

Scandinavian Embroidery

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The topic of 'medieval Scandinavian embroidery' is obviously a rather wide one – as you'd expect.

“Scandinavia”, geographically speaking, consists of the Scandinavian peninsula, i.e. Sweden and Norway these days and in period the southern parts were Danish. But in the SCA and in wider society, “Scandinavia” means something rather larger, perhaps really a cultural sphere (its inhabitants generally know this culture as ‘Nordic’), consisting of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Greenland, the Færøes, and sometimes Finland, plus of course tributary areas in period such as the Baltic areas, parts of Scotland, Ireland, and Normandy...

When researching these areas, consider how closely the cultural ties were at the time you're looking at – Iceland and the Færøes have always been very closely tied to Norway, but Ireland and Scotland have seemed to manage to absorb invaders fairly quickly. Finland has always been special – while the west coast became very firmly Swedish in that country's great expansion north during the 13th Century, ethnically and culturally the main part of it has always been very different from its western neighbours, and the Baltic countries have always been closer to Finland than Sweden, despite Swedish efforts to convince them otherwise.

Embroidery is an ancient art, and this is borne out in archaeology from very early on. The Nordic countries are very rich in finds from an early age, largely thanks to the Danes favouring burials in oak coffins, and also their later hobby of drowning people in bogs. But soil conditions have also helped – clay rich soils are common, and given added weight are quite good at locking out oxygen, that great feeder of textile-eating bacteria. Högom, Oseberg and Mammen are examples of burial mounds that have preserved textiles, embroidery included, thanks to the architect's ambitious sizing of the mound and the condition of the soil underneath.

An article of this format can only ever be an introduction to such a large topic. Therefore I have made no attempt at building an exhaustive overview, nor indeed to show examples from every time and place. Consider this instead an introduction – an appetizer if you like.

Below you'll find a selection of documentable stitches and styles sorted by time period. At the end of the article, I have included a bibliography, so that you can both study these examples further, and look for other ones.

Bronze Age, Iron Age (Migration/Vendel eras)

From these earlier times, a surprising amount of decorative stitching has survived particularly in Denmark. Quite a few of these are used as decorative stitching, i.e. not necessarily embroidery per se. They make the functional decorative; holding a hem with button hole stitch, twining a contrasting colour through a running stitch seam. Marking the beginnings of a long tradition of embellishing the ordinary, these stitches very much belong in the tradition of embroidery.

Looking through Margrethe Hald's 'Ancient Danish textiles', we come up with the following stitches:

- Stem stitch
- twined stitches of various kinds
- button hole stitches (and detached button hole)

