

Recreating an 11th Century Finnish Spiral Apron



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This project was started due to my increased interest in Scandinavian/Norse history, specifically the country of Finland. I had never done an A&S project before and I knew this would be a challenge but I was bound and determined to make something unique, so that I could honor this not-so-talked-about country and its influence in 'Viking' age fashion. I already knew I wanted to recreate Viking garb but I wanted it to "scream" Finnish and not be the typical Scandinavian or Gotlandish Viking outfits that are more often seen throughout the Kingdoms. And so, my quest began.

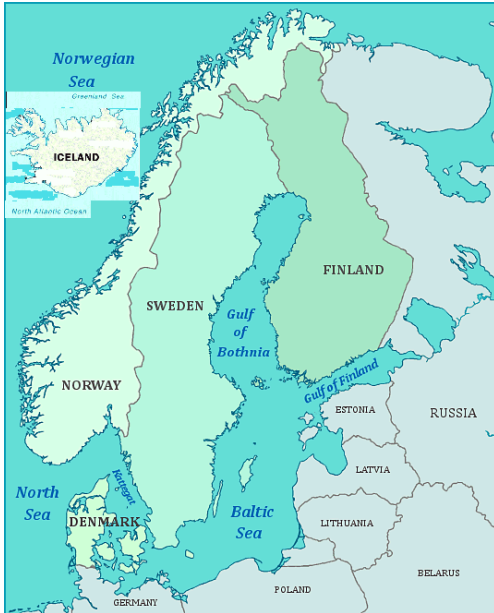


Figure 1. Map of Scandinavian Region

I began looking on-line (as most people do, I'm sure) and came upon a handout written by an SCA person named Viscountess Oonagh Bhan, from the Kingdom of the West. In her handout, she explained the history of the term 'Viking' and how the term was used more as a description of the actions of a said person(s) and that the term "Norsemen, or Norse" was a more correct way to call those who lived during the "8th-11th century in the regions surrounding the Baltic, North, and Norwegian Seas. (fig. 1)" (Bhan 2)

<<Wow...I never knew that>>

As I read further in Oonagh Bhan's handout, I came across what would become my obsession; Finnish Bronze Spirals! Oonagh had a picture of bronze spirals which I discovered were from grave #27 in Kaarina Kirkkomäki, Finland (fig. 2) (Riikonen) I was utterly amazed at the work that had probably gone into making this apron ornamentation and I knew I just had to try it myself.

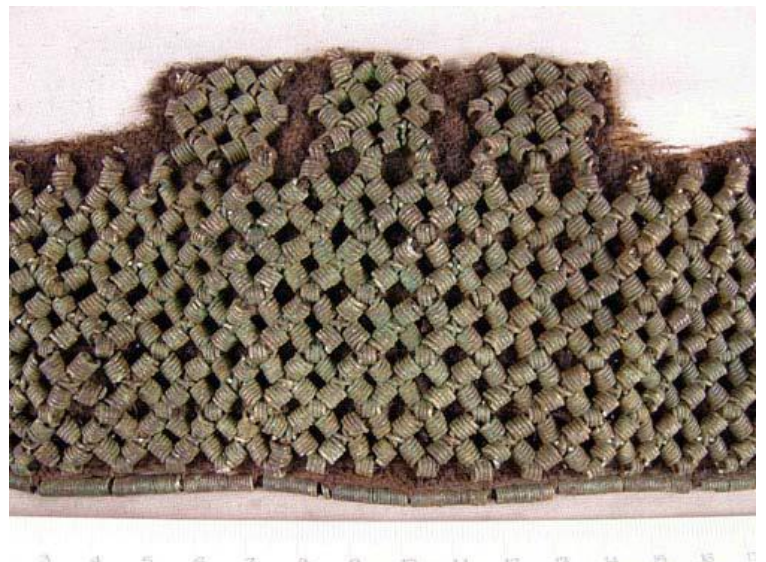


Figure 2

But...before I rushed off to the doctors to make sure my Tetanus shot was up-to-date (I would be working with metal after all), I thought I should probably learn a little more about these amazing bronze spirals and how they came about in Finland. <<Oh Google, you are my friend!!>>



