

How to Set up a Viking Warp Weighted Loom

Step by step instructions for setting up a Warp Weighted Loom



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How to Set up a Viking Warp Weighted Loom

Introduction: Weaving was an important part of every aspect of life in the Viking Age. It required great skill to weave but also great knowledge to set up the loom. In order to weave it was necessary to have, a loom (and all of its parts), a starting border, weights, additional thread, and patience. If the loom was not set up properly the weaver would not have been able to complete their goal of making cloth. The cloth was used to make clothes, bed, and table coverings, as well as wall hangings. “In the Viking Age, ordinary people made not only their own clothes, but also their own cloth. Even away from the fields which supplied the wool and the flax, city dwellers were spinning and weaving cloth for themselves.”¹

Along with creating cloth and clothing for themselves, the ability to have additional clothing on hand for visitors in need or be given as gifts, was an outward expression of wealth and station in life. “Generally a rich man could afford to dress better than a poor man, but clothing given as gifts would reflect the giver’s wealth at least as much as the receiver’s...Clothes were also routinely provided for travelers, but this is best understood as an act of hospitality rather than specifically as gift giving.”²

In the Viking Age cloth was made of natural fibers, and the fact that we have any remnants available to study is amazing. Natural fibers, such as linen and wool, naturally decompose when exposed to the elements. “Linen is made from the fibers of the Flax plant; other plant fibers can also be used in cloth making, notably nettle and hemp, but where tests have been possible, plant fibers from Viking-era textiles have been proven to be from flax.”³ Wool fibers come from a sheep’s fleece. “The type of fleece used is of utmost importance for the nature and quality of the finished cloth.”⁴

Along with the remaining fibers we have access to the design of the loom. The loom was designed using minimal pieces of wood that could be set up in a corner of a home. It includes two support beams, a cloth rod, a heddle rod, heddle supports, and a shed rod. “The loom rests against a wall, so that the uprights are at a natural angle to the freely hanging warp. Near the bottom of the loom is a fixed crossbar, called the shed rod...Each set of threads is fastened to a different set of loom weights... A moveable ‘heddle rod’ runs across the loom, resting on brackets fixed to the two uprights at chest height, and freely-hanging warp threads are tied to this by long loops or heddles”.⁵ Weaving on a warp-weighted loom was not simple or limiting. However, prior to weaving, the loom needed to be prepared. It required specific knowledge and skill. The weaver would secure the starting border, create the stabilizing thread and heddles and secure the weights. They would have used linen or wool thread to do this. My modification to this process is that I used commercially made cotton thread to secure the border and create the stabilizing threads and heddle. I did this because the cotton thread was inexpensive and could be bought in bulk.

The talent needed for the weaving was necessary but without the knowledge or skill to set up the loom, none of this would be possible. In this paper, I will discuss how-to-set-up a Viking Warp-weighted loom.

Terms:

Beater – used to push the weft threads up.

Shuttle – used to hold the weft threads.

Cloth Rod – the rod used to hold the starting border.

Comb – a small piece of wood that is used to separate the warp threads from each other as you weave.

Heddle rod – the rod that keeps the warp threads separated from each other as you weave.

Heddle supports – the supports that are approximately half way down the upright poles and will move the warp back and forth.

Warp – Threads that hang down and will be woven on.

Weft (woof) – Threads that are drawn through the warp to create the fabric.

Heddle – The strings that are used to pull one set of warp threads that will create the pattern of the cloth.

Shed Rod – the lower support rod that is used to separate the warp strands from each other to create the pattern.

Weights – soapstone or clay used to weight down the warp threads



Before starting to weave on the Viking Loom I spoke with several known weavers within the Society for Creative Anachronism. They spoke to me regarding the creation of a starting border, warp and weft as well as how to set up the loom.

The Process

Step 1 – Creating a starting border.

The first thing that needs to be created is a starting border “The starting border would be woven on a small band loom.”⁶ Just like a selvage edge in modern fabric, the starting border provides a solid edge as well as the weft in which the fabric is to be woven. Depending on the desired outcome the starting border and warp will differ. The procedure for this step is beyond the scope of the paper.



Warp for starting border



Creating the starting border and Warp



Creating the Warp strands



The final Starting Border and Warp

Step 2 – Attaching the Starting Border to the Cloth Rod

After completing the starting border, you will need to attach it (and warp) to the “cloth rod”. In order to do this, you will need to take thread and wrap the border to the rod. I did this by laying the starting border on the cloth rod and lashing it to the rod with string. I then wrapped the string around the rod and used a half hitch knot. I continued to do this between each warp thread to securely fasten the border to the rod. The cloth rod is then placed at the top of the warp-weighted loom.



Attaching the Starting Border to the Cloth Rod



Attaching the Starting Border to the Cloth Rod



The cloth rod placed at the top of the loom

Step 3 – Separating the Warp threads

Next it is necessary to separate the threads. Separate each strand by placing every other one over the cloth bar. The separation will then be used to set the pattern of the fabric. Once the strands have been separated, half will be behind the shed rod and the other half will be in front.



