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elsebeth lavold

VIKING KNITS & ANCIENT ORNAMENTS

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LIBRARY JOURNAL

photography by
anders rydell

Interlace Patterns from Around the World in Modern Knitwear

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Viking Knits and Ancient Ornaments

interlace patterns from around the world in modern knitwear

photography by anders rydell



TRAFALGAR SQUARE
North Pomfret, Vermont

*The frontispiece shows an interpretation of Viking age dragon ornamentations.
The dragons appear to study an illustration from a Spanish 11th century manuscript,
Commentary on the Apocalypse by Saint Beatus of Liébana.
Drawings by Elsebeth Lavold, composite by Anders Rydell.*

First published in the United States of America in 2014 by
Trafalgar Square Books
North Pomfret, Vermont 05053

First paperback edition 2019

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ISBN: 978-1-57076-935-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018965072

Photography: © Anders Rydell
Designs, artwork and charts: © Elsebeth Lavold
Graphic design: Anders Rydell, interior; RM Didier, jacket
Technical editing and translation: Carol Huebscher Rhoades

Printed in China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A Small World of Infinite Size

Ever since my *Viking Patterns for Knitting* book was first published in 1998, I have continued to work with Viking age patterns and interlace. This ornamental treasure has in no way lost its appeal, neither for me, nor for the many knitters and others who have come into contact with them. For me, the project has actually grown and become increasingly multifaceted.

The *Knitting Along the Viking Trail* exhibition has toured Sweden, Denmark and the USA, and I have shown Viking Knits designs in a number of other contexts: in books, in Knitter's Magazine and Vogue Knitting, to name a few publications, when attending knitting symposiums, while giving lectures and workshops, in participating in handicraft exhibitions and even on a conference about the relevance of Viking culture in our time... It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I have been pretty entangled with the Vikings, as well as with my knitting, in the fifteen plus years that have passed.

In those years, I have frequently encountered people who have commented on the patterns and told of similar patterns they have seen when traveling, or in some cases in their homeland, and this planted the seed to what was to become this book. I started examining more thoroughly and systematically where else on this planet people are fascinated by the decorative powers of interlace patterns, and how they express this fascination in their arts and crafts. The quest became more exciting than I could ever have imagined.

In my typical manner, I started out in a rather unstructured way. As an avid cable knitter, I had a fair bit of knowledge about Celtic ornamentation, and I suspected that Islam, with its ban on realistic imagery of living beings, might produce interesting ornamental results; those were the first two lines of thought I pursued. I flipped through all the art books on the shelves of the Stockholm Public Library (and there are quite a few of them) to see if any interesting interlace patterns would turn up. And they certainly did, providing some additional threads in the pattern web of the ornamental universe I was about to explore.

I went on to visit other libraries and museums, both real world and virtual, and I naturally searched the Internet, looking at websites in every language I could make sense of, and some where I had to get help from friends and rela-

tives to figure out the written content. From this platform I could search for, read about, look at and learn more about my new project.

I have mainly studied objects and images of objects with interlace ornamentation. Do they just emerge spontaneously in a given culture, or could there have been contact between the originators, spreading the inspirational ideas? I had to dig deep into history to satisfy my curiosity and try to understand what might have happened, and how. This was the beginning of a journey through a multitude of cultures that, for a period of some five hundred to a thousand years, shared a strong partiality to interlace patterns, with some of them having been in documented contact with each other. This line of thought is further developed in the *Follow the Threads* chapter, but I must emphasize that this is not a scientific dissertation, but rather my personal interpretation of an extensive but not detailed research.

Most cultures don't seem to attribute any specific symbolic meaning to the patterns, at least not beyond the obvious, such as creating ties between e.g. people or clans or undoing such ties. But as you will see in the following chapters, there are some pretty compelling exceptions to this rule.

Throughout my adult life, my love for needles and yarn, and their potential to expand our common ornamental heritage, has been the motivating factor to dig deeper into the technical aspects of knitting. Through the work of myself and others, Viking age decorative traditions are still relevant today, and are becoming "public domain" in a similar manner as their Celtic "cousins".

In the book, I analyze a great number of patterns and motifs; some from the Vikings, some Irish, and yet some from other parts of the world. I hope and believe that the simple but versatile technique I developed to create Viking Knits will extend into other ornamental traditions, making new designs possible, and inspiring people to develop their own patterns. You may start by joining me as I follow the threads of interlace through history and geography in the pages to come. I hope you will have as fun a ride as I have had, and still have.

