

PIECEWORK. PRESENTS

NÅLBINDING COLLECTION

Explore an Ancient Yarn Craft



Photos by George Boe



Nålbinding

A SHORT HISTORY OF AN ANCIENT CRAFT

By Penelope Hemingway

Unna from Draicraeft
nålbinding a hat during
the reenactment of the
Vikings at Whitby Abbey
in 2018.

Photo by Nathaniel Hunt

Nålbinding is one of the oldest textile arts. It's so old, in fact, that the specifics of its origins are unknown. It is seemingly universal, crossing cultures and continents. Extant textiles created with this single-needle looping technique have been found by archaeologists the world over. Needles made of bone and horn that could have been used for nålbinding have also been located in archaeological sites, but none with a piece of nålbinding still attached.

Evidence of nålbinding is found in many parts of the world, but the textile fragment that led to my interest in this technique lies close to my home in the north of England and is one of only two extant pieces of nålbinding found in the United Kingdom. The Viking-age sock found in Coppergate, York, dates from around the mid-tenth century. Made from natural white and madder-dyed red wool, it was created using a stitch only found in that one artifact, which is now called York stitch. Today at the Danelaw Centre for Living History near York, we wear items made using this stitch and teach nålbinding classes to bring this craft full circle.

LOOPING AROUND THE GLOBE

One of the earliest known nålbound items, a textile fragment dating from 10,000 years ago, was found in a cave in Nahal Hemar, Israel. Researchers found that the fragment was made from plant fibers and human hair. Another early example of nålbinding is a fragment found at Friesack, Germany, dating to around 7,750

SOTO SPEAK

Nålbinding, typically pronounced *noll-bin-ding*, means “needle binding” or “needle linking” in Norwegian. Sometimes spelled nalbinding, it is also the name commonly used for this technique in English.

“Nålbinding is the Norwegian word for a technique that is seen widely across the continents, centuries, and stages of technological development. The *knudeløst* net of Denmark is the same as *schlingentechnik* in Germany. Names and variations are found worldwide. In addition to variations caused by language there are descriptive names used to classify the technique. Anthropologists and textile researchers use names such as knotless netting, needle looping, coiling, and looped needle netting.”

—Dr. Kate Martinson,
“Scandinavian Nålbinding: Needle-Looped Fabric,” *Weaver’s Journal* 12, 2, Issue 45 (Fall 1987).

NORWEGIAN NÅLBINDING

STRAINER

Date 1830–1870

Place of Origin Fåvang, Gubrandsdal, Norway

Creator Unknown

This nålbound strainer made from handspun cow hair, originally used for straining milk, was sent to Vesterheim Museum in 1927 by the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, Norway. It was part of a group of gifts from Norwegian museums sent in honor of 100 years of immigration to the United States.

Materials Cow hair

Dimensions width: 14¼ inches

Identifier / Source LC1558 - Gift of De Sandvigske Samlinger / Maihaugen



Courtesy of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa

BCE. Close inspection shows that the two-ply yarn used was bast fiber spun S (left) and plied Z (right). Several other Stone Age looped finds are from Denmark.

From the Bronze and Iron Age, there are extant items of nålbound clothing such as the famous beret-shaped hat from the Tarim Basin in China found with the Charchen Man mummy. The Roman era yields a famous pair of socks found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. The red Coptic-stitch socks were misidentified by early textile researchers as having been knitted, as the Coptic stitch bears a strong resemblance to stocking (or stockinette) stitch. The socks dated from the third to the fifth centuries CE and were found on the site of a Greek colony. Other Roman-era finds hail from elsewhere in Egypt and Syria.



Photos on this page by Nathaniel Hunt



Above: Spinning and nålbinding display at at Whitby Abbey during the Viking reenactment. Left: Nålbinding by Unna of Draicraeft. Lower left: Unna from Draicraeft nålbinding a hat during the reenactment of the Vikings at Whitby Abbey in 2018.

From medieval times, some of the best-documented items are Scandinavian. Mittens were found in Mammen, Denmark (from which we now have the Mammen stitch), and others in Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Poland. Medieval nålbinding is often found in ecclesiastical grave goods. Two German examples are the cap of Saint Simeon (wool, eleventh century) and the cashmere cap of Saint Bernard (twelfth century).

Archaeologists have located nålbound textiles throughout the Middle East, Europe, North and South America, and beyond. In the Pacific Islands, the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea make *bilums*, bags from bast fiber that are used to carry anything from firewood to babies. Nålbinding is found on almost every continent and was used by numerous cultures to solve many of life's daily challenges.

ANCIENT CRAFT AND MODERN TIMES

In seventeenth-century Scandinavia, items were still nålbound, such as the famous Åsle mitten, which has a

stitch named after it that is still in use today. Nålbinding continued in remoter areas of northern Europe well into the twentieth century. However, the technique faded as the faster art of knitting gained in popularity. There is some evidence that nålbinding was also carried to the United States, particularly in Scandinavian communities. An item made in the twentieth century was the toothbrush rug, a rag rug made from odds and ends of fabric combined using a nålbinding technique.

