

Planning a Recreation: Weaving a Siksälä Shawl

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2020 Contribution

In February 2020, I settled on researching and weaving a reproduction of an ornate Estonian shawl from the late Iron Age and medieval cemetery at Siksälä, in southeastern Estonia near both Latvia and Russia (Valk and Laul, 2014; Valk et al., 2014). These shawls date mostly from the 13-14th centuries, and are tremendous feats of textile construction. Although the body of the shawl is plain blue wool twill, they are ornamented with woven-in metal decorations, and have colorful patterned tablet-woven borders, polychrome fringe, edgings of metal spirals: wonderfully complex productions. The abundant metal bits have acted to preserve the textile during centuries buried, so more complete and better-preserved examples are available than of many early Northern European textiles. The two-volume set of books on Siksälä cited above contains many photos to work from.

I started planning and organizing, and ordered the singles wool yarn for both the body of the shawl and the patterned borders. However, 2020 being as it was, before I even received the yarn I had to convert my weaving studio into a home office, and have managed to actually complete very little of the planned research and weaving. Instead, this will be a two-part contribution, with the 2020 paper here describing how I plan a major project, and the hopeful 2021 paper describing the result of this planning.

What is my starting point?

Something inspired this project. What is it? Is it someone else's recreation? A painting? A photo of an artifact? A painting? A museum trip? A mention in a book? All of these are great inspirations, but some give you more to work from than others.

Example: My original inspiration was this recreation of a metal-decorated Latvian shawl, from Zeire (2017).



The originals, which span the 11th-14th centuries, were even more complex. Look at these edges (Valk et al., 2014)! This is like catnip to me, and I've been thinking about researching and recreating one for several years.



What is my goal?

There are lots of reasons to make something. This worksheet is for those who want to use “making something” as a starting point for research.

Pro tip: It’s a whole lot more effective to do the research before you make something, rather than after.

Pro tip: It is absolutely okay to make something for the sheer joy of making it. Not everything must be researched exhaustively (or so I’ve heard).

Example: My goal for this project was to: a. Understand as much as I could about the original shawls, and b. Make the fanciest, most complicated version I could find.

What do I already know?

Often you have some context for the thing you want to make: you’ve made something similar, you’ve read a related book, or tried some of the techniques. That gives you something to build on, but beware of assuming that what you already know of other pieces is “of course” true of this piece.

Example: I know a lot about Northern European weaving and textiles, but very little about these Baltic shawls, and almost nothing about the metalwork.

What do other people know?

Now we get into the research. It’s important to try to figure out some things before you start to make an item. It can save a lot of pain later. (What do you mean I used entirely the wrong yarn?)

Collecting what other people have figured out is a good place to start. Searching the internet can give a great overview, but eventually you are going to want some academic sources. Academic publishing is complicated, and books and articles are often very expensive. There are ways around some of these barriers. Don’t be afraid to talk to librarians, including Special Collections librarians. Your local library may be a good starting point, and your state library may also have services available to residents.

- <https://scholar.google.com> - start here for searching academic literature.
- <https://www.researchgate.net> - more academic in focus, but also many uploaded papers. Indexed by Google Scholar.
- <https://www.academia.edu> - you need an account, but many scholars are uploading papers there, including independent and SCA authors. It's also a good place to share your own work.
- <https://archive.org> - scanned out-of-copyright books, including some archaeological works.
- Individual journal and society websites.
- <http://www.archaeologicaltextiles.net/> - collects textile museum and society links; see Resources section.
- <https://books.google.com> - this is a good one! Google Books only provides full-text for out-of-copyright sources, but it allows you to search many other books. It's a great way to find out which books cover your subject. Often there is "snippet view," which allows you to see enough to decide if you want to look for the full book.
- Interlibrary loan.
- Friends, email lists, FB groups, etc.
- <http://jurn.org> - specialized google index for open access humanities, social sciences, science sources
- <https://www.worldcat.org> - useful to find libraries that have particular books
- <https://unpaywall.org/products/extension> - browser extension that finds legitimately available copies of articles.
- <https://www.jstor.org> - Currently has a COVID increase in accessibility.
- <https://doaj.org> - Directory of open access journals

Pro tip: neither random websites nor articles by academic authors are guaranteed to be correct.