Spånga, Sweden, February 2014
Elsebeth Lavold

Follow the Threads

Tying was the first technique man developed to keep things together. Ropes were twined and used in just about every aspect of primitive life; to carry home bundles of firewood, to secure the posts keeping your roof over your head, to weave baskets for storing and what not. Innumerable knots and braids were developed through the course of history, and it is safe to conclude that awareness of how threads can travel has been a human trait since the dawn of man. In the process of tying, twisting and weaving, the decorative potential becomes obvious.

There are ancient examples of using braided and twisted patterns for sheer decorative purposes. Among the oldest, dating back some eight thousand years, are objects found in present day Turkey: A knife handle ornamented with an S-hook depicting a serpent, and a basic twist on a clay stamp. To generally attribute serpent symbolism to patterns of this type is a very reasonable conclusion, as indicated by several examples in the S-hook chapter of this book.

The Vikings and their partiality to the decorative powers of interlace patterns were the ones who originally inspired me to embark on the ornamental journey that has resulted in this book. Well, it was not *just* the Vikings, but also the peoples of what Swedish historians refer to as the Vendel era, (550 to 800 AD, while the Viking Age spans from 800 to the mid-11th century AD), who can also claim to be inventors of patterns that have inspired me. But they too had their predecessors, as I was about to find out.

The 4th and 5th centuries AD, in the beginning of what has been named the Migration period, were years of great turmoil in Europe. By the end of the 4th century, Mongol hordes invaded eastern parts of Europe, forcing many Germanic peoples to abandon their homes. Goths migrated southward from Scandinavia through Eastern Europe, and the so called Visigoths eventually settled in present day Spain via Turkey, Greece and Italy, while the other major branch, the Ostrogoths, found a home in Italy and Austria. Vandals and other Germanic tribes made their way through Europe. Angles and Saxons left southern Denmark and northern Germany for the British Isles, and the Franks established a kingdom in, you guessed it, present day France. The remains of Roman rule, the Eastern Roman Empire,

occupied what we now call Turkey and Greece. This intense mobility caused peoples and cultures to interact in both war and peace to an unprecedented extent.

Scandinavian decorative interlace originates from the earlier Germanic tradition of animal ornaments. It, in turn, may have been influenced by the invading Mongols. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes gained increased power, which also increased the status and distribution of their decorative preferences.

Langobards is the name of a semi-mythical Germanic tribe that, according to the sparse sources of information I have found, are claimed to have their roots in Scandinavia. (Throughout this book, I use the term “Langobards” instead of the more common English name “Lombards”, which *can* mean the same thing, but also refers to inhabitants of present day Lombardy in Italy, some of which may be descendants of “my” Langobards, others not. By using terms like “Langobards” and “Langobardic” I’m simply pointing to a pre-medieval ornamental tradition, which is what *I’m* interested in, and I hope I don’t offend any scholars by doing so.) The actuality of the Langobards seems to be held in doubt in some academic circles, while other historians attest to their existence. They are believed to have migrated south through Eastern Europe to reach present day Croatia by the 7th century, where a great number of decorated friezes and other stonemasonry with interlace patterns from that period have been found.

Some sources claim this type of ornamentation to be typical of Croatia, others that it is Langobardic. If there were artifacts of this type predating the arrival of the Langobards, a Levantine origin might be possible; the Middle East is not far from Croatia. But either way stonemasonry seems to have begun in Croatia at this very point in history.

The Langobards later continued westward and founded the north Italian region of Lombardy in the 11th century. Still to be found in Lombardy is an abundance of stonemasonry in the same style, and quite a few are shown in this book to illustrate various patterns. These borders and friezes may be the result of both Langobards getting access to types of stone which were easy to tool, and of coming into contact with Comacines, stonemasons already established

Quite by lucky coincidence I found a small monograph about the people living in present day Suriname in the northeastern part of South America. Tribes of escaped African slaves have developed a tradition of carved household items, eating tools, combs and other such utensils, decorated with interlace patterns.

The Peruvian Chavin culture also displays some examples of interlace decorations, dating back to the first millennium BC.