Nålbinding Today

Today, nålbinding is a craft in resurgence in Europe. At events such as the annual Jorvik Viking Festival, traders from across Europe make, sell, and buy nålbound items. In addition to the interesting history of this ancient technique, nålbinding and looping techniques have some advantages over knitting: the fabric doesn't ladder (as for a dropped stitch) and can be harder-wearing,

thicker, and warmer than knitted fabric. Many of the stitches nålbinders use today are named after extant finds, such as the York, Oslo, Åsle, Mammen, and Korgen stitches. This thread links our hands to many cultures and deep into our shared past. ●

RESOURCES

Martinson, Kate. "Scandinavian Nålbinding: Needle-Looped Fabric." *Weaver's Journal* 12, 2, Issue 46 (Fall 1987).

Claßen-Büttner, Ulrike. *Nalbinding: What in the World Is That?: History and Technique of an Almost Forgotten Handcraft*. Wiehl, Germany: Books on Demand, 2015.

Penelope Hemingway is a genealogist and historian who writes about material culture and textile history. She is a relative of the inventor of magenta dye and descends from a long line of Yorkshire wool weavers. She currently demonstrates spinning on a great wheel, bandweaving, and nålbinding at shows and for guilds across the north of England. She is the author of *River Ganseys* and *Their Darkest Materials*.

Textiles made with nålbinding techniques often have a surface that resembles woven herringbone fabric.



Photo by George Boe

Project



Two-ply yarns spun with a semiworsted draw (from left): Border Leicester from the Doulton Flock, Boreray wool dyed with alder buckthorn, Derbyshire Gritstone dyed with indigo and logwood, and British shortwool dyed with cochineal.

NÅLBINDING BASICS

Oslo Stitch

By Penelope Hemingway

Nålbinding is the craft of making a textile from loops of yarn; it is a craft for mavericks. Learn it and you'll be forever free from the tyranny of patterns and rules. My best advice to someone trying nålbinding for the first time is to be patient with yourself while learning and to persist. Can't start in the round? Crochet your first round! Can't do the spit-splice joins? Let ends dangle and weave in later. Persist, keep going, and all will be well with more practice.

A pouch worked in the round (page 8) is a good project to learn nålbinding basics. And you'll need a pouch for those nålbinding needles you will somehow start collecting!

HANDSPINNING FOR NÅLBINDING

You can nålbind with many types of yarn, and to prove it, I made pouches from yarns that were in my handspun oddments basket. Nålbinding is ideal for using up leftover yarn from other projects and loom waste. It is great for keen dyers who have smaller lengths of random colors and no reasonable way of using them.

It's wise to start with a thicker grist yarn, something between aran weight (8–10 wpi) and chunky weight (7–8 wpi), when first exploring nålbinding. Various nålbinding stitches can show off the qualities of singles and novelty yarns very well, but it's easier to learn with a

TIPS TO TRY

- Nålbinding with silk and other non-felting fibers is more challenging when you are learning because they are difficult to join. However, blends such as silk/wool work well for beginners.
- Nålbinding with energized singles or thick-and-thin yarns makes for unique fabrics with loads of character—give it a try!
- Nålbinders have varying opinions on whether they prefer to spin singles Z (right) and ply S (left) or vice versa. Try both and see which you prefer.
- When you set work aside, you can save your thumb loop by putting a stitch marker through it.

smooth, balanced, two-ply aran-weight yarn or similar. Choose a light color so you can more easily see the stitches and analyze mistakes if they occur.

Historically, all sorts of fibers have been used for nålbinding: various types of wool, flax and other bast fiber, and even human hair! (See page 1 for more examples of nålbinding.) My preference for nålbinding fiber is a Down-type shortwool spun with a semiworsted drafting technique. Breeds such as the rare Boreray and Derbyshire Gritstone make a nice nålbinded fabric. Other shortwool breeds include Dorset, Southdown, and Suffolk.

Remember: the only nålbinding rule is that there are no rules!

NÅLBINDING TECHNIQUES

While nålbinding is often compared to knitting, the technique is quite different. For starters, nålbinding cannot be made from a continuous length of yarn. The fabric is worked with one needle and short pieces of yarn rather than a continuous length. While nålbinding, you work with lengths of yarn that are about as long as your arm-span, then you splice (join) the yarn as you go.

Oslo Stitch

There are hundreds of nålbinding stitches and generally no patterns for nålbinded items. Patterns like those used for knitting or crochet don't work, as no two thumbs or needles are precisely the same; gauge is not even a concept. The steps below are only one way of working. Once you get the hang of it, you may prefer not to tension using your thumb and can explore other methods, but this is a good one for beginners.

Make a Chain

To start, thread your needle with about 1½ yards of yarn. (Pull yarn to break it; don't cut it, because you need a fluffy end to join later.)

1. Make a slipknot, but do not tighten. Place knot over the thumb of your left hand with the “halo” on the pad of your thumb, pressed between thumb and index finger. Place the remaining loop of the slipknot over the thumbnail. The following stitch is worked with the rear loop (RL) and the thumb loop (TL). When looking at the thumbnail side, the working yarn (WY) is to the left of your thumb and hangs in front of your hand.