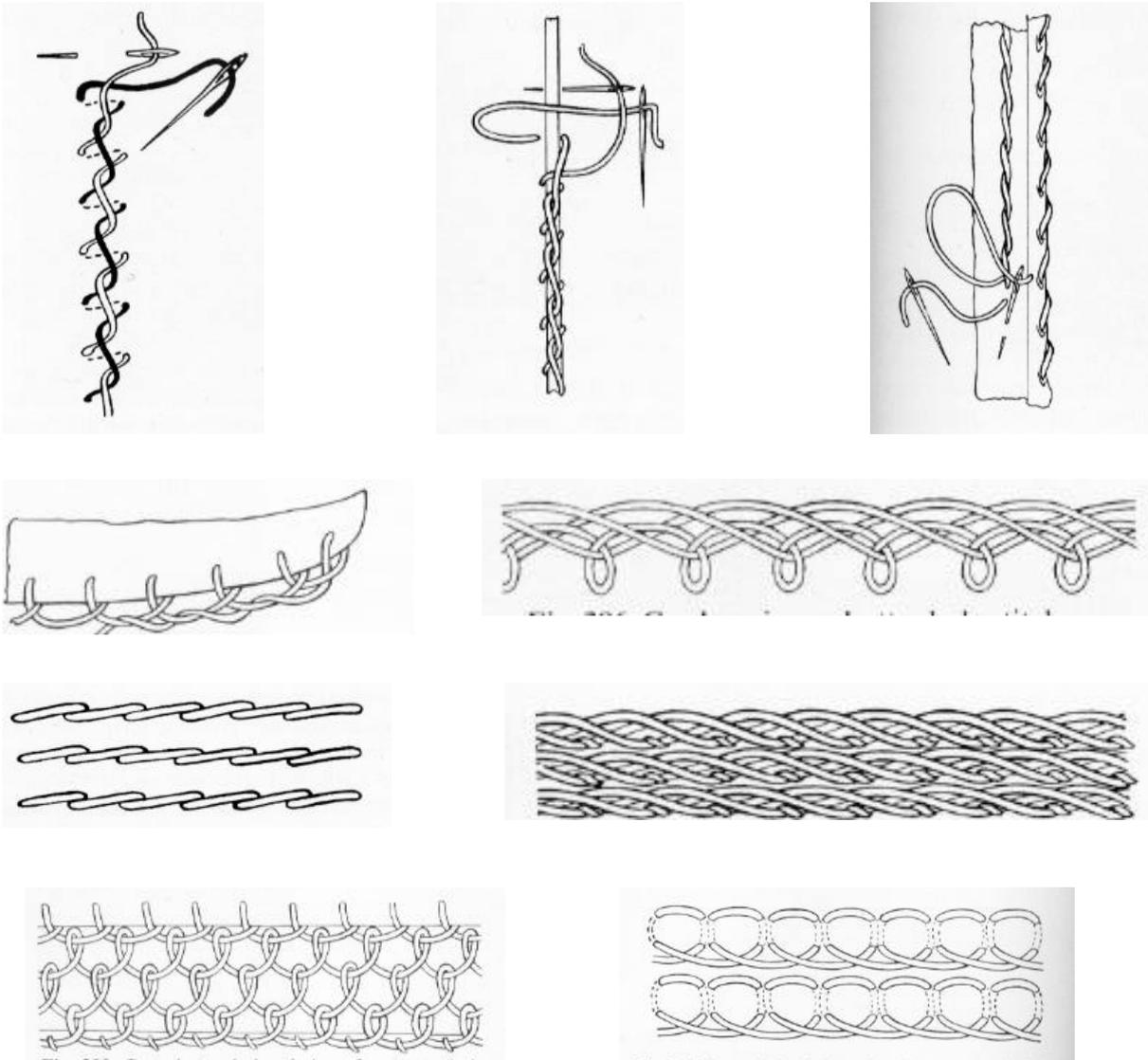


Figure 1 - Decorative Stitches, Bronze and Iron Ages

The Viking Age

When we reach what is commonly called 'the Viking era', in other words the two hundred or so last years of the Iron Age before the region became Christian (and therefore intimately connected to Europe), embroidery remains common. Examples of embroidery have been found in the towns of Birka, Lödöse, Lund and Hedeby, as well as in the burials of



Figure 2 - Oseberg embroidery

Oseberg and Mammen. The most common examples, and perhaps the most spectacular, come from Mammen, which is right on the tail end of the period.

The Mammen embroideries, which are present on several of the different fragments of textiles, are executed in stem-stitch, placed in close rows. There are several motifs – two spectacular border motifs (one acanthus, the other faces) and some individual animals (a 'leopard', a bird etc).