If I had defined my quest, project, research, call it what you like, as one of finding *the* origin of ornamental braids, twists and knots, I would have to admit to failing. But this was never my objective. The fascination I felt in discovering how interlace ornamentation can be found in so many different cultures, some of them with documented or possible contact, and the interesting and unexpected find that the

appeal of such patterns often seems to have had a limited lifespan, has been reward enough.

Another positive effect has been the inspiration for new knitwear designs the project has generated. And even though all the designs in this book have been given old Norse names, to keep my own tradition intact, I think you will find that Viking Knits encompasses a lot more than just the inspiration from the Vikings. With this book I can add Germanic peoples, Semites, Africans, Mongols, Native Americans and a whole lot of other pre-historic, historic and present-day fellow humans to the list of Fans of Interlace Ornamentation. And that, in turn, leads me to a very comforting conclusion: That the human race is really a tight knit community, with more things tying us together than separating us. Just follow the threads and I think you will agree.



A beautiful winged Little Knot on a Roman mosaic. The original can be seen at the Santa Giulia Museo, Brescia, Italy.

LOOPS



The essence of Viking ornamentation is bands traveling across a background, and the most basic pattern you can make with a band is a loop. The Vikings made a lot of loops, and also typically made the bands twist and turn in a variety of other ways, and not very systematically at that.

Numerous rune stones, scattered all over the central parts of Sweden, show examples of this spirited looping. The one in the photo below has been used as a building block in a wall of the church in Kårsta, some 25 miles north of Stockholm, centuries after Sven carved the loops (yes, he has actually signed his work, as did many of his stone carving colleagues).

The Odal rune in the Elder Futhark (the rune alphabet) is just such a basic loop. Odal is a Germanic word meaning “inheritance” or “inherited estate”, and the shape itself is usually interpreted as a symbol of real property. The depicted weather vane from the Stockholm suburb Grimsta, very close to my home, is decorated with a series of loops just above the horse and rider.



On the Croatian stone, it looks as if the loops line up, but this is because the right diagonal has been made steeper than the left; something which is not possible to achieve in knitting.

On yet another embroidered fabric from the Congolese Kuba people a braided variety is used as a surface pattern, and a Croatian folk art embroidery provides a horizontal example along with other wing loop elements (not shown).



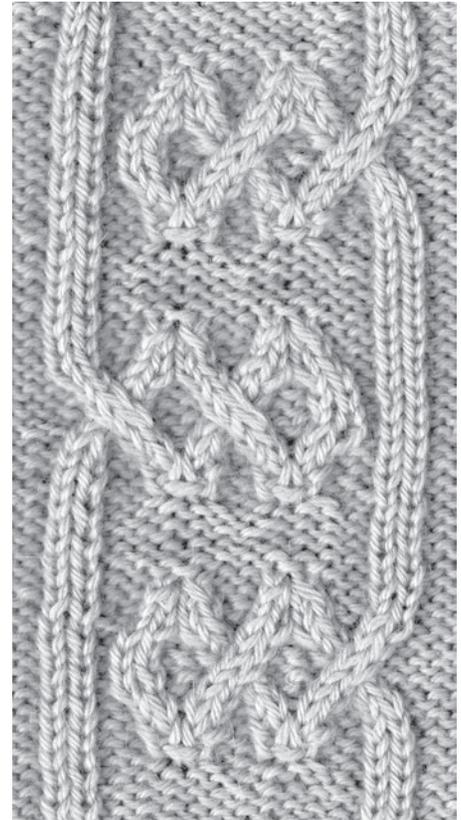
*Above: Rune stone from Martingbo, Gotland, Sweden
Right: Fragment of a 9th century marble tablet, on display in
Muzej Lapidarium, Novigrad, Croatia*