When making a new stitch, WY must always be to the left and in front.

2. Insert needle into RL from front to back. (Do not pull needle through.)

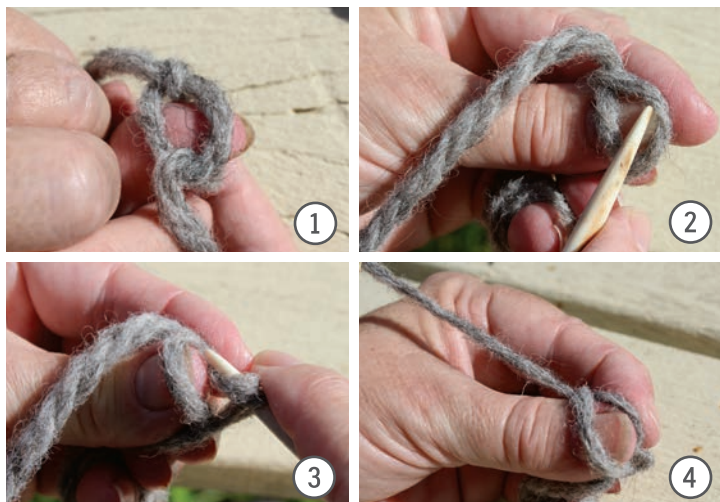
3. Rotate needle and insert it into TL from back to front and under WY.

4. Pull the thumb out of TL, pinching it against the needle. Then pull needle and working yarn to the left and through all loops. The working yarn tightens to form a new TL.

Practice making chains just to get into the rhythm of nålbinding and to perfect your tension.

Connecting Stitches

The most straightforward connecting stitch is called the F1 stitch. This is done by working through one chain stitch from front to the back. To work in the round, you will be working into one chain stitch, from front to back, and then working Steps 2–4 above.



A Nice Splice

Because nålbinding uses short lengths of yarn rather than a continuous yarn as in knitting or crochet, the working yarn is spliced, or joined, to the beginning of the next piece. Often called “spit splicing,” this technique uses moisture and friction to slightly felt the yarn tails together. I use a plant sprayer, but in the past these were called spit splices for a reason.

- Make joins over the final one or two inches of the yarn ends. Fluff out the ends of both yarns. If working with a two-ply yarn, pull off the last inch of one ply of each yarn so your join will be the same grist as the rest of the yarn.
- Wet yarn, overlap yarn ends, and rub vigorously between your hands until you have felted the two lengths together.
- Proceed with nålbinding with a little caution until you have worked past the join. When using this joining technique, avoid superwash and other fibers that won't felt readily.

If you have trouble with joins, don't worry. Try needlefelting the ends together or simply leave several inches of yarn tails dangling and weave in later.

Work into the same stitch to create an increase (as shown below) or work into the next stitch to the right to continue on the same number of stitches.

Increases

Make 2 stitches in one old stitch from the last round.

Decreases

Make 1 stitch in one old stitch, then skip one old stitch from the last round (as in crochet).



Increase by working two new stitches into the same old stitch.

Photos on this page by Nathaniel Hunt

Needle Pouch—Working In the Round

NOTES

- You will always be working on the right side of the fabric, and work proceeds from left to right. The most recent loop can be found by pulling on working yarn.
- Mark the start of your rounds by using a piece of waste yarn or locking stitch marker.

STITCH GUIDE

WY Working Yarn

TL Thumb Loop

RL Rear Loop

TOOLS

Nålbinding needle; locking stitch marker or waste yarn.

Chain 8 sts. Join in the round, making sure chain is not twisted, as follows: Insert needle from front to back through first chain stitch, then work Steps 2–4 above.

Rnd 1 Work rnd in F1 stitch, increase by nålbinding twice into every stitch—16 sts.

Rnd 2 *F1 1, inc 1; rep from * to end.

Rnd 3 *F1 2, inc 1, rep from * to end.

Rnd 4 *F1 3, inc 1 rep from * to end.

Continue in this way, increasing regularly and on each round until you have completed Rnd 18.

Work even without increases until pouch is desired height.

Drawstring

*Skip 2 stitches, F1 2, repeat from * to end of rnd.

Braid a drawstring and pass through loops at top of pouch.

Finishing

Pull yarn through last stitch until tight. Weave in ends. ●

This white pouch with shots of different colors (below right) is an easy way to learn to nålbind. The smooth, white surface was the perfect background for small amounts of shortwool yarns dyed with madder (orange), logwood (purple), woad (blue), and cochineal (red). With more experience, try creating pouches with flaps (left).



Photo by George Boe

RESOURCES

Boast, Emma “Bruni.” *Nålbinding for Beginners*. Self-published, 2018.

Neulakintaat video tutorials: www.en.neulakintaat.fi/79

Penelope Hemingway is a genealogist and historian who writes about material culture and textile history. She is the author of *River Ganseys* and *Their Darkest Materials*.