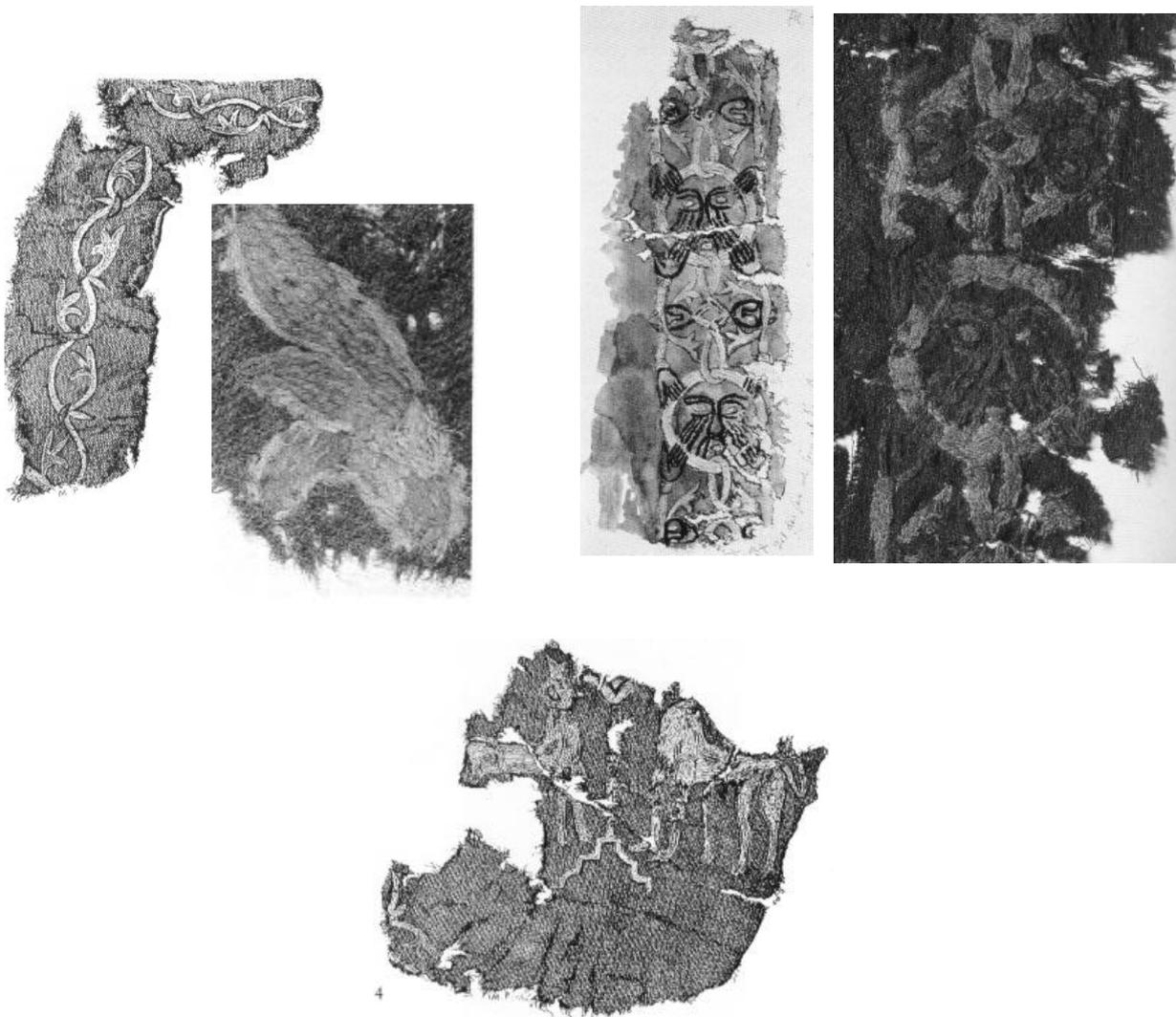


Figure 3 - Mammen embroideries

Medieval embroidery

By the time we reach the Middle Ages proper (i.e. after the turn of the Millennium) there is a virtual explosion of embroidery. We get the large scale pictorial embroideries, such as the Høyland carpet and some of the Icelandic needle-woven work, small fine work such as the needle-lace on the Birgitta coif, and many examples of fine domestic ecclesiastical work closely related to the continental embroidery of the time.