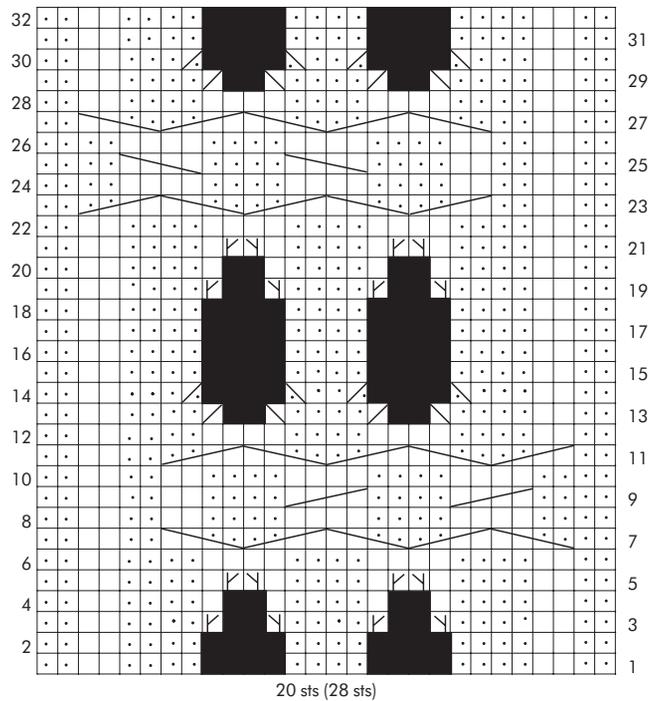
In a small beautiful corner decoration of an Irish manuscript from the Abbey of Saint Gall, Switzerland, two bands of Twisted Wing Loops are joined zipper-style and closed at each end with a double overhand knot. The drawing shows the central part of the border (right).



