

Brocaded Tablet Weaving

By Fru Isabel Ulfsdottir, CW

History

Tablet weaving has a long history, as shown by a few examples. The earliest known tablet woven band is the "Rameses III" belt dated 1197 BC, shown in the picture from Crockett page 11. Most scholars credit the Egyptians with



developing tablet weaving. Tablet weaving spread north and east out of Egypt to Europe and Asia. Women's belts, woven on two-holed tablets and dating to the bronze age, were found in Borum Eshoj and Egtved in Denmark. Tablet weaving was used as a starting border in warp-weighted looms as early as the new Stone Age. Also, 6th and 7th century Anglo-Saxon belts were found in women's graves in Cambridge and Suffolk. A linen brocaded band made with 52 tablets was found in the Oseberg ship find that dates to 850 AD. Viking Era (10th and 11th Centuries) bands range in complexity from threaded-in patterns to brocaded silk. 12th Century bands from the Middle East were primarily double-faced and brocaded in silk and linen. Finally, 13th Century and later bands found in Europe were often silk with gold and silver brocading.

Materials

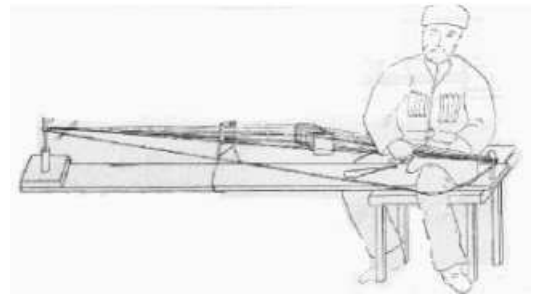
Tablet weaving is an art form that can be accomplished with very few tools. All you really need are a few cards, some yarn, and a method to attach the warp threads at each end.

Weaving without a loom is called the back strap method. In this method you attach the beginning of the weaving to your body, such as to your belt, and attach the far end of the weaving to a secure object across the room. The tension is adjusted by your body position.

Another simple method for weaving with tablets is to attach the two ends of the weaving to two raised posts or bars. Adjusting the distance between the two posts controls the tension in this method. Pictures of medieval women weaving often portray the weaver sitting between two posts with the two ends of the weaving attached to the posts, such as the picture from Collingwood shown here.



Using a circular warp is another common method of weaving with tablets. In this method the warp is warped around two short posts. The weaver then sits beside the warp and adjusts the tension with his knee. This is shown to the right in the drawing from Crockett page 8.



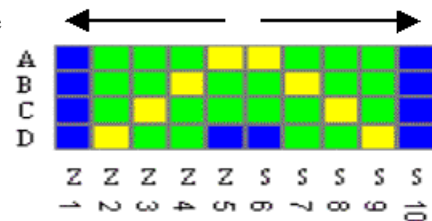
One common loom constructed for tablet weaving has two drums attached to a board that measures the length of the weaver's arm. The weaving is then rolled onto the warp drum and advanced to the cloth drum as the weaver weaves the band.

The most common loom used for tablet weaving in the SCA is the inkle loom. The cards are warped directly on the loom using the different pegs to get the different lengths of cloth. A tension knob on the front or back of the loom controls tension.

Weaving Basics

Before you thread your first card you must understand how to read a pattern draft. The pattern draft will tell you the number of cards used, the colors of the yarn, and how to thread the cards.

The pattern draft consists of numbered columns and lettered rows. The columns refer to the cards and the lettered rows correspond with the lettered holes in the cards. For example: look at the fifth column. The fifth column refers to the fifth card. Each thread is threaded through the holes in the card according to the pattern draft.

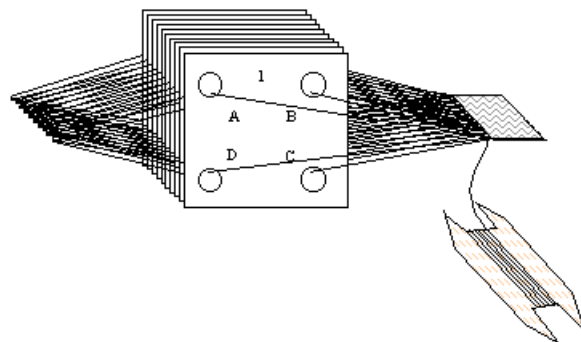


Cards are normally used with the printed side of the card facing to the left. The printed side of the card is the front of the card. The threading direction of the card can be annotated in several ways on the pattern draft. Arrows or the notation "s" and "z" are often used to indicate threading

direction. The arrows under the pattern draft indicate in which direction the yarn is threaded through the card. If the arrow goes from right to left the card is threaded from back to front. If the arrow goes from left to right the card is threaded from front to back. In the S and Z notation you look at the card from the top. The body of the letter indicates the direction the card is threaded. The S notation indicates that the card is threaded from front to back and the Z notation indicates that the card is threaded from back to front.