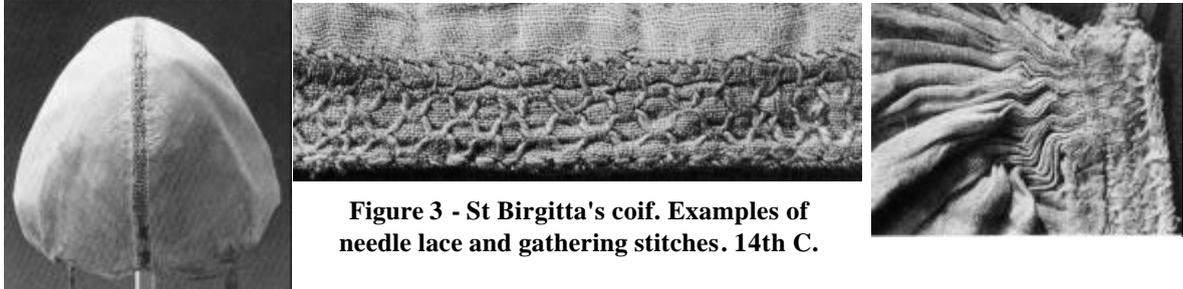


Figure 3 - St Birgitta's coif. Examples of needle lace and gathering stitches. 14th C.

Needle weaving was quite common in the Norwegian/Icelandic sphere. Often these pieces were pictorial, such as the Høyland carpet, but geometrical patterns (easily executed in this style) were also common. The pictorial carpets are closely related to tapestries of the same period and indeed earlier (some very fine examples were found in the Oseberg burial from the early Viking Age). The Baldishol carpet is closely related to the Høyland example.

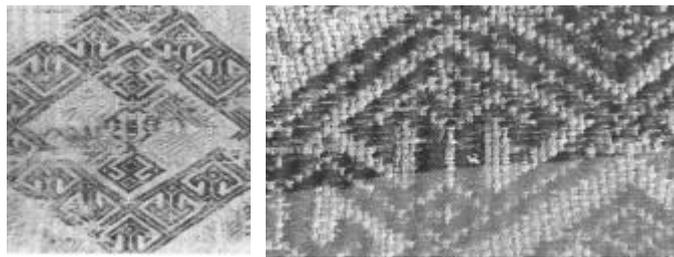


Figure 3 - cushion from Skokloster



Figure 3 - Høyland carpet



Figure 6 - the Baldishol tapestry

Laid and couched work (Bayeux stitch) was still in use right up through the Middle Ages in Scandinavia. On the large scale, the Icelanders made some impressive hangings in this style, using wool on linen, but in the later part of the Middle Ages the method was also used for pictorial/ecclesiastical work in silk on silk or linen ground.



Figure 7 - Antependium from Revkiahlid Church. Iceland



Figure 9 - detail of figure 8



Figure 8 - edge of cope, Vallentuna Church

Figures 8-9 show one of the many extant embroideries to have come out of the workshop of Albertus Pictor, who was a well-known artist painting church walls. He was also sometimes known as Albertus pearl-stitcher, as his workshop produced highly valued embroideries also. During the Middle Ages, two Swedish workshops became very well known. Albertus ran one, the other was the convent at Vadstena, where the Brigittine nuns created artistically innovative and technically superlative works.



Figure 3 - Brigittine embroideries 15th C

Scandinavian embroidery was executed in very similar stitches to work on the Continent. Examples exist of stemstitch, split stitch, laid work, brick stitch, satin stitch and long/short stitch, couching and underside couching, or nué and pearl stitching. There are also some unusual stitches preserved in extant pieces, such as velvet and loop stitching, and a form of long-armed cross stitch known as ‘twist stitch’ from the ground it was commonly worked on.

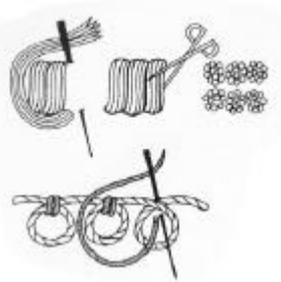


Figure 3 - velvet and loop stitch. Flisby church.



Figure 3- twist stitch. Antependium Fogdö church.



Renaissance

By the time of the Renaissance (generally understood in the Nordic countries to occur in the middle of the 16th Century) Scandinavia had firmly joined the European sphere. Its nobles and rulers aspired to the same finery as their continental relatives, and while their contemporaries liked to comment on the “Barbarian North” and the amount of fur one needed to survive the climate, Nordic princes and nobles took great care to conform to Southern tastes and fashions.