*Marble pillar, Como, Italy,
on display in Musei Civici di Como*



Wing Loops Twisted & Staggered



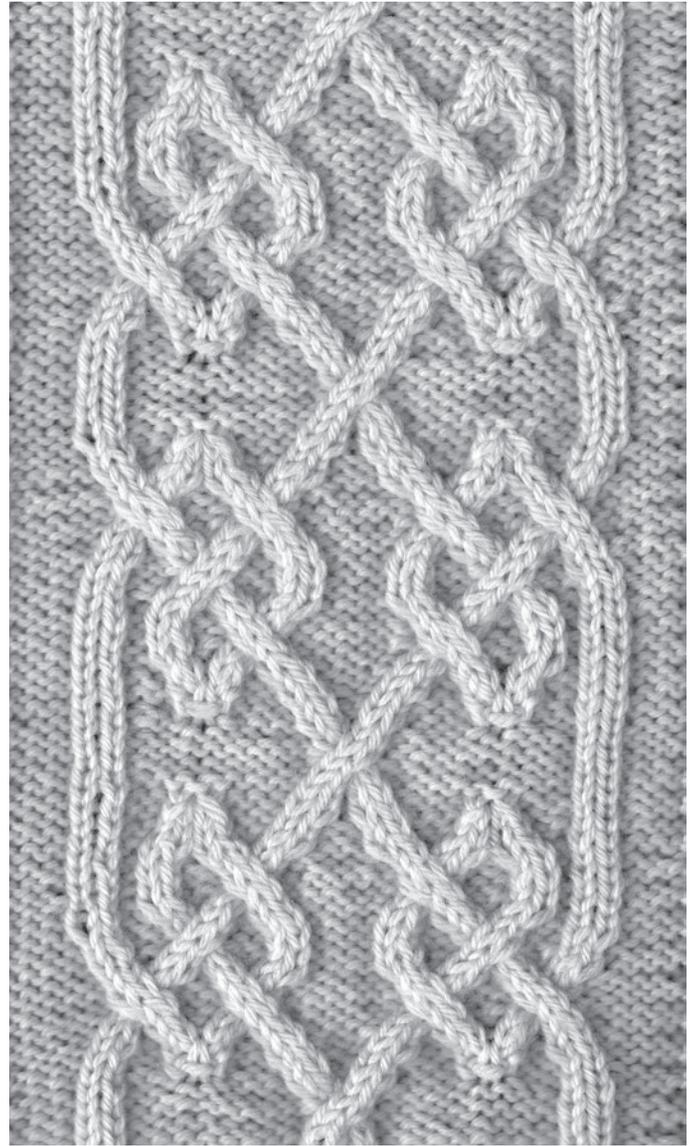




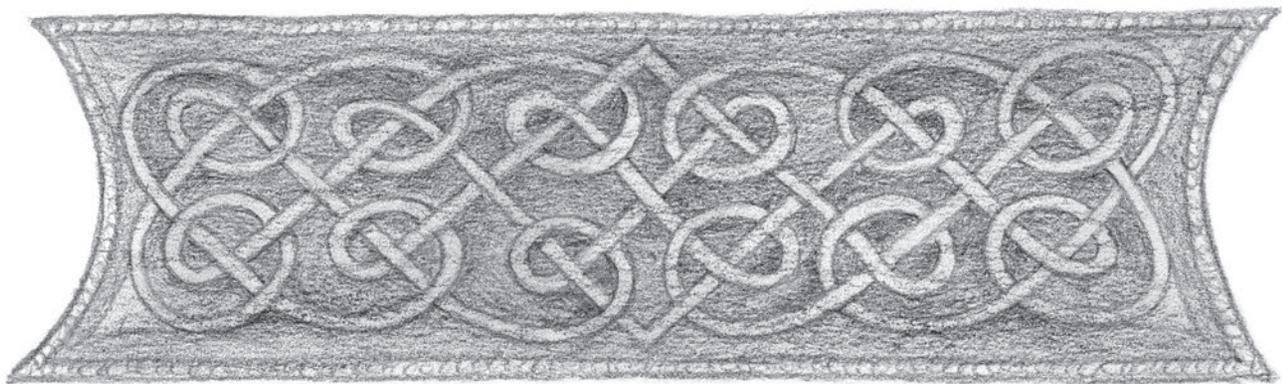
Here is the Lillbjärs pattern developed one step further by mirroring the loops in all four directions. This is a pattern favored in Islamic art as well as by the Langobards. The below beautiful stone fragment from Italy really shows the pattern's decorative potential.



*Langobardic stone fragment, on display in the
Santa Giulia Museo, Brescia, Italy*



Lillbjärs Mirrored Panel



Detail from the Ardagh chalice, found in Ardagh, County Limerick, Ireland



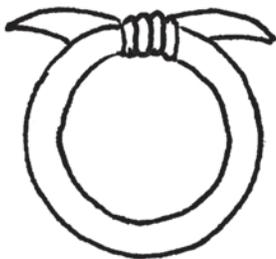
Rings & Chains



Join the ends of a band and you have created a ring. In many cultures, the closed ring symbolizes togetherness (e.g. the wedding ring in Western tradition) and/or eternity. The ring as a symbolic representation of the sun, and thus of life, is commonplace in many cultures.

Another common way of symbolically interpreting the ring is as Ouroboros, a serpent eating its own tail. Ouroboros appears in ancient Egyptian and Greek texts, and in Aztec imagery. In Norse mythology a corresponding creature, Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, encircles the world. Ouroboros symbolizes wholeness, our entire being, eternity and the cyclical character of our existence.

Egyptian mythology also includes Shen, a ring with a tangent representing encirclement, which is what the Egyptian word actually means. Stretched-out versions of the Shen, Cartouches, encircle the names of Pharaohs and are commonly found carved into walls inside pyramids.



Egyptian Shen symbol

Indigenous North Americans often refer to “the hoop” that holds people together and represents the cyclic repetition of our existence. Another concept of Native American tradition is the Medicine Wheel, used to preserve the health of man and earth. To the Maoris of New Zealand, the ring can also symbolize the interplay between head, hand and heart.



Thor's Hammer pendant, Sigtuna, Sweden

A pendant from Sigtuna, Sweden shows a Viking age ring ornamentation: Filigree rings decorate Mjölner, the hammer of the god Thor. Basic individual rings like these were covered in my *Viking Patterns for Knitting* book, but they can naturally be varied in shape and size in a multitude of ways.



Back: With US 7 / 4.5 mm circular and RS facing, pick up and knit 44 sts along cast-on edge, and work back as for front.

Sides: With US 7 / 4.5 mm circular, pick up and knit 1 st in each knit ridge along one side = 20 sts. Work in cable pattern following the Chain Narrow chart, with 1 stockinette st inside the edge st at each side. Work 4 pattern repeats. Set piece aside and work the other side the same way. All four sides should now be the same length.

Handles: With US 7 / 4.5 mm circular, pick up and knit the sts for all of the sections, eliminating all the edge sts with ssk before each intersection and k2tog after = 120 sts. Join and continue in stockinette for 3 rounds. Next, beginning between the back and one side: work the side sts, k8, work the next 24 sts (center of front) with waste yarn; place sts back on left needle and knit again with working yarn. Knit the

last 8 sts and then repeat on the other side and back. Knit around in stockinette for 2½ in / 6 cm and then bind off. Carefully remove the waste yarn, and, with dpn, pick up and knit the released sts and 2 sts at each side (or short end) for the handle. Bind off.

Finishing

Sew the four seams.