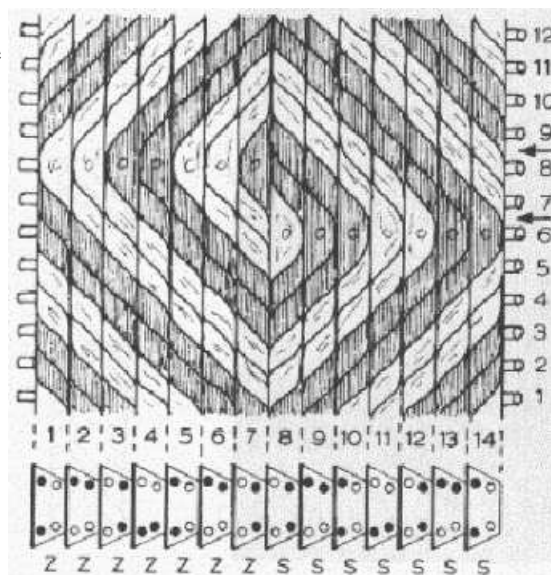
Once the cards are threaded, weaving is accomplished by passing the weft through the shed every quarter turn of the cards. A shuttle is often used to pass the weft, as shown to the right. Turning sequences determine the overall pattern on the band. The cards can be turned continuously in one direction or the cards can alternate their turning sequence to produce more complicated patterns.



Common Weaving Techniques

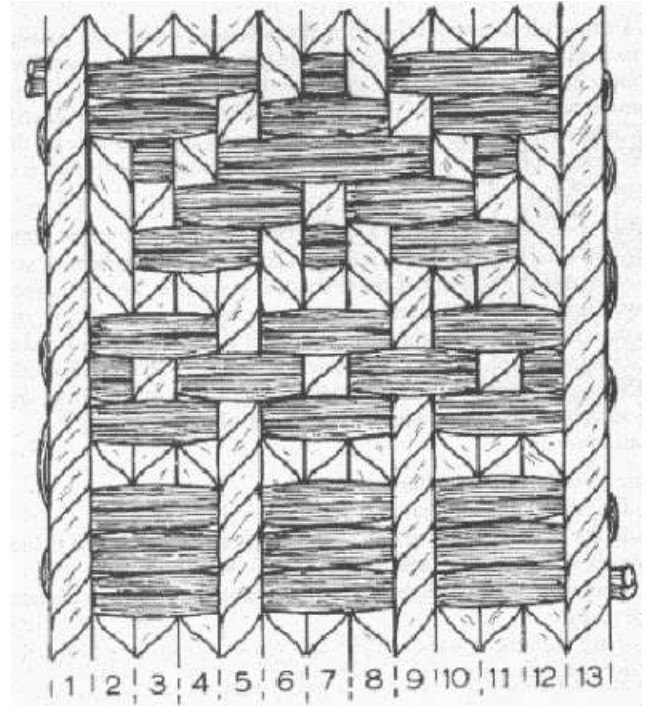
Threaded-in Technique: The pattern is created by how the warp is threaded in the cards, along with the turning sequence. This is shown in the example above on reading pattern drafts. This is the most basic technique and a good place to start. This technique can produce very complicated and beautiful repeating patterns with relatively little skill or effort required.

Egyptian Diagonals: The cards are all threaded with two dark and two light colors. The cards are then stepped. Changing the turning direction of individual cards in the weaving creates the patterns. An example from Collingwood, page 107, is shown to the right.



Double Face Technique: The cards are threaded using two colors, two threads of each color per card. The pattern is created by turning individual cards to bring the color of choice forward, much as a mosaic is made up of many small bits of color. The continuous warping method is often used in double-faced weaving. The cards are alternately threaded S and Z.

Brocaded: The cards are usually all threaded with one background color alternating with the S and Z threading direction. The pattern is created by laying in a second weft on top of the band and picking up individual threads to create tie down points. The picture to the left shows an example of brocade, from Collingwood page 240. In this picture, the darker thread is the brocade thread. The brocade thread is often doubled to give a more solid look, such as shown in the drawing, or it can be a heavier yarn than the warp and weft. Brocading looks best when the yarn colors contrast well with the brocade color.



Brocaded Tablet Weaving:

Materials Needed:

Loom or Backstrap; a loom provides more uniform tension which is best for brocade

Tablets w/ 4 holes, the number depends on your pattern and desired width

Warp thread

Ground weave, i.e. weft thread; usually the same type thread as the warp thread

Supplemental brocade weft thread; doubled up or twice as thick as the warp thread

Bobbins or shuttles (total of 2)

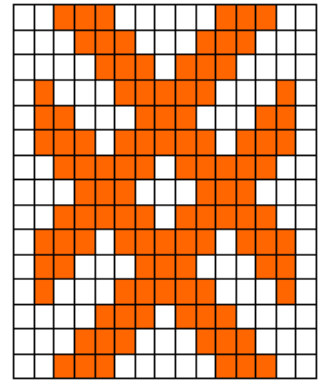
Pick-up stick (anything the size and shape of a knitting needle is fine)

Beater (or combination shuttle-beater)

Reading a pattern draft:

Just as in all other forms of tablet weaving, you first have to understand how to read the pattern draft in order to weave. A brocaded pattern draft looks very much like any other tablet weaving draft. The difference is that the draft shows your tie down points (also known as your pick up threads). The pattern does refer to how you turn the tablets or how you thread them. Most brocaded pieces have the tablets alternately S and Z threaded. The design in brocaded weaving is obtained from your supplemental weft, not the warp threads in the tablets. The warp and weft provide your background for the brocading.

