

4-strand Whipcord Braiding

Class notes by Ásfríður Úlfviðardóttir and Meadhbh inghean ui Aonghusa

Whipcord braids, are a way of making string, usually with threads in multiples of four, where the threads are interlocked together, instead of merely being plied (twisted).

There are cords that have been found, that could have used this technique, including a leather string from the Danish bronze age, in Krogens Mølle Mose bog (400 BCE to 250 CE), a cord from Iron Age Finland (500 BCE to 1000 CE),ⁱ and silk seal tags on a 16th century marriage contract.ⁱⁱ There appears to be relatively ample evidence for it in the modern periodⁱⁱⁱ, and the technique can create a cord structurally identical to a four-strand plait, or four-strand kumihimo braiding. However there is surprisingly little evidence for the use of bobbins during the Viking age or medieval periods.

This does not appear to have stopped people from giving this technique the name of 'Viking whipcording,' and at least two museums focusing on Viking-age history include it in their displays.^{iv} It also makes for an attractive braid to edge seams with (even if the garments themselves may have used cords created using different methods), such those found on the Heddeby apron-dress fragment,^v an apron-dress from Gotland,^{vi} or (maybe) the Skjoldehamn shirt.^{vii} General uses for cords may have included draw strings, threading beads or other jewellery, lacing cords, or strings to tie up packages.

While no bobbins appear to have survived long enough for archaeologists to dig them up, or recognise them,^{viii} it is the major piece of equipment (other than your hands) which makes this technique so easy. By winding long threads onto the bobbins one is able to interlock threads quickly, and without tangling the ends, which can often occur when making four-strand plaits.

How to whipcord

For four-strand braids, it is equally easy to create cords by yourself, or with two people. However, as the number of strings increase, it becomes easier to grab another person to help keep the bobbins separated.

The cord is made by switching the diagonally opposite bobbins. To make it easier to keep track of where the bobbins should be, you can mark your bobbins. Modern lace bobbins, if you buy four, will often have two bobbins with one design, and the other pair shaped slightly different. The clothes peg 'bobbins' used in this class are grouped so that the pairs have matching colours. If you're looking to purchase more clothes pegs, they can be found in craft shops in the 'kiddie' section with the icy pole sticks and pipe cleaners.

A Hint

When you need to put your half-finished cord down, to stop it unraveling use an extra piece of string. Tie a cow hitch around one of the thread pairs that you just crossed, and the two remaining threads, it will then be unable to unravel.

The Basic Movement

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Starting Positions of Some Patterns

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After Signora Giuliana di Benedetto Falconieri's notes^x:

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- i Hald, 1980 pp. 240, 242
- ii Boutrup, 2006. With thanks to Þóra Sharptooth (Carolyn Priest-Dorman)
- iii Hald 1980 p.242
- iv Danr Bjornssons' "Whipcord Braiding Bobbins" notes, includes a photograph of 'braiding bobbins in the Weaver's Hut of the Iron Age Village' at the Lejre Research Centre, Denmark. Jennifer Thies received a flyer from Skoletjenesten Vikingeskibmuseet in 1999 about 'interlocking'.
- v Lewins, 2003; Beatson and Ferguson, 2009
- vi Sempel and Lowe, 2003 pp.5-6; Pettersson, 1968 p.200
- vii Lucas, 2009
- viii Hald 1980 pp.240-245 have text and photographs of both braids and bobbins, but none are described as being anything other than (presumably) modern.
- ix di Benedetto Falconieri 2008. pp. 7, 9-14.