

## **Hand Sewing**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most basic skills in the Middle Ages was sewing. With no sewing machines, everything had to be sewn by hand. This meant that it took a long time to make clothes. There was always sewing that had to be done!

Hand sewing is a useful skill in the Current Middle Ages too. It is even lot of fun to do! Today, we have sewing machines, but they are too big and loud to use at events. But hand sewing is easy, quiet and portable. It is a great project for car trips and at events. It is even fun to do during court! Plus, by hand sewing an item, you are making it the way they would have in the Middle Ages.

When you start hand sewing, it can seem hard and slow. That's OK! With practice, your speed and skill will improve.

### **Choosing fibers**

#### ***Fabric***

You need to start with the right piece of fabric. As always, natural fibers are best! Cotton and linen are easy for new sewers to work with. Try to choose a fabric that is tightly woven. Don't use stretchy fabric. Avoid slippery fabrics until you get more practice.

The "right" side of the fabric is the side you want to show on the outside of your project. The "wrong" side is the other side of the fabric. Many woven fabrics are the same on both sides, but you should check. If they are not the same, you need to be careful! Make sure you sew all the pieces so that only the "right" sides are showing.

When you cut out your project, you need to add a "seam allowance." This is a little bit of extra fabric on the edges so you have space to sew. Most people use a seam allowance of about ½ inch.

#### ***Thread and Needles***

The most common kind of thread is cotton-poly thread. This is OK for hand sewing, but you can try other types too. Linen thread would have been used a lot in the Middle Ages. It can be hard to find linen thread in colors to match your fabric. Silk thread would have cost a lot of money in the Middle Ages but is pretty affordable today. It is very strong and smooth and comes in many colors. Some fabric stores sell it next to the regular thread.

Choose a needle that is thin and sharp. A blunt or thick needle will be difficult to push through the fabric. If you have trouble threading the needle, look for one with a larger eye. Usually hand sewing needles come in a package that has many different sizes. You should try using a few types to see which one works best for you.

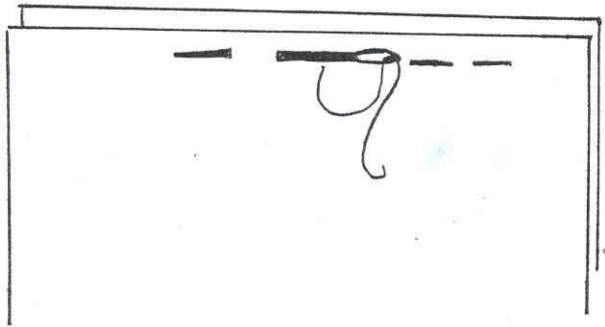
When you are learning to hand sew, use short pieces of thread. Start with a piece only two feet long. Short pieces get fewer tangles and knots. You can run the thread over a cake of beeswax to make the thread smoother. You should sew with only one strand of thread. Thread the needle and pull the needle almost to the middle. Tie a knot on only the longer end. Now you are ready to try some stitches!

### **Stitches**

All these stitches were used during the Middle Ages. Most of them were used in many different places.

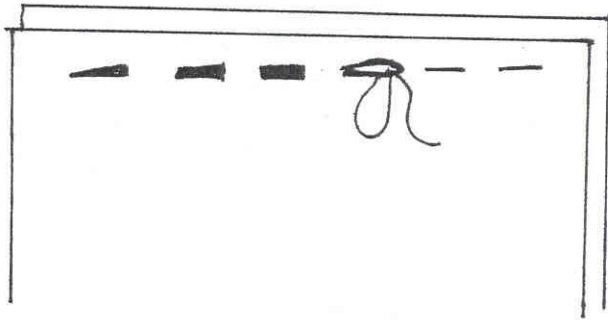
#### ***Running Stitch*** (Wild, JP. page 54)

There are many ways to sew a seam, but the simplest one is the running stitch. To do this stitch, you use a simple in-and-out motion. The needle pulls the thread through the fabric in a straight line.



RUNNING STITCH

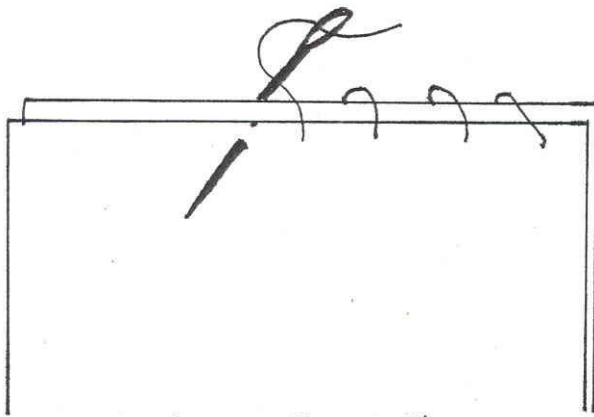
You can also bunch several stitches onto the needle at a time. Be careful to keep the stitches small and even!



