

# OLD SOCK

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by Penelope Walton.

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Fig 1

Over the last few years a steady flow of leather boots and shoes from the Coppergate excavation has passed through the trust's conservation laboratory. While watching the treatment of this vast amount of footwear, I have occasionally wondered what, if anything, was worn between the shoe and the foot - a question given especial relevance in the present weather conditions. An answer to this problem was finally provided in the last few weeks of the excavation with the discovery of a well-preserved group of textiles in a 10th-century cess-pit, and we can now say that at least one of York's Vikings wore woollen socks, or possibly stockings, under his (or her) boots.

The find consisted of an almost complete but well worn sock which appeared to reach up only to lower ankle level (Fig 1).

The toe and upper part of the foot are still intact, but the heel has almost totally disappeared, with only a small area of shaping indicating its presence. The side of the ankle has been torn, which

makes it difficult to measure the exact length of the foot, but it was probably originally 26-28cms long (modern shoe size  $6\frac{1}{2}$ - $7\frac{1}{2}$ ); the breadth of the widest part, in front of the ankle, is 11.5cms when flattened out. There is a second area of wear across the ball of the foot and it is clear that at some stage a rectangular repair was stitched round the foot to cover this hole. Unfortunately only the stitching for this patch has survived, most probably because the repair patch was of a vegetable material, such as linen, which decays much more rapidly than animal fibres in waterlogged deposits. The sewing thread, being of wool, as is the rest of the sock, survived in excellent condition and marks the outline of the patch.

The technique in which the sock is made is well-known in Scandinavia and is usually known by either its Danish name nålebinding or the Swedish term nålbindning. These literally mean 'needle-binding', although they are sometimes translated as 'looped needle-netting'. Nålebinding is worked with a needle with an eye large enough to take a fairly thick two-ply yarn (several bone needles suitable for this purpose have been

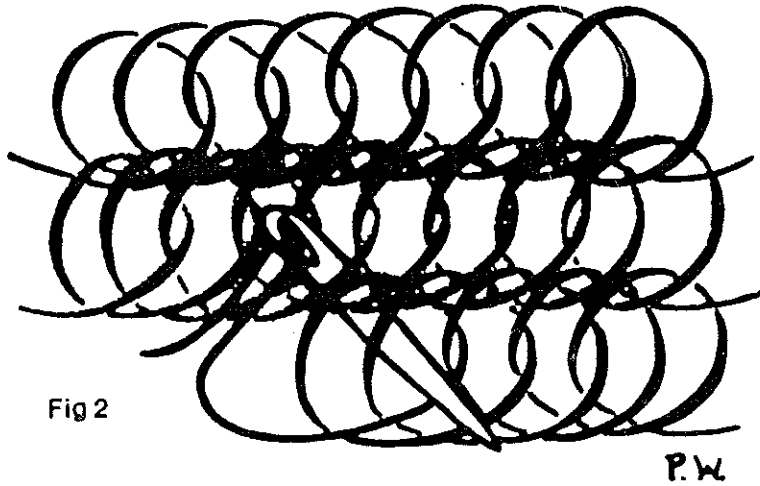


Fig 2

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found on the Coppergate site). As can be seen from Fig.2, which illustrates the particular stitch in which this sock is worked, the needle, held in the right hand, is inserted into the row below and then picks up the last two loops of the current row. It is then pulled through and the loop thus formed drawn to the correct size. This new loop is kept in place by the thumb of the left hand while the next loop is being worked.

The work is started by making a series of these stitches round a central loop of thread at the toe and continuing in rows of loops, round after round. Where the shape requires an increase in the number of stitches in a row, two loops of the current row are worked into one lower stitch; similarly, to decrease, a lower stitch can be omitted. At the heel the row of loops turns back on itself several times to produce an elliptical gusset.

One advantage of nålebinding ----- the garment can be tried on regularly while it is being made and shaping added as it becomes necessary. The work can be finished at any stage, by tucking in the loose end, and it is therefore not impossible that the sock top, which ends just below ankle level, originally continued upwards into a stocking leg which has since been torn away: unlike knitting, for instance, the work does not unravel if a tear or broken thread occurs. The major disadvantage of nålebinding, when compared with other 'single element' techniques such as knitting or crochet, is that it cannot be worked from a continuous ball of wool, but has to have new, relatively short, lengths of yarn joined in at regular intervals. There were no obvious knots in the Coppergate sock, so presumably the thread has been neatly spliced.

Although nålebinding is almost unknown in this country, it has a long history by no means restricted to Scandinavia, finds being recorded as far away as Peru and New Guinea. The earliest finds are a mitten from Asle Mose in Sweden, dated to the first few centuries AD, and a 4th-6th century AD sock from Egypt. From the Viking period there are finds of wool mittens from Finland and Iceland, and a 9th-10th-century silk cap (probably Arabian) from Antinoe has been found to be worked in the same nålebinding stitch as was used for a panel of gold work in a 10th century fillet from Mammen in Denmark. There are medieval examples of wool nålebinding mittens from Sweden, Finland and Denmark, and other finer garments in various fibres from medieval France, Italy and Germany appear to be in the same technique, although this last group of finds have not been studied in detail or their method of construction positively identified. Nålebinding is still in use in several countries, mainly in Scandinavia but also, for

instance, Iran. In European folk collections it can be seen in use for socks, stockings, slippers and mittens, which are occasionally fulled to make them waterproof, and coarser fibres, such as cattle hair, are used to make milk strainers and protective gloves for workmen.

Until the finding of the Coppergate sock, the only known British example of this technique was a pair of child's bootees from the late 18th century in the National Museum in Edinburgh. In looking for parallels it was therefore necessary to turn to the Scandinavian finds where several different types of stitches have been recorded. It would appear that the York sock is worked in a very simplified form of nålebinding, the foreign examples so far investigated being without exception more complex, with extra interweavings of the needle with the previous loops on the row. The Coppergate find is, as a result, probably more elastic and has a smoother surface appearance, very close to the simplest form of sprang, another technique well-known in Scandinavia and rare in this country. So perhaps the nearest parallel to this find in York is a sprang stocking found near Micklegate Bar in 1838. Unfortunately this stocking is of uncertain date, although tentatively ascribed to the Roman period.

It is an odd fact that although our invaders and visitors have brought with them techniques, such as sprang and nålebinding, for more flexible, shaped garments, this nation has in the past shown itself resistant to their comforts, and even the now ubiquitous knitting was a very slow to take hold here. Nålebinding is an excellent method of producing thick hard-wearing mittens and socks and is not difficult to learn. Perhaps with the present crafts revival the English will finally take it up.

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## Congratulations, to:-

First of all I would like to congratulate Bob and Mary Collins on the birth of their baby boy - Alexander - on Wednesday the 18th of Lenting (March), welcome to many happy hours of nappy changing and sleepless nights.

To Adrian Wild and Sarah Doolan of Rochdale Sveiter on their engagement, which took place on the 9th of Merrymoon (May). "It was love at first sight! The strength... ..the polished charm! And Adrian was fighting with it....."  
Best of luck to you both, and may you never misplace your autosol.

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