

2.10.4 – Fiber Arts Tools

Viking Era Weaving Tools



Figure 1 - Viking Era Weaving Tools

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Introduction: In the city of Westness, on the Island of Rousay in Orkney, skeletons of a young woman and a newborn child were found. “Buried in the grave with the young woman were tools from her daily life, wool combs, weaving batten (beater), a bronze basin, a knife and a pair of shears.”¹ The evidence left with the young woman symbolizes the type of work she would have performed in her daily life.

Background: To work on a warp weighted loom, several other tools are necessary. There is a need for a beater, shuttle, comb, and weights. Each item performed a specific job in the weaving process. The beater was used to push the weft up on the loom after it was woven through the warp. Several beaters have been found in various



grave sites and dated to the “eleventh century”.² The shuttle was used to hold the weft yarn/thread. It was then passed through the warp thread. One of the few references found regarding the shuttle comes from Najl’s saga, “when they speed the shuttle.”³ The comb is used to comb the weft thread up the warp. The weights are used to weight the warp as the fabric was woven. Hence the name of the loom, warp-weighted loom.

Design: The design of the tools was based on those found in the various grave finds. As seen in the above picture, there is a circular weight and sword beaters. I did not include a handle on my sword beater due to the length of the wood piece I could purchase.

Materials: For the shuttle, beaters, and comb I used redwood. In period, they would have used “maple, alder, or oak”.⁴ I chose to use redwood because it is readily available and affordable. “In Greenland sword beaters or parts of them have been found in several excavations. They are made of whalebone or of wood.”⁵ For the weights, I used air dry clay. In period, they would have used soapstone, basalt



or other heavy item such as rocks. “Besides loom weights of soapstone, a couple of weights of granite were found in Gardar... In the Faroes basalt was used for loom weights.”⁶ I chose to use air dry clay because it is readily available and affordable.



Technique: For the various wood pieces, I drew the design onto the wood using a marker and then proceeded to use an electric saw and drill and an electric sander to shape and smooth the tools. Once the pieces had been sanded to the desired thickness and design, I took a sandpaper sheet and finished it by hand sanding the piece. This is very different from the period method of wood working. The Norse would have used axes and knives to cut and shape the wood. While using hand drills to cut the holes for the peg supports and files

to smooth the wood.

Final Construction:

Weights – The weights are made using modern air dry clay. Each weight is approximately 2 ¼ lbs. “The weights found in the graves ranged from 1 – 2 lbs.”⁷ On the weights, I included runes that represent the recipient (myself), love, protection, and courage. Many period weights have carved crosses or runes. “Some of the runes have been interpreted as spells that averted illness or helped people against all sorts of evils”⁸

Comb – I used an electric saw and sander to cut and shape the comb. I elected to do this because it was easier to remove the excess wood.

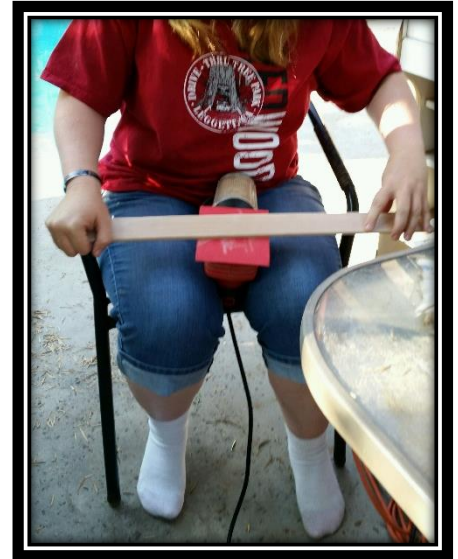


Shuttle – I shaped the wood using an electric sander. I decided to do this because it was easier for me to remove the excess wood. It was challenging to cut out the ends of the shuttle. I had to use a drill and then a dremel tool to cut the straight portion. To get into the rounded portions of the shuttle, I used a rounded sander. This allowed me to

get into the smaller area without doing damage to any other portion of the shuttle. This was very challenging to hold the shuttle piece and the sander. The final size of the shuttle is 14 inches.

Beaters – I shaped the wood using an electric sander. I did it this way because it was the fastest way for me to remove the excess wood. The shape of the shuttle is based on the sword beaters found in Greenland. The size of the beaters are 24 inches long. “At another farm in the Western Settlement four sword beaters have been found, two of which are of wood and measure 325mm and 312mm in length respectfully.”⁹

Conclusion: The grave finds have provided society with a snapshot into the life of those who lived in the Viking Age. The tools show a hard-working group of people who took pride in their work and everyday lives. If I were to recreate this project, I would try to be more authentic in my replication of the ways in which they would have done it in period, using more hand tools. Trying to hold onto some of the pieces and use the electric sander was quite difficult. I did enjoy this project. By creating the various pieces for the loom and the weaving, I gained a better understanding of what it would have been like to have to create the items needed to take care of a family.



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End Notes:

¹ Jesch, Judith; *Women in the Viking Age*, pg. 9

² Ostergard, Else; *Woven into the Earth*, pg. 56

³ *Njal's Saga*

⁴ *Viking Answer Lady- Woodworking in the Viking Age*. Wood

⁵ Ostergard, Else; *Woven into the Earth*, pg. 56

⁶ Ostergard, Else; *Woven into the Earth*, pg. 55

⁷ Ewing, Thor; *Vikign Clothing*, pg. 137

⁸ Ostergard, Else; *Woven into the Earth*, pg. 55

⁹ Ostergard, Else; *Woven into the Earth*, pg. 56