Origin of the Finnish Spiral

What I learned was that traces of the bronze spirals started to show up in Finland somewhere in the beginning of the 9th century. However, it was also discovered that similar “spirals” had already been adorning Latvia textiles since the 5th and 6th centuries. So, the question raised was; were Finnish Norseman influenced by Latvia fashion? There are many theories as to how the spiral idea made its way into the minds of Norse Finns but one argument against the Latvia influence is that the early Latvia spirals heavily adorned women’s mantles but such spiral adornment had not shown up on Finnish mantles until the 11th century. So, one would theorize that if the Finns were influenced by the Latvians then the spirals should have shown up on mantels a lot sooner in Finland. Also, Latvian spiral-ornamented aprons (such as the ones found in Finland around the 9th century) do not start to appear until the 11th century in Latvia. (Lehtosalo-Hilander, 60-61) <<Sounds like a case of what came first, the chicken or the egg?>> My theory is that the wife of a Finnish Norseman asked her husband to come back with something “shinny” from his trading trip to Latvia and he came back with spirals, which she in turn then applied to her apron and started her own fashion trend. <<Sounds plausible to me. >>

Was Bigger Better?

After some more research, I learned that the picture I would soon try to recreate (fig. 2) was from the 11th century, specifically

1020. (Sahramaa, 60) Spirals began to appear in the beginning of the 9th century as small spiral “fans”

(fig 3) which adorned the corners of aprons. Soon after, spirals began bordering the apron hems as well. (Lehtosalo-Hilander, 60) “In the beginning...the diameter of bronze wire was as much as 1.5mm,

or more in male spiral belts, and the diameter of the tube made from the wire could be 5 mm.”(Hovi)

As time went on, the spiral fan-like decorations gradually became bigger and were about 3-4 cm in

diameter during the 10th century. Then, somewhere between the 10 and 11th century, large appliqué spiral patterns began to appear at the bottom of aprons. A famous find of a large appliqué spiral

pattern would be the “Eura Dress.” (fig. 4) Once these appliqué spirals became fashionable, the size of the

fan-like decorations became smaller. (Lehtosalo-Hilander, 60)



Figure 3

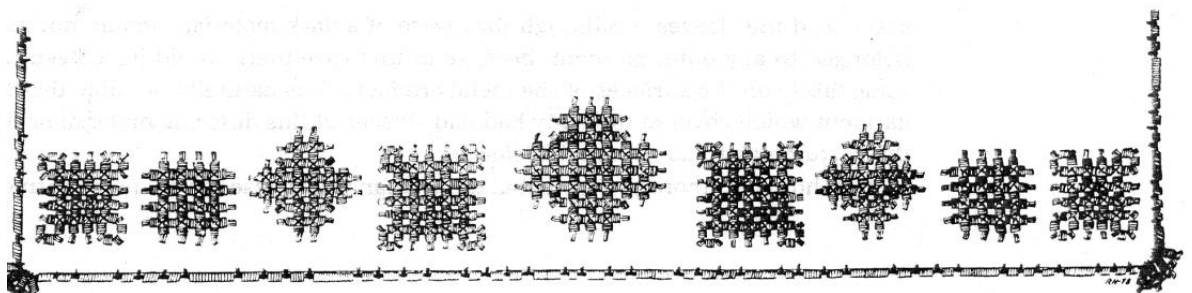


Figure 4

Was the apron always fashionable?

The answer to this question was, ABSOLUTELY!! What I learned (through some Finnish translation from my good friend Mervi Pasanen) was that, according to many archeologists, the apron was a very important part of the Norse Fin outfit and in some cases, so important that a woman was not allowed to work during harvest times without wearing an apron. It was a sign of a married woman and a woman without an apron was seen as available. A more recent theory as to when the spiral decorated aprons were worn was that they were used mostly in connection with rituals and fertility symbols and were not part of the everyday outfit. It was believed that the more bronze spirals a woman had on your apron, the more she was protected from “bad spirits” and that the spirals protected her womb and female parts. Also, the spirals where a way to show wealth; a lot of spirals = a lot of wealth. (Sahramaa, 60 – 61)

They didn't wear just aprons, did they?

After I felt pretty comfortable with my new spiral knowledge, the next thought that popped into my head was, “I can't walk around in just a spiral apron, people might talk!” From all the amazing sources I looked at, I decided to do my own interpretation of the “Eura” costume (meaning I used the colors black, red, & yellow). Now, I can write another paper just talking about what was found in grave 56 (“Eura” costume) and the different interpretations of how the garb was worn but I simply just want to mention some highlights and the parts I gathered/made to complete my “Finnish” outfit.