Example: I don't read any Baltic languages, but there are archaeological site reports from Siksälä (Valk and Laul 2014; Valk et al. 2014). These gave me both a starting point and a focus: recreate a shawl based on finds from this Estonian cemetery.

Additional research tip: Book darts! (<https://www.bookdarts.com>) These let you mark pages and even specific lines in books, will not fall out, and will not leave a residue like post-its do.

What are the components of the project?

A “component” is any portion of the item or process that needs to be considered independently. Some projects are reasonably straightforward, and only have one component, but most have a few (or many) parts.

For each:

- What are the materials?
- What are the tools?
- What are the techniques?

How were the components combined?

Example: Shawl components include:

- Fabric
- Metal decoration
- Spirals
- Fringe
- Tablet-woven edges

Were the edges woven in or sewn on? Both approaches exist in archaeological material, and both historical precedent and my choice of materials and equipment may influence my decision, especially if I can't figure out from the images what was actually done.

What can I figure out?

One of the things I enjoy the most is finding a photo of the thing and really digging into it, to find out everything I can about the item. (But why do they never provide photos of the BACK?) Sometimes diagrams of other analyses exist; sometimes you can make your own analysis; sometimes you have to guess. (And not all published diagrams are necessarily correct.)

ImageJ (<https://imagej.nih.gov/ij/index.html>) is a useful tool for extracting size information from photos. If there's a scale bar, you can get absolute sizes, but even without that you can get relative sizes (this thing is 0.7 times as wide as it is long, for instance).

Example: I used ImageJ to get estimates of the length and width of the metal ornaments, of the length, diameter, and wire size of the spirals, and of the number of threads per cm in warp and weft. This video (<https://youtu.be/7wFSDPfMZ-Q>) shows a brief demo of extracting information about the spirals in this image (from Valk et al., 2014).



What are my constraints?

- External: some things may be unavailable, or unaffordable.
- Internal: some things may be unachievable, or uninteresting.

Example: My constraints for the shawl were determined by a desire to actually finish, and lack of interest in learning how to do particular steps.

- Not spinning or dyeing my own yarn. (Time)

- Using a floor loom instead of a warp-weighted loom (Time, space, equipment)
- Not cutting my own strips or drawing my own wire (Time, interest)

What do I need to acquire?

- Tools
- Materials

Example: Given that I wanted to purchase yarn, and given the measurements of ends per cm in warp and weft that I made on the images as described above, what commercial yarn would be most suitable, and what colors would best match my experience with natural dyes used in northern Europe during this time period? After some time wandering the internet, I settled on 6/1 wool singles, the Fårö line, which I purchased from Vavstuga (<https://store.vavstuga.com/product/yarn-borg-woo-faro.html>).



What do I need to learn?

What skills do I already have? What do I need to learn?

Example: I'm a good tablet weaver and I can weave twill on a floor loom. I needed to figure out how best to make the metal decorations work using the supplies and equipment I have available.

Experiment, experiment, experiment.

After working through as much as I can learn and figure out from written sources, it's time to begin. On a project of this size and complexity, clearly I needed to sample first. Not only to ensure that my sett was correct for the yarn and exemplar, but to see if sizing improved the weaving (and if so, whether flaxseed or gelatin was better), and to figure out how best to shape and insert the metal decorations.



The fabric is about right, and the yarn I chose is pleasing to weave with, but I'm not yet happy with the metal inserts. Continued experimentation is needed. My attempts at making the spirals were more successful, but it will take me a long time to produce enough for the finish I desire.

Literature Cited

Valk, Heiki and Silvia Laul. 2014. Siksälä Kalme I. Muistis ja ajalugu. Tartu. ISBN 978-9985-4-0870-4 <http://www.arheo.ut.ee/docs/siksali-I-veebi-.pdf>

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