



Needle binding - a short introduction.

What is it?

Needle binding, or nålebinding, is the ancient art of using a single needle to bind knots to create textiles. The knots are created by casting loops, usually around the thumb, and as a contrast to knitting and crocheting, the thread regularly has to be joined together to add a new length. This makes needle binding a sturdy material, as it will not easily dissolve, or as they say in knitting 'pick up' if a mask opens up. Needle binding is becoming more and more popular. It is a red listed textile craft in Norway as still very few people master the craft. If you intend on dressing in Viking Age or Medieval Age costumes, this is a time correct textile craft, to both wear and produce.

Historic insight

Needle binding is older than knitting and widely spread across countries. The technique dates back 6000 years, and in Europe it is documented to be about 4000 years old. A fishing net of plant fiber in needle binding technique was found at Tybrind Vig in Denmark, and is from the end of the Mesolithic period. From Egypt a fine stitched pair of red socks (1), dated 300-500AD, are on display at the Victoria & Albert museum in London. The famous 'Coppergate sock' (2) is dated to the 10th century, and is on display at the Jorvik Viking center in York. Though parts are missing on the sock, it was already repaired when it was found in this condition. Another colored yarn (faded) was used around the edge of the sock, and makes a nice little décor.



Egyptian red socks. Photo: Victoria & Albert museum



'Coppergate' sock from York. Photo: Jorvik Viking Centre.



Needlebinding from the Mammen tunica. Photo: Lennart Larsen. Mitten from Kulturhistorisk museum, Oslo. Photo: Eirik Irgens Johnsen.



In Denmark from the Viking Age there is a special find of needle binding done in gold and silver threads from the Mammen grave (3), dated 970/71AD. The binding is part of a larger shirt or tunic form a high status person and was found with the extraordinary decorated 'Mammen axe'. A mitten from Oslo in Norway (4) dates from the Medieval Period.

A textile tradition

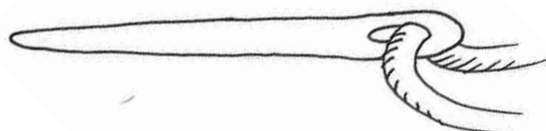
Crafts disappear when people no longer share or pass on the knowledge and tradition of it. When people become apprentices they learn from older generations, the knowledge and skill is continued. In the case of needle binding, it was likely passed from mother to daughter. Sometimes techniques are kept a secret as to increase the value of making something that is rare, but then traditions and skills are at risk of disappearing.

Even though there are many kind of stitches, needle binding is usually easy to recognize, and you only need to know one stitch to use it. You need only yarn, preferable wool, and a needle which can be made of a material of your choice. Historically the first needles were crafted from wood and bone, and later metal.

Start!

This is a guidance for needle binding by casting loops on the thumb. By casting loops without using the thumb, creates smaller knots, such are found on the Egyptian socks. If you are right handed, it will be most natural for you to hold the needle in the right hand and tie the end of a long string on your left hand thumb. Tie the string with a regular knot on top of the thumb and let the thread hang along the base of the nail. The top of the thumb is your workspace. The long side of the thread, with the needle hanging from the other end, must always hang from the thumb towards you. The start is often the most complicated step, but be patient, once that first knot is in place, it goes much smoother. First, align the tip of the needle on top of the thumb, and push it halfway under the thread, then turn the tip of the needle towards you. Now, the thread needs to be a little loose here, next step, push the needle under the loop of the thumb and under the free hanging string, and push the needle all the way through. Use two fingers to support the threads on the thumb, because as you pull through it, it will fall off the thumb. Pull the string so a new loop falls under the thumb, and a tiny loop occurs on the top, that is the first knot. Go through the first loop you see, going 'down and up'*, turn the needle towards you again, and twist it under and through the loop on the thumb and the free hanging thread, and push the needle through. A new loop occurs as the thread is tightened. Let it fall furthest onto the thumb, and push the other loop on the thumb, the 'old' one from last time, up. This becomes the new loop you need to go through on the next round. Basically, under a loop, turn the needle towards you, twist the needle tip under a second loop and a free hanging thread, and pull it through, and create a new loop under the thumb.

**Recipes may refer to 'over and under' by using O/U, OOUU etc.*



Working in circles

After creating a length, for making mittens, socks and hats, you need to work in circles. Be sure the length is not twisted before you take the tip, and go through a loop/mask, and then start regular bindings. At the start and end of working a long spiral, a little edge will stick out, this is very characteristic for needle binding. When making a heel or a thumb, you simply jump over a row or area, as you will fill in the heel or thumb later. Just be sure to measure and see that the gap is big enough to fit in size.