If you want pieces that will be extra soft, dense, and stable, full the cap and bag. Place the garments in a nylon net washing bag (stuff with a hand towel to facilitate the fulling) and wash with a half or full load at 104°F / 40°C. Shape pieces and let dry.

Cut out the base for the bag and attach with a few stitches at each corner. Make the lining slightly larger than the bag and sew in along the bag's first row of stockinette.



The beret knitted in Favorite Wool

signiLO



Some claim that the name Signild means beloved, others that it means victorious. I don't have a strong opinion, but what I do know is that Signild the cardigan has been with me for a long time. Among my earliest Viking Knits designs, she has had many incarnations and is still a wardrobe staple.

Adorned with the very pretty Figure Eight on Bands pattern and made in the lovely Silky Wool XL yarn, this version is one of my absolute favorites, even though I'm not supposed to favor any one of my own designs. Will she become one of your favorites as well?

Sizes S (M, L, XL, XXL)

Finished measurements

Chest	37¾ (40¼, 43¼, 45¾, 47¼) in 96 (102, 110, 116, 120) cm
Length	19¼ (19¼, 20½, 20½, 20½) in 49 (49, 52, 52, 52) cm

Materials

Yarn Silky Wool XL (p. 14)
Yarn amounts 500 (550, 600, 650, 700) g
Notions 5 buttons, ⅝–¾ in / 18–20 mm
Needles US sizes 7 and 8 / 4.5 and 5 mm

Gauge 17 sts × 24 rows in stockinette on larger needles = 4 × 4 in / 10 × 10 cm

Adjust needle sizes to obtain correct gauge if necessary.

Edge Stitches The outermost st at each side is an edge st. Edge sts are included in the stitch counts and are always knitted, even along front edges.

Note Make sure that the ribbing always has a knit st inside the edge st on RS and a knit st next to the panel.

Charts Figure Eights on Bands, p. 56, and connecting chart A, p. 58. The two smallest sizes are worked following Rows 3–34 and the three largest sizes Rows 1–36. If necessary, work the rows at the end with knit over knit and purl over purl.

Back

With smaller needles, cast on 83 (89, 95, 101, 107) sts and work 5 rows in ribbing as follows: begin on WS with (k1, p1) 7 (8, 9, 10, 11) times = 14 (16, 18, 20, 22) sts ribbing, 19 sts of the main chart following Row R2, 17 (19, 21, 23, 25) sts in p1, k1 ribbing, 19 sts panel and (p1, k1) 7 (8, 9, 10, 11) times = 14 (16, 18, 20, 22) sts ribbing.













The Langobards made use of it in many ways; the photo shows it in several versions on a buckle now on display in Cividale del Friuli, Italy.

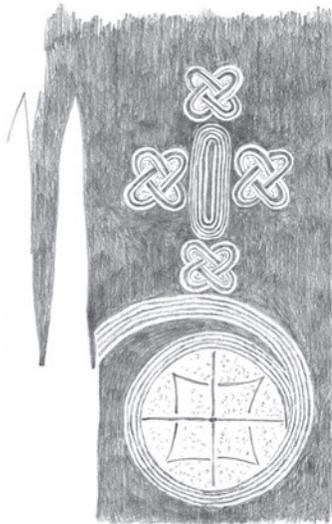


Langobardic buckle, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cividale del Friuli, Italy

The Youruba people utilize the Little Knot on all sorts of objects. They refer to it as Ibo, and it's associated with royalty. An ivory ornament in the shape of a ram's head, worn attached to a ceremonial garment from the 17th or possibly 18th century, is just one of many examples I have found (see page 86). Other African sources include the Nigerian Hausa culture, where it's known as the Kano knot, named after the Kingdom of Kano which existed from around the turn of the last millennium and into the 19th century. The

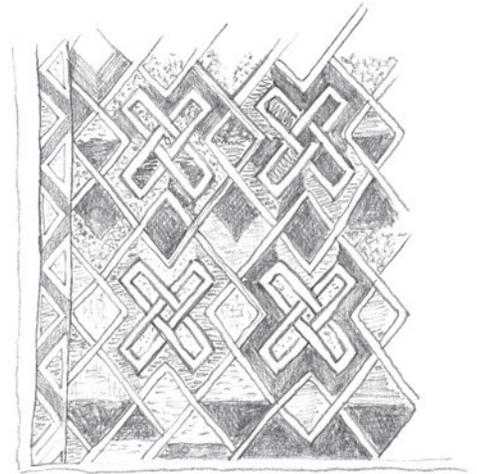
Kano knot adorns façades, as single elements or as part of an all-over decoration. Islam introduced the use of large, full-length shirts with traditional embroideries, and those frequently included the Kano knot.

