwear from the Gullskoen Area of Bryggen: The Bryggen Papers: Main Series*, vol. 4. Scandinavian University Press. [Numerous examples of surviving embroidered shoes with a wide range of designs, all stitched within the thickness of the leather. Available for free PDF download at [https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive.](https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive/)]

Metropolitan Museum of Art website, accessed April 13, 2022 [doublet]: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/23241> ["The delicate silk embroidery and the use of gold and silver metallic yarns are additional indicators of its high quality."]

Metropolitan Museum of Art website, accessed April 17, 2022 [gloves]: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/119576> ["16th century. British."]

Mould, Q., I. Carlisle, and E. Cameron. 2003. *Leather and Leatherworking in Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York*. Council for British Archaeology, York. [A number of shoes; esp. topbands; references to a few other items.]

Norska-Gulkoa, M. 1964. "Early Mediaeval Embroideries on 10th-13th Centuries Leather Objects from Ostrówiek in Opole" in *Bulletin Archéologique Polonais*, 30, Warsaw. [Polish article with photos of embroidery that appears to go up and down through the leather rather than within it.]

Nøttveit, O.-M. 2010. *Sheaths and Scabbards from Medieval Bergen - In a Comparative Perspective: The Bryggen Papers: Main Series*, vol. 8. Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke AS. [Contemporary to hundreds of embroidered shoes, at least some of the sheaths seem to be made from reused shoes. Available for free PDF download at <https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive>.]

Pedersen, I., 1992a. "Appendix: Technical Analysis of the Embroidery" in Larsen, 1992. [Many details about the shoes from Bergen. Available for free PDF download at <https://boap.uib.no/index.php/bryggen/issue/archive>.]

Pedersen, I., 1992b. "Silk threads on leather objects from the Middle Ages" in *Archaeological textiles in northern Europe: report from the 4th NESAT Symposium 1.-5. May 1990 in Copenhagen*, pp. 141-150. [Instances of silk used as decoration in both embroidery and otherwise.]

Stuart, K. 2020. "Amor Vincit Omnia: 12th-Century Embroidered Shoes" posted to Academia.edu at <https://tinyurl.com/3bkcfa5y> [The author's documentation for his reconstructed shoes.]

Swann, J., 2001. *History of Footwear in Norway, Sweden and Finland: Prehistory to 1950*. Coronet Books, Inc. [Nice selection of colored images with some close-ups.]

Volken, M. and O. Goubitz. 2020. *Covering the Blade*. SPA Uitgevers. [No mention of embroidery, except one partial strap in Fig. 10.]

Screenshots from the Met's website:

Note that the Met's site allows one to zoom in and move around the image to see all details at high resolution and that "[a]s part of the Met's Open Access policy, you can freely copy, modify and distribute this image, even for commercial purposes." This is very much appreciated for the doublet and gloves.



Beati Sutores in Æternum.