Separating the Warp Threads

Step 4 – Creating the stabilizing thread and tying the warp to the threads

Next, since this is a free hanging warp it is necessary to create a stabilizing thread. This keeps the thread separated and evenly spaced. To do this, I cut a very long piece of string and tied one side to the left upright. I then used a chain stitch (for lack of a better term, a single crochet chain) and made sure to capture each warp thread. While securing the threads I began to group them and tie them to the weights using a slip knot. This gives stability to the warp. Continue with the loops until all threads have been secured. The remaining stabilizing thread is then attached to the right loom support.



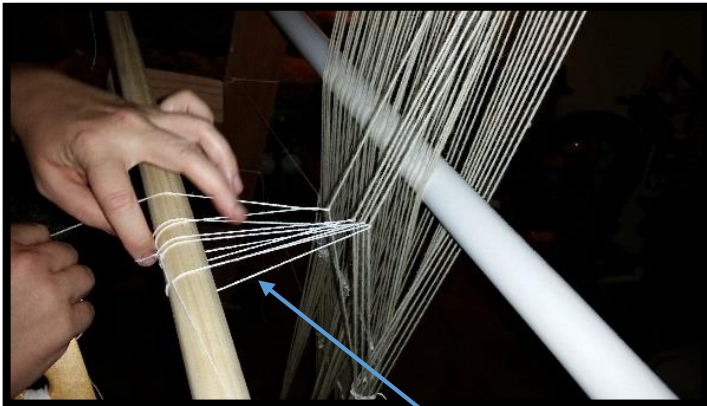
Attaching the Stabilizing thread



Attaching the weights

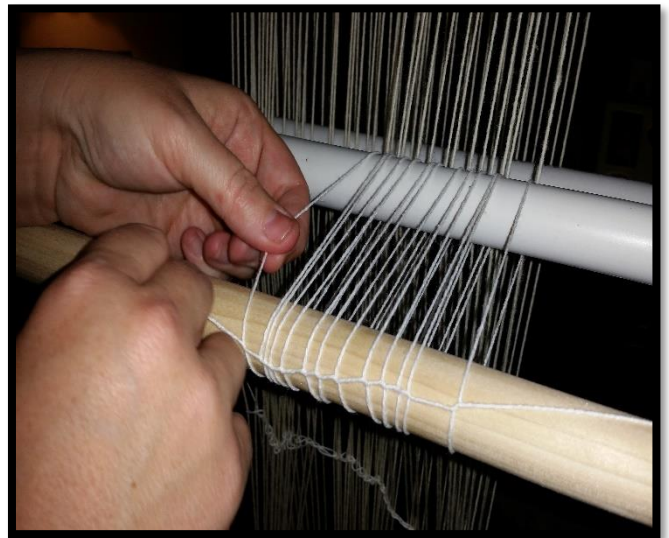
Step 5 - Creating the Heddle

After separating the threads and tying them to the weights, it is time to create the heddle. I started by tying a string to the heddle rod and then wrapped the thread around the warp thread. I then came back to the heddle rod and wrapped the string around the bar using a similar knotting to secure the border to the cloth bar. If at all possible, use one long string to create the heddle. I continued to attach the string to the heddle until I attached all of them.



Heddles

Creating the Heddles



Creating the Heddles



The heddle attached to the heddle rod



The heddle attached to the heddle rod

At this time, the heddle bar is resting on the heddle supports that are attached to the upright supports. It is at this point that a second heddle could be created if a particular pattern was to be created. After completing all of these steps, it is now time to start weaving.

Conclusion: Weaving was and is a process that takes patience and practice. The Viking women were truly skilled artisans. Based on the various remnants that have been discovered, I feel that having the knowledge and skill to set up the loom as well as weave was impressive. I have learned a lot in this process. I learned that weaving is difficult but that setting up the loom is very important. The various steps that go into ensuring that you are setting it up properly is extensive. The number of times that I had to stop and check that I was getting the right warp thread or making sure that they didn't twist, was numerous. The images I used in this paper show two different warps. The reasoning behind this is because I warped this loom twice in the process. During the first set up and weaving (the white warp), I noticed some flaws in the starting border and placements of heddles. The second warping was a lot easier and mistakes were minimal. I believe that as I continue to set up and work on this loom I will become more skilled. My goal is to continue working on the loom and eventually create a multi heddle set up and weave a more intricate pattern. I now have a better understanding about the skill required by women who wove the fabrics for not only their families but for others. I do look forward to learning more about the process of setting up different looms as well as weaving on the looms.

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End Notes

¹ Ewing, Thor, *Viking Clothes*, Pg. 131

² Ewing, Thor, *Viking Clothing*, Pg. 171

³ Ewing, Thor, *Viking Clothing*, Pg. 131

⁴ Ewing, Thor, *Viking Clothing*, Pg. 132

⁵ Ewing, Thor, *Viking Clothing*, Pg. 137

⁶ Ostergard, Else, *Woven into the Earth*. Pg. 64