The Ashanti people of Ghana traditionally used distinctive pieces of cloth as burial shrouds. This is the origin of the Adinkra tradition, a set of symbols imprinted on e.g. fabric. In this symbolic system the little knot means "one bad makes all look bad". Further south, in the Kuba culture, the men weave fabrics that are then embroidered by the women, using raphia bast fiber to produce a velvety surface. They have come to be known as Kasai velvets, today sought-after collectables.

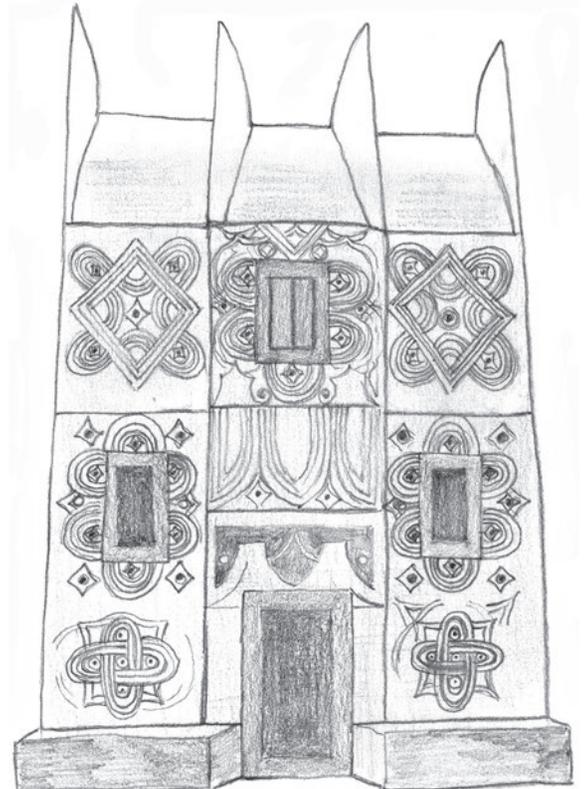


*Above: Detail of embroidery on a 19th century shirt, Hausa tribe, Nigeria
Right: Kano house, Nigeria*

To the Kubas themselves, these fabrics have no practical use, but a quite significant ceremonial function; various kinds of intertwined motifs come together in rhythmic constellations. The words "embroidered jazz" comes to mind, at least to my mind. Here's an example with an elongated little knot from a Kasai velvet.



Detail of Kasai velvet, Kuba, Congo



In a 16th century embroidery pattern book by German author Peter Quentel, I found a page with a border of Little Knots with bands intertwined. On a side note, the same page also showed a border of Linked Rings. I discovered a Little Knot and Ring motif used as a beadwork decoration on a ceremonial garment from the Yoruba tribe. This type of motif can also be found in the art of the Nigerian Hausa tribe.

Fourknot

The Fourknot is also known as a Shield Knot. Just like the Little Knot, it is a common symbol in virtually every civilization in the world, tracing its origin back several millennia. The cardinal points were important in most ancient cultures, and the Fourknot has often

been used to represent them, hence the sometimes used English name “Earth Square”. One of the oldest discoveries is from Mesopotamia and believed to be some four thousand years old.

In classical antiquity it can be found in both mosaics and on stone reliefs all over the eastern Mediterranean; later