Stitches commonly used in this period include cross stitch and black work stitches such as double running stitch and stem stitch.



Figure 3- cross stitch cushion. Söderdala Church.

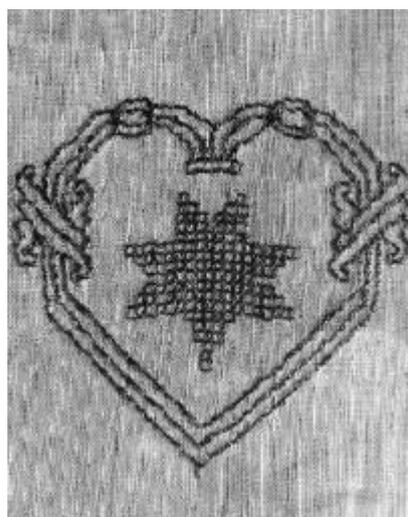


Figure 3 - details of a cloth made for Karin Gyllenstierna, probably in the 1560's.



Related techniques

Metal thread work



During the Viking Age, in the so-called Eastern culture (Sweden, Finland and the Baltics), a form of metal thread decoration was relatively common. Agnes Geijer calls this technique ‘Passamenterie’. It consists of drawn metal thread, shaped into motifs, sewn onto garments. Often these metal objects are found where the hem of an overgarment would be expected. A similar technique appears to be a form of couching, again with drawn metal thread.

The indigenous people of the North, the Saami, have a closely related traditional technique, known today as “pewter thread embroidery”. This is sewn onto leather objects with sinew thread. It very likely goes back to the interaction with the southern cultures as Sweden, Norway and Finland expanded Northwards, and trading made such metal threads available.



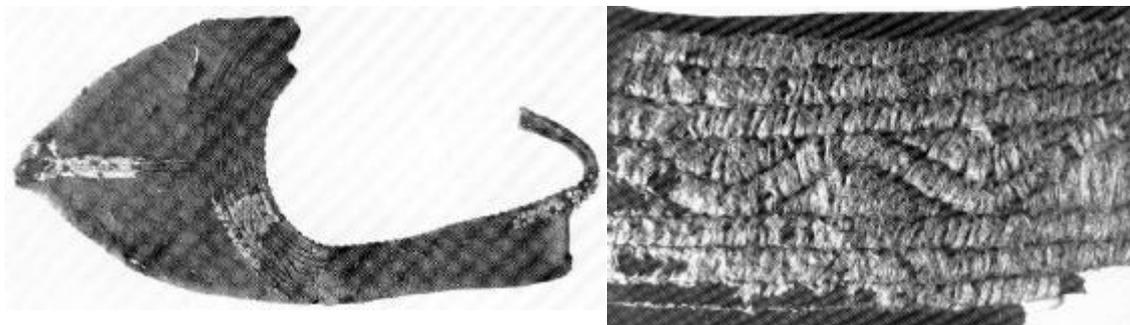
Appliqué/Intarsia

There is a large number of appliqué cushions and coverlets extant in Scandinavia (Sweden and Norway). They are closely related to contemporary embroideries in style, and usually executed in wools with a couched outline of gilt leather strips. These coverlets have been made throughout our period and right up to the last century. This particular one, from Dalhem church, is dated to the 15th Century.



Leather decoration

In the excavations of the waterlogged environment at Bryggen, in Bergen, a large amount of leather was found. Interestingly, some of the shoes from the 13th Century were richly decorated with silk embroidery, stitched into incised lines in the leather. Done in bright colours, this represents a nice application of embroidery.



Conclusion

This has been a very cursory look at types of embroidery made in what we tend to term 'Scandinavia' in period. I hope this has been sufficient to whet your appetite, and given you some inspiration to do more research. For even more examples, have a look at <http://www.historiska.se/exhibitions/textil/>

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