The brocaded pattern draft is read much like a cross-stitch pattern. The grid shows the brocaded pattern, which will be the color of your brocade thread, and the tie-down points, which will be the color of your warp threads. Unlike cross-stitch, the grid squares do not represent true squares, but will result in a pattern that is slightly rectangular. In this pattern draft the shaded grids indicate the brocaded pattern. Therefore when you weave a brocaded row, you count the threads and pick up the white points. The brocaded weft will pass under the pick up threads and over the other threads forming the pattern.

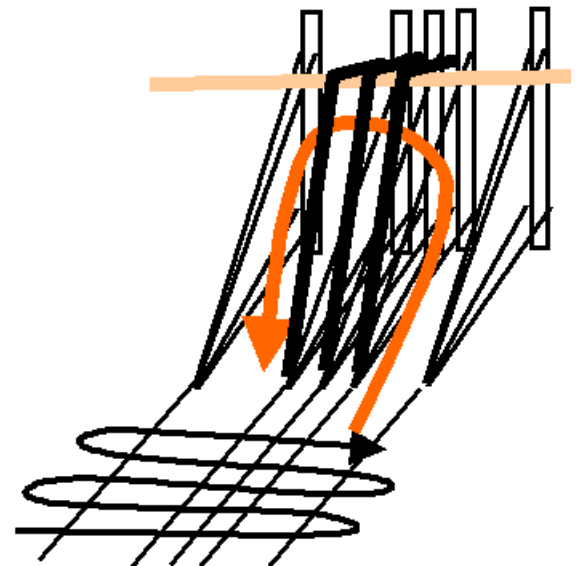


When you pick up your threads in brocading, you can pick up either one or two adjacent threads, depending on the desired effect of the pattern. Picking up two adjacent threads will produce a block look to the tie down points, almost a square, and picking up one thread will produce a narrower look the tie down points and show more brocade thread.

How to Weave:

1. Set up the loom: Warp the loom with alternating S and Z threading for the number of tablets indicated in the pattern draft with your background weft.
2. Set up your bobbins: One bobbin will have your background weft and one will have your supplemental or brocaded weft.
3. Weave approximately one to two inches turning the cards continuously in one direction with your background weft, but without the brocade, to obtain the width of the woven piece.
4. Start weaving the brocaded pattern:

- a. Pass the background weft.
- b. Turn the cards $1/8$ of a turn in the same direction you are weaving. The cards will be on end. This opens up a mini shed and separates the two threads that are on the top layer of the background shed.
 - a. Pick up the threads indicated by the pattern draft. I count from left to right. If you are left-handed you may find it easier to count from right to left. See the picture for placement of the pick-up stick. The pick-up threads are shown as heavier black threads in the picture.
 - b. Return the cards to their position before the $1/8$ turn.
 - c. Pick up the threads indicated by the pattern draft. I count from left to right. If you are left-handed you may find it easier to count from right to left. See the picture for placement of the pick-up stick. The pick-up threads are shown as heavier black threads in the picture.



- c. Return the cards to their position before the $1/8$ turn.
- d. Bring the brocade weft, shown as a heavy shaded thread, up from the back of the band between the end two tablets. Passing the brocade *through* the end tablets would result in a bit of brocade thread showing along the edge, which most weavers do not like. By coming up *between* the outside two tablets you can avoid this.
- e. Lift up the threads using the pick stick.
- f. Pass the brocading weft under the pickup threads (picked up by the pick up stick).
- g. Pass the brocade weft to the back (underside) of the band between the other end two tablets.
- h. Turn the card $1/4$ turn in the direction of weave.
- i. Beat your weft into place.
- j. Weave the next row.

1. Weave as many rows as desired. If you warp threads start to get excessively twisted, reverse the direction you are turning the tablets.
2. End the band by weaving another inch or two of plain weave, without the brocade.

Bibliography

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3. Mary Meigs Atwater, *Byways in Hand-Weaving*, Shuttle Craft Books Inc. Coupeville, WA 1988.
4. Nancy Spies, *Ecclesiastical Pomp and Aristocratic Circumstance, A Thousand Years of Brocaded Tablet woven Bands*, Arelate Studio, Jarrettsville, Maryland, 2000.



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