“...round buckles with knobs worn on the shoulders and another brooch to fasten the cloak, **{I borrowed both items for the picture}**

bronze chains...” **{borrowed}** (Lehtosalo-Hilander, 45)

The grave also had many more items that I was not able to gather, such as:

“...broad spiral bracelets and four rings...an adorned bronze-plated knife sheath.”

(Lehtosalo-Hilander, 45).

According to the research done by Lehtosalo-

Hilander, there were not

enough surviving fabric

pieces to really know how

the undergarment and over garment where worn or what pattern they had

used. For my dress, I took the patterns that where provided by Lehtosalo-

Hilander's gathered research (fig. 5) and made my underdress of linen and

both the overdress and soon to be spiral apron of wool.

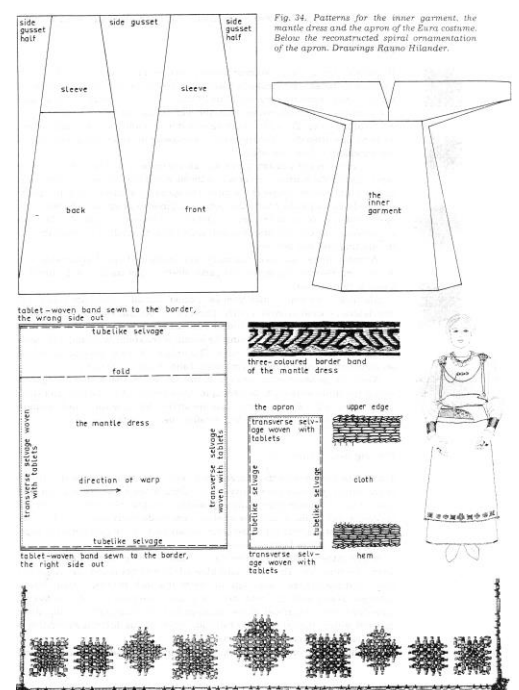


Figure 5

Two other parts to the dress, which I decided to make myself, was the tablet woven band and necklace. “This band, ...woven with tablets, had apparently also held up the apron. It was running twice across the waist, and the upper edge of the apron was folded over the first turn” and a “necklace comprising coloured glass beads, twelve silver coins and two silver pendants.” (Lehtosalo-Hilander, 45-46)



I was only able to gather 9 silver-like coins and the glass beads were not made by me. (Hence why they are so pretty. 😊)



I used wool thread strung on 14 cards.

Time to make it my self

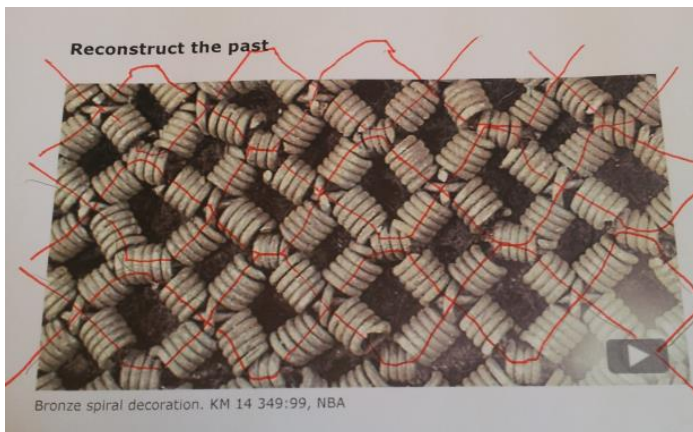


Figure 6

Now it was time to try and recreate this amazing piece of history myself.

The first thing I did was study the spiral pattern (by drawing which way I thought the spirals where threaded (fig. 6)). Then it was off to the hardware store to purchase the wire. I chose to use **brass wire** that was 0.75 mm in diameter and a 3 mm rod to wrap it around, which yielded a 5mm spiral. I choose to use

brass verse bronze because they are very similar metals,

historically. “When talking about Viking "bronzes", we're actually often talking about alloys closer related to present-time brasses.” (Söderberg) I did not find a lot of material that talked about how the Finnish spirals were made but one can assume that the same method of creating links for medieval chainmail (which has been around Europe since 400 BC) can be applied to making Finnish spirals. “Rings were made by wrapping the wire around a mandrel, then cutting them one by one, either by a cold chisel or by a sawing process.” (Griswold) After a few failed attempts at trying to tightly wrap the wire around the rod myself, I gave in and hired a pair of strong Scandinavian Norse hands to help with the wrapping and cutting of each spiral. This, according to Sahramaa, was very period. “The spirals were not always made by themselves: there might have been were someone in the village who made them or merchants sold them. So weaver and spiral maker were not always one and the same person.” (Mervi Pasanen translating Sahramaa, 61-62)

(Note: To avoid having to file the ends of the spirals after cutting, make sure to have a sharp wire cutter.)