RUNNING STITCH  
MULTIPLES

**Whip Stitch** (*Wild, JP. page 54*)

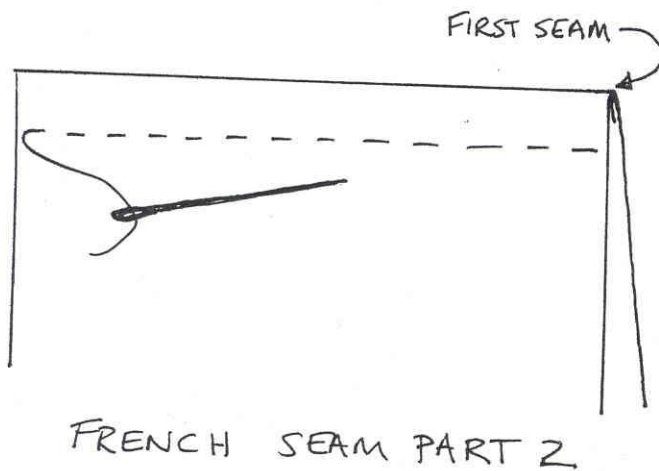
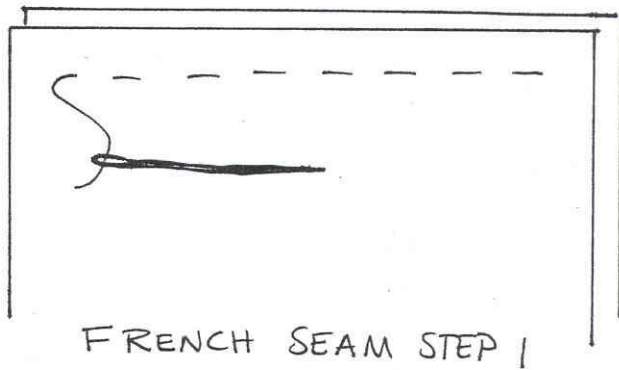
If the fabric you are using likes to unravel, you should finish the edges. One finishing stitch is the whip stitch. To do this stitch, you put the needle through the fabric and pull it out the back. You always push the needle through from the same side. The thread goes over the edge of the fabric in a spiral. It is just like the wire on a spiral notebook!



WHIP STITCH

**French Seam** (*Mikhaila, N. page 53*)

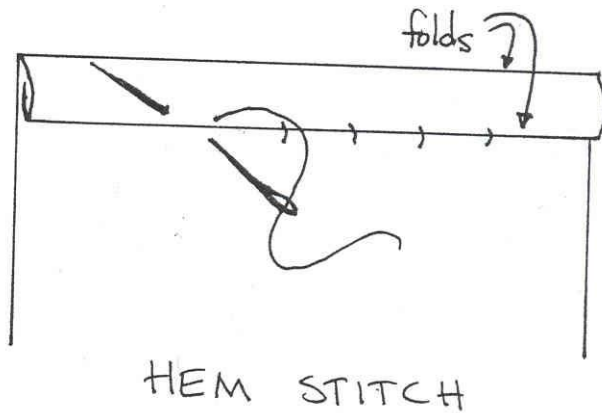
Another way to finish a seam is to make a French seam. You start by putting the wrong sides together. Then, use a running stitch to sew the pieces together. Next, you turn the project inside out. Now the right sides are together. Then, you use a running stitch to sew the same seam again. This puts all the cut edges inside the seam!



Be careful! To make a French seam you have to sew the seam twice. This means you need two seam allowances! You should cut your project a little bit bigger than normal.