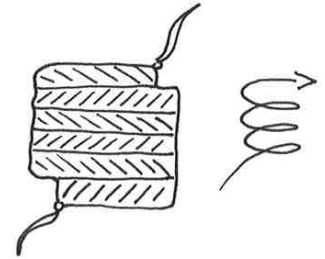
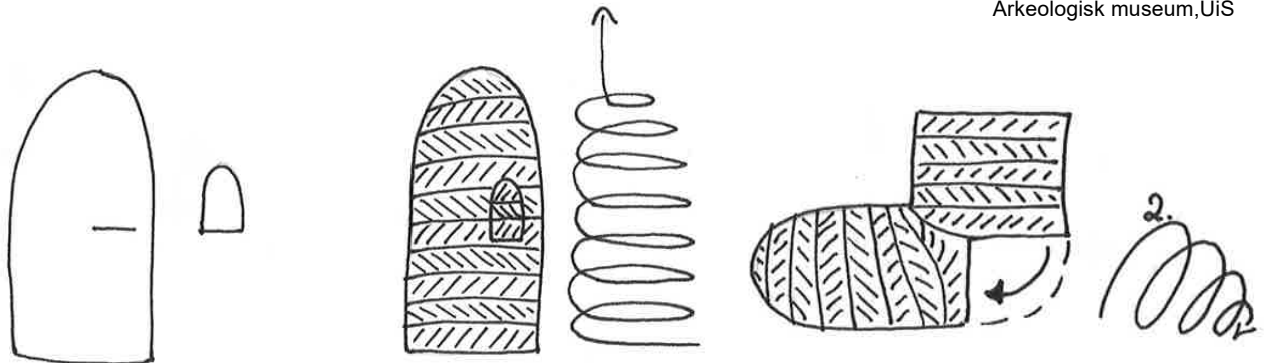
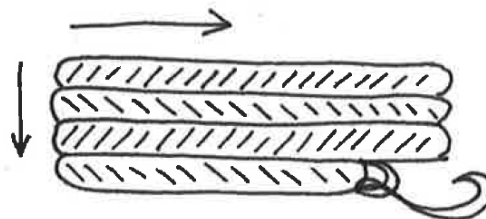


Illustration: Ellen Hagen
Arkeologisk museum, UIS



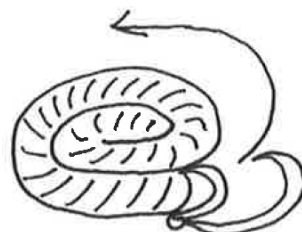
Working in patches

It is possible to make a blanket or patches, just create a long row of stiches (the length determines the size), and continue by starting a new subject, and immediately stitch it into the first one.



Add or reduce, and end

To add stitches, simply go through the same loop twice. To reduce, either combine two loops, or jump over one. Try to make it even, so not to create holes in-between. To end, just pull the end thread and the loop will close. The end of the thread can be hidden by pulling it through a row of done loops/masks, and clip off the tip if there is anything left sticking out.

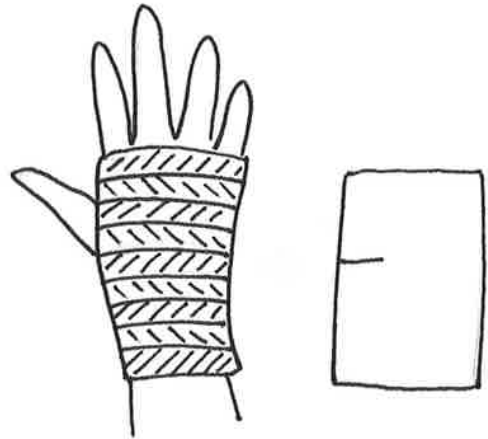


How to fix a mistake

Needle binding will be 'honest' with you, if you have made a mistake, it will be visible as it will break away from the regular pattern. It is possible to fix, but you have to 'back step' every stich you have done, which takes times. It is possible to cut off a part, say the tip of a sock if you are not happy with it, and just pick away the loose parts and simply continue by creating new masks.

Stitch types and recipes

Depending on the size of the yarn, stitches, and your thumb, this will create an individual look. One loop is usually for a thick yarn, or a loose look, two or three loops and you get the classical herringbone pattern, three loops also makes it very tight, and good for a thin thread. There are many stitches, but if you know one, that will be very sufficient. By knowing the Oslo stitches, (with; one, two or three loops) you know three kinds of stitches. This makes creating recipes for mittens, sock etc a little difficult, as one needs to rather measure a hand or foot, than to count stitches needed, as they will vary in size depending on your own thumb. Once you 'crack the code', needle binding can be used for many creations.



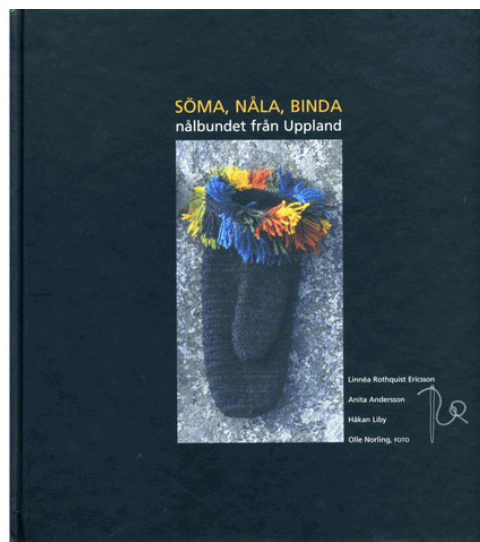
Illustrations by Ellen Hagen
Arkeologisk museum, UIS

Recommended literature

These are in Scandinavian but the techniques are well documented, step by step with photos. A resume of info in this paper is gathered from these books.

Youtube also has a variation of tutorials.

- 1) 'Med en nål' by Vest-Agder museet (2017).
- 2) 'Söma, nåla, binda' by Upplandmuseet (2003).



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***By practicing this, you are helping keeping
a very old textile heritage alive© ***

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