Due to the good quality of the picture, I was able to count the number of times the wire needed to be wrapped around the rod (which was 5) before I needed a space (stretch of wire) and then another set of 5 turns, to form one spiral piece.

According to the picture, 2 of these spiral pieces were used to form a crisscross and then a small (only 3-4 turns on the rod) individual spiral was used to connect the crisscrosses. I then laid the crisscrosses and connectors on my fabric to see how many I would need. By looking at the picture, I already knew that it needed to be 5 crisscrosses high. I, then, just needed to make enough crisscrosses to go across the width of my apron. In total, the final product had 150 crisscrosses with small bead connectors. This equaled 300 spiral pieces and 76 small connectors. Now it was

time to string them together.

According to research done by Lehtosalo-Hilander, the threads used to string these beads were of different material depending on where the wearer lived. Western Finland had used different types of woolen thread, the Mikkeli area had plaited linen or hemp and in parts of Karelian, horsehair twisted with woolen yarn was used. (Lehtosalo-Hilander 61) I decided to use loosely spun woolen yarn so that I was able to thread an embroidery needle better. But, later I discovered that this was not the best choice. The yarn would constantly break when pulled through the spirals too hard. If I had to do it again, I would use tightly spun braided woolen thread. However, I did find using two large embroidery needles to thread the spirals worked best. I would thread through the spirals in a crisscross motion.

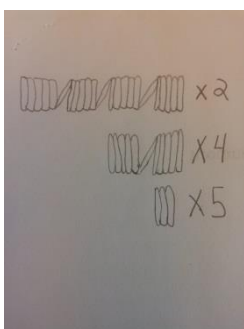


Figure 7

After I had completed the large bottom appliqué, I started to work on the three appliqués at the top of the design. They required a few different spirals of different lengths (total of 33 spiral pieces). (Fig. 7) I choose to only create a set of three but I would speculate that the original apron had these separate appliqués going the width of the apron. After the large appliqué and the three smaller ones where complete, I then placed them on my apron and began to tack them down with red thread.

The next stage was creating the spirals that would line the edge of the apron. The spirals along the border of the appliqué I tried to recreate (fig. 2), varied in size and number of turns. I choose 20 turns due to the fact that a majority of the spirals in the find had that many turns. Once the spirals were complete (120 in total), I then strung them all on to the wool yarn and tacked them to the edge of the apron.

After I had finished edging the apron, I decided to add “fans” to the corners of my apron, to give it a little more flair. The original picture did not show the corners of the apron, so my inspiration of using “fans” with appliqués came from the Eura Dress. (Fig. 4) I just used more of the wool yarn to thread the “fans” and tack it to the apron but if I wanted to make this more as the Finnish Norsewoman would have made it, I would have used the “ends of the looms of tablet woven bands {that} were woven into...finger-looped bands.” (Hovi) These “tablet woven bands” were used to finish the edges of the woven cloth that were used for their aprons. (Hovi)



I attempted to recreate the middle fan which required 13 spirals.

This project took me, in total, about 60 hours to complete and in the end I had a Finnish inspired apron with 542 spiral pieces and a better appreciation for Finnish Norse Fashion. 😊

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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2. Bronze spiral appliqué, Riikonen, Jaana. "Kankaita maan kätköistä - Suomen myöhäisrautakautiset ja keskiaikaiset tekstiilit - projekti." www.hum.utu.fi/tiedostot/arkeologia/tekstiiliprojekti/
3. Spiral fan drawings by Rauno Hilander, published in *Euran Esihistoria*, written by Lehtosalo-Hilander, p. 241.
- 4 & 5 Spiral appliqué drawing by Rauno Hilander, published in *Ancient Finnish Costume*, written by Lehtosalo-Hilander, p. 50.
6. Picture of Bronze spiral decoration. "Iron Age: Study of Ancient Costumes." *Remembering the Future*. www.uiah.fi/virtu/materiaalit/refu/200.html
7. Picture of different spiral sizes drawn by author of this paper.