

4.6.2 – Surface Embroidery

Embroidered table covering



Figure 1 - Embroidered table covering

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An Embroidered Table Covering

Intro: While there are only a few extant examples of embroidery from the Viking era, there are references to elaborate embroideries in various sagas, the Saga of Gisli the Outlaw and the Saga of Rigsthula. “So he went away; but when he gets to Gisli’s house, Gisli and Auda were hard at work putting up the hangings. ... That alone is quite enough, said Gisli; and with that he gives him the rich hangings.”¹

Background: During the Viking Era (and most of the Middle Ages), embroidery was a sign of wealth. If a person had embroidered clothes, table coverings, or wall hangings then they either had enough money to hire a skilled artisan to create such beautiful works or hire enough servants so that the mistress of the house can enjoy her hobby. The few examples that have been recovered, the most significant has been from the chamber grave in Mammen. “The high status of the man buried in a chamber-grave at Mammen, in central Jutland, would be evident from his magnificent cloak.”²

Design: In reading the cookbook, an *Early Meal*, a book based on Viking foods, I came across an excerpt from the Saga of Rigsthula. In the saga there is mention of an embroidered cloth. “Þá tók Móðir merkðan dúk, hvítan af hörvi, hulði bjóð, hón tók at þat hleifa þunna, hvíta af hveiti, ok hulði dúk.” Or translated to “Then Mothir brought a broidered cloth, of linen bright, and the board she covered; and then she took the loaves so thin, and laid them, white from the wheat, on the cloth.” ~Rigsthula (1936 transl. Henry Adams Bellows)³ In my design I recreated



Figure 2 - What my table would look like in my home.

the moment in time where Rigsthula is seated in the home of the couple. The moment I chose to depict was where Rigsthula (believed to be the god Heimdall) comes to the home of a young couple, who are preparing their evening meal. The saga appears to be the detailing of how the caste system was developed. Rigsthula travels the Scandinavian countryside. At each home that he stops at, he counsels the young couples that he encounters. After staying with each couple and upon his leave, they have multiple children and therefore populate the country. The excerpt above comes from Rigsthula's visit to a wealthy couple, which would lead to the birth of King Harald the Fair-haired.⁴ With this in mind, I chose to design my piece with this in mind. I also chose to use design elements that were reminiscent of the wall hanging that I also created based on extent findings and other sagas. The two pieces would then adorn my home during special occasions.

Materials: To complete the project I used a golden color medium weight linen and wool thread. "The material used between the sixth and eleventh centuries included flosses of wool and silk and thread of spun gold and background fabrics of wool and linen."⁵

Color: I used colors that would have been available during this time period. Red/rust would have been made using madder. The natural colors are undyed. While the whiter colors would be natural thread that could be left out to bleach in the sun to a whiter white. Orange is made through a combination of Weld and Madder. Green is made from a combination of Wode and Weld. Brown/tan color is made from tree bark and nut shells. While, grey would have been made using an exhausted wash of the color black. Black is made from walnut shells and iron oxide.⁶

Technique: Prior to starting the project I read the saga of Rigsthula. I chose to depict

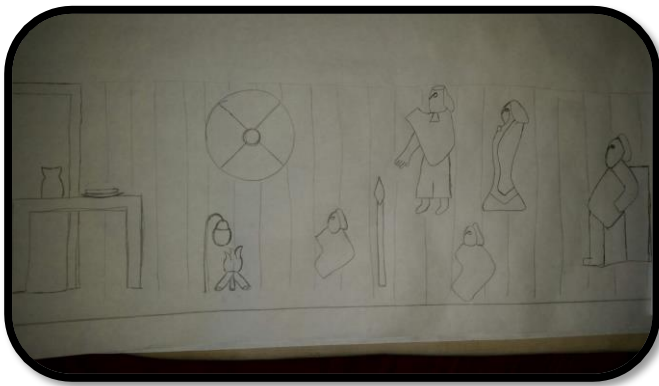


Figure 3 - Design of table linen

single Thor's hammer.

After deciding on the topic for my piece, I drew out the design onto a piece of paper (figure 3) and then used a sewers marker to draw the image onto the fabric (figure 4). Other than the

the moment in time that was mentioned in the cookbook, an *Early Meal*. In designing this piece, I used similar design elements from my Viking era inspired wall hanging. In the table covering, I used lozenges as well as a



Figure 5 - Drawing on linen with sewers marker.



Figure 6 - Corner

in style with a grid pattern. I chose to do a simplified lozenge on the table covering and one Thor's hammer in the corner. I decided not to do an exact replica of the border because I feel that while they should be similar they would not have been identical. I used stretcher bars to hold the embroidery.

straight lines for the border and the table and chairs, all other items were drawn free hand. As you can see from figures 5 and 6 the borders are similar



Figure 4 - lower portion of table covering.

The scroll bars allow me to have light tension on the project as I worked. For this project I used the split stitch. Based on my research this stitch is very common in the Viking era.⁷

Final Construction: In completing the project I did a simple double fold of the material and used modern sewing thread to hand sew the edge, and that the thread matched the fabric.

Conclusion: Due to the fact that linen and wool are natural fibers, they will decompose from exposure to the elements; especially from being buried in a grave. Luckily we have a few small examples that showcase the beautiful skill of the artisans of the time. We also have the stories that give us a glimpse into the homes. With this information, we are able to come up with our interpretation. Based on the information, I believe that this home would have had multiple embroidered pieces. They would have been unique yet similar.

Bibliography

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- Saga of Gisli the Outlaw – Thorgrim’s slaying
- Serra, D., Tunberg, H.; An Early Meal: A Viking Age Cookbook & Culinary Odyssey. Furuland, Sweden: ChronoCopia, 2013.

End Notes

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- ¹ The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw. Chapter 9 Thorgrim’s slaying
- ² Graham-Campbell, James; Viking Art. Pg 100 - 101
- ³ Serra, D., Tunberg, H.; An Early Meal. Page 28
- ⁴ The Poetic Edda – Rigsthula; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe14.htm>
- ⁵ Priest-Dorman, Carolyn; Anglo-Saxon and Viking Works of Needle (1992). Page 4
Decorative Embroidery stitches
- ⁶ Newman, Paul B.; Daily life in the Middle Ages. Dyes, pages 100-101
- ⁷ Priest-Dorman, Carolyn; Anglo-Saxon and Viking Works of Needle (1992). Page 4
Decorative Embroidery stitches