***Hem Stitch*** (Wild, JP. page 54)

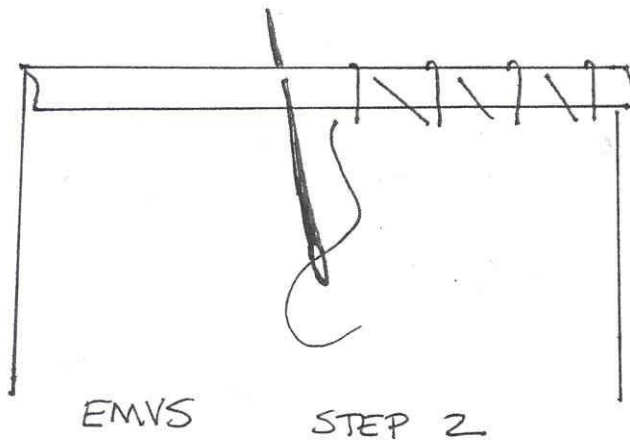
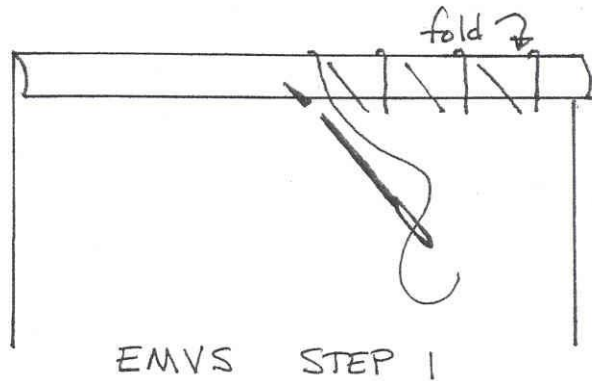
When you are finishing a hem, you use a different sort of stitch. You only have one piece of fabric, not two. The hem stitch sews the edge of the fabric to itself. First, you fold the fabric over twice. Then you sew along the folded edge.



### ***Eithni's Magic Veil Stitch***

Sometimes you want a teeny-tiny rolled hem. Veils and some necklines need a small hem. But it can be hard to get the fabric to roll! This is a stitch I developed that makes it much easier. It looks just like a normal rolled hem when it is done.

Fold over the edge of the fabric just a little bit. Take a small stitch on the fold. Then right below your first stitch, take another tiny stitch. Next move over a tiny bit (1/4 inch or less) and repeat. Your stitches should look like a row of Z's with tiny stitches in the fabric and lots of thread showing over the folded fabric.



Stop after you have sewn about six stitches. Carefully pull on the thread, and the hem will roll itself. It's just like magic! The finished hem will only show the tiny little stitches. The long stitches all get rolled into the middle of the seam.

### **General comments**

There are two things that will make hand sewing easier: good light and clean hands. You will handle your project a lot while you sew! It can get dirty very fast if you have dirt on your fingers. Wash your hands before beginning, especially if with white or light colored fabric. Also, you will be looking at very small details for a long time. It will be easier on your eyes if you work in a well lit place.

If you will be doing a lot of hand sewing, it is nice to make a project bag. This will help keep all your supplies together. A bag about the size of a paper lunch bag is great. You should put in this bag all the things you need to hand sew. This includes thread, scissors,

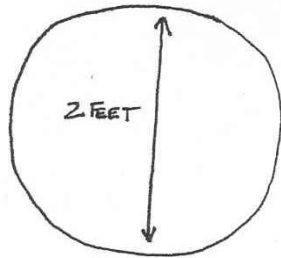
pins, and needles. If your scissors are pointy, pad them or put them in a case. Then they won't poke you or make a hole in the bag! A project bag is also a good place to store your project. That way it will stay safe and clean when you are not working on it.

### Project Ideas

**1) Veil** – Use linen, cotton, or silk. In many periods and cultures women would cover their heads with a veil. Sometimes the veil was worn alone and sometimes it was worn with a hat or wimple.

Cut a circle of cloth about 2 feet across or copy a veil you like.

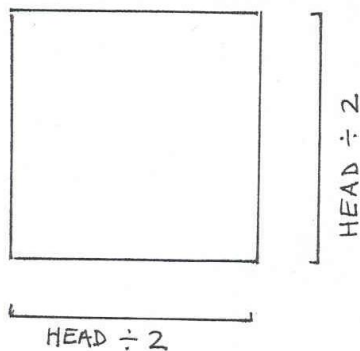
Finish the whole edge with Eithni's Magic Veil Stitch.



**2) Viking cap** – Use linen, cotton, or silk. This is a style of hat Viking women, and probably girls, would have worn. You can also sew a curve in the back of the hat if you don't like the point.

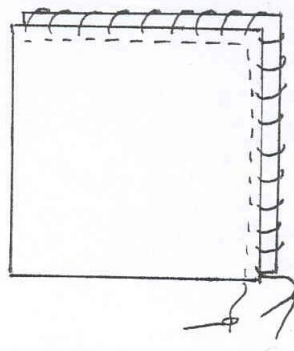
1. Measure around your forehead. Divide that number by two.
2. Cut two squares of fabric with each side being equal to that number.
3. Sew along two sides of the squares with a running stitch
4. Finish the sewn edges with either the whip stitch or by making a French seam
5. Use the hem stitch to finish the other 2 sides of each square, leaving them open.
6. Add a cord or string to the points.