Above left: Calabash box, Yoruba, Nigeria

Above: Carved chair, Nigeria

Below left: Chess piece, Lewis, Scotland, Great Britain

Below: Roman mosaic, The Basilica of Aquileia, Italy







Pendant from Öland, Sweden

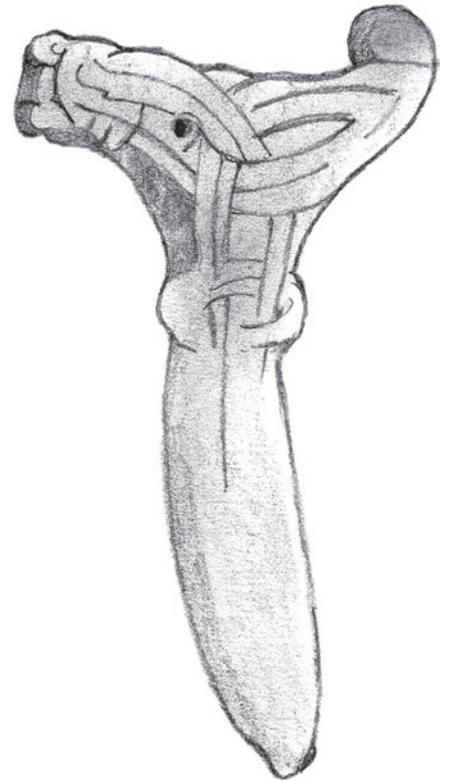
The ornamentation on a cross from Yorkshire, England ends with three Threeknots (not shown); perhaps the craftsman believed that three times three multiplies the power of the symbol? On the small pendant from Öland, Sweden, the craftsman has included four Threeknots, which, by the same logic, should be extremely potent. Both three and four are numbers considered to be very powerful

in Christian as well as Pre-Christian times. And just as is the case with the Little Knot, the Threeknot frequently acts as the center point of the designs.

This is not the case with the rune stone in the below photo, but there are so many intriguing things going on in the ornamentation that I just had to include the photo in the book. And with four Threeknots visible, this was the chapter to show it in.



I haven't had many chances to display objects from the Sami culture in connection with the Viking Knits project, so I was thrilled to discover this Sami drum hammer with a Threeknot as its major design element.

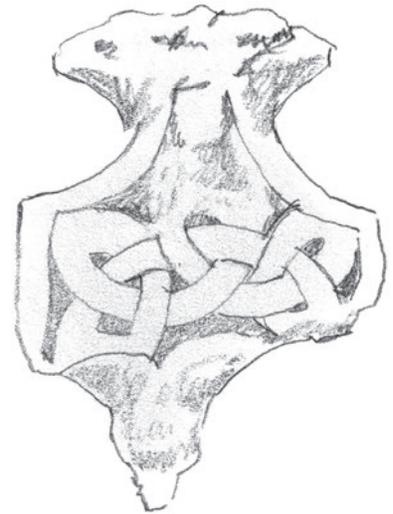


*Left: Rune stone placed outside the Frösunda church, Vallentuna, Sweden
Above: Sami shaman's hammer, Sweden*





Combined with two Little Knots, this motif can be seen on a sword from Stokke, Norway. Another example from Norway is on a round buckle, where the motif is combined with a trinity symbol. The bronze matrix from Slagelse, Denmark, is another example, and to complete the Nordic trinity, the photo shows a picture stone from Sweden, which, however, predates the Viking age by a couple of hundred years.



*Above: Sword from Stokke, Norway
Top right: Bronze matrix, Slagelse, Denmark
Right: Picture stone, Hellvi, Gotland, Sweden, now
at the Historical Museum, Stockholm, Sweden*















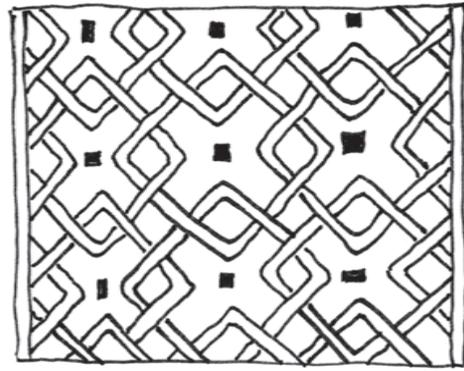


All-over patterns

Some patterns can be connected both vertically and horizontally to create all-over patterns. Another way is to make a lattice of diagonal bands and weave in knot motifs where the bands cross.

Do it yourself

Now that you have read the theoretical aspects of how to manipulate and vary patterns, my advice to you is knit and don't think too much—follow your intuition.



Adding Color

It is entirely possible to knit these patterns with the cabling in a contrasting color using a combination of Intarsia and stranding.

For a motif like the Little Knot & Ring used here I've stranded both the main color and the pattern color and just turned the pattern color, without twisting the yarn, at the end of the motif. For patterns with long vertical stretches, you'll want to use Intarsia technique, using a separate ball of yarn for each area of color, twisting the yarns (only once around) at the color change to avoid holes. Each color will make a U-turn at the meeting point.



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