Step 2:



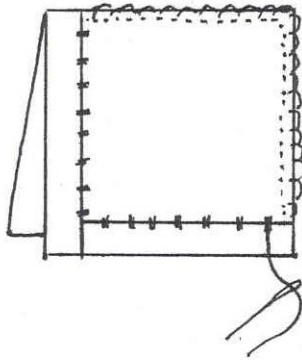
CUT TWO

Steps 3 and 4:



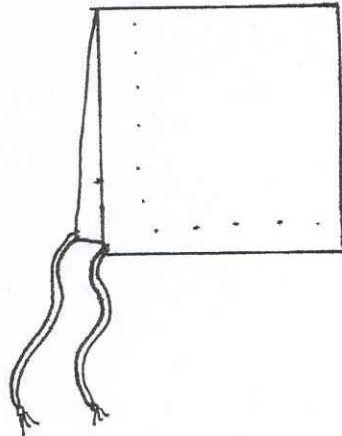
RUNNING STITCH  
THEN  
WHIP STITCH

Step 5:



HEM STITCH OPEN SIDES

Step 6:

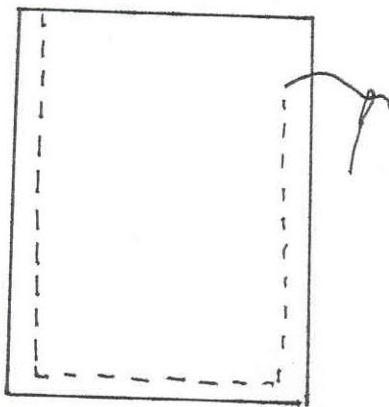


ADD TIES

**3) Pouch** – Use a sturdy fabric. During most of the Middle Ages, clothing did not have pockets. People used pouches or purses to carry their belongings instead. This pouch can be tied to a belt to carry small items.

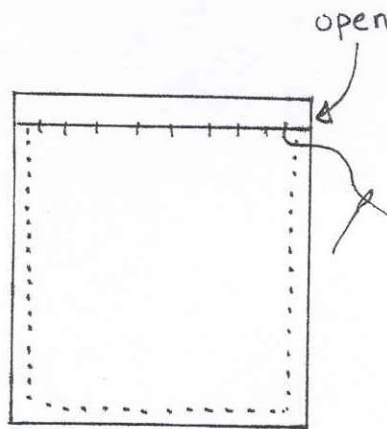
1. Cut a rectangle of fabric a little larger than you want the finished pouch to be.
2. Sew along three of the sides with a running stitch, skipping about one inch of the last side.
3. Fold the top down twice (about ½ inch time) and finish with a hem stitch.
4. Thread a cord through the casing at the top. Pin a safety pin to the end of the cord. Put the safety pin into the casing opening. Push it around the top of the pouch until it comes out the other side. Then pull the cord through and tie the ends together.

Step 2:



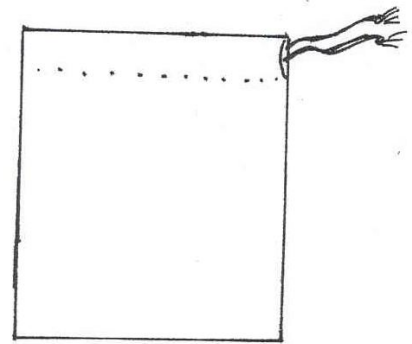
RUNNING STITCH

Step 3:



HEM STITCH

Step 4:



ADD DRAWSTRING



## **Sources for more information:**

### **Websites:**

Archeological Sewing and Surviving Garments (Heather Rose Jones)

<http://www.heatherrosejones.com/archaeologicalsewing/index.html>

<http://www.heatherrosejones.com/survivinggarments/index.html>

The Elizabethan Costume Page (Drea Leed) – stitches and construction methods

<http://www.elizabethancostume.net/#construction>

Sewing Stitches Used in Medieval Clothing (Jennifer L. Carlson)

<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/stitches.htm>

### **Books:**

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Ostergard, Else. Woven into the Earth – Textiles from Norse Greenland. Aarhus University Press, 2004. ISBN: 8772889357

Walton, Penelope. Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16–22 Coppergate - The Archaeology of York, Small Finds 17/5. Council for British Archaeology January 1, 1989. ISBN: 978-0906780794 <https://tinyurl.com/y466glyz>

Wild, John Peter. Textiles in Archaeology. Shire Archaeology, Buckinghamshire, UK, 2003. ISBN: 0852639317

### **Hat Project Sources:**

- Walton, Penelope. Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16-22 Coppergate – pages 360-367.
- Silk Cap, 10<sup>th</sup> Century <http://genvieve.net/sca/vikingcap.html>