

LEATHER

SIMPLE MEDIEVAL PURSES

Presented by Lady Barry the White

Medieval Leather 101: A Simple Purse

This class will be an introduction to medieval leather crafting. We will focus on the basic European medieval purse. You will learn basic materials, styles and construction methods. By the end of this course you should have a better understanding of the

functionality of the basic leather purse. You will also have the materials and instruction to make simple purse for yourself.



Leather in Medieval Europe

Leather was a commonly used material by all classes of people in Europe. Clothing, shoes, drinkware, armor, saddles and purses are just a few of the items that were constructed with this material. Many objects, such as purses were decorated to provide identification for the item and it's owner. The more decorated the item, the greater the value of its contents and /or the higher class of

its owner.

Vegetable tanned leather from mainly goat, cow, deer or pig, was used for items. Leather was tanned using bark from acidic trees such as oak. The term tanning comes from the medieval Latin word *tannāre*, derivative of *tannum* (oak bark) [Wiki.]. Tooling leather is essentially the only leather that is vegetable tanned today and comes in a variety of thicknesses. We will

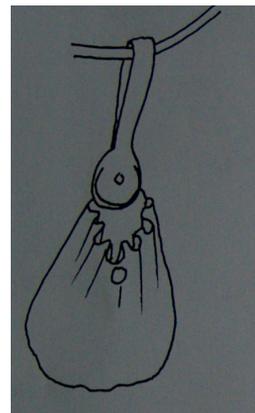
be using this in our class to make our purse.

Money Purse (Drawstring)



The Money Purse was used by both men and women in Medieval Europe. There have been many different styles of construction for the purses, all of which have the same finished structure, a soft pouch with a cord that was strung through holes at the top and attached to a girdle or a belt.

Pouch Purse



The Pouch Purse was very similar to the Money Purse. The main difference was that it had a rear panel (stiffer leather normally in the shape of a pear) which had a loop that the belt would go through. The front of the pouch was made from soft leather like that of the Money Purse and was opened and closed with a drawstring. This was worn by women.

Linen Thread, Bees Wax and Awls

Linen thread coated with bees wax was used to sew leather together. Take a piece of linen thread and hold it about 3" away from one end. Hold the thread against the wax and with your finger or thumb securing the thread pull it along the surface of the wax to the end. Repeat this at least one more time. Then turn

the thread around and starting at the 3" (approximately) spot on the thread pull the rest of the thread through the wax in the same manner. Now thread your harness or saddlers needle. You will be using an awl to punch holes in the leather. When punching holes into the leather make sure your fingers are not in the

way of the awl. It is very painful to punch a hole in your finger! Please be careful! You will punch one or two holes and then sew the thread through the newly made holes. Then again punch a few more holes and repeat.

Stitches

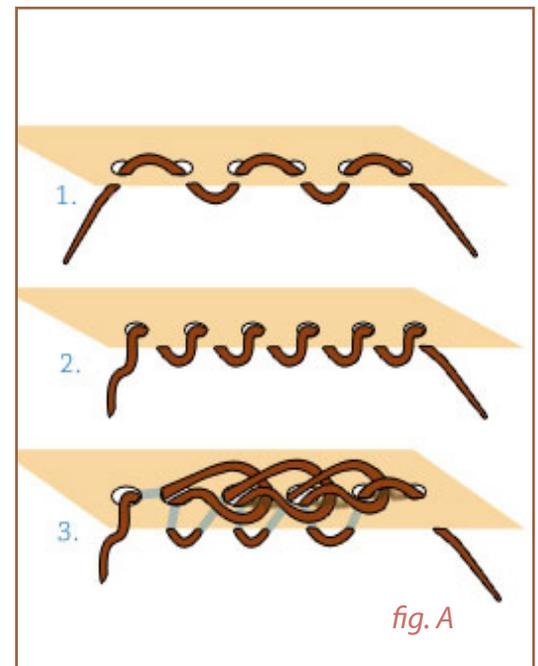
There are a few stitches that we will be using in class. For sewing articles of leather together we will be using either the Running stitch (fig. A.1) or the Whip stitch (fig. A.2). There is also the daisy chain stitch as well (fig. A.3)

A running stitch goes in one hole and out through the next in one direction, without crossing over any edges. Alternating on each side of the material for the entry and exit points (fig. A.1)

A whip stitch goes along the edge of the article to be sewn. Each time the thread goes through the same side of the material by entering the hole, wrapping around the outer edge

of the material and then entering into the next hole on the same side as the previous stitch (fig. A.2)

A daisy chain stitch goes through the stitching hole wrapping around the base of the chain done prior and then exiting the same hole it entered through (fig. A.3). We will discuss this stitch in greater detail in class.



Constructing a Money Purse

Soft leather such as Goat, Calf, or Pigskin was used to make these purses. The leather was normally anywhere from 1/2 oz. to 2 oz. in weight. It would have been oiled and/or waxed to waterproof it.

There are a few shapes from which to construct this purse. The first style can be made from a large circle. The next style of Money Purse can be made from a rectangular shape that can be cut from two pieces or one extra long piece. The edges of the seams are turned/ folded in about 1/4" and then sewn together (fig.B) around the perimeter with the whip stitch (remember one side is left open, otherwise you'll have a purse with no opening).

For both rectangular shaped purses we will stitch a flap on opposite ends of the bag. Two holes will be punched in both flaps, reinforcing where the two separate cords will go through. These will be sewn on either end where the stitching meets the opening of the purse (fig.C.2). For the round one it will be on opposite sides of the circle (fig.C.1). Sometimes the flaps are connected to form a strap (like a purse strap) (fig.D). This would allow for attachment to a belt without using the closing cords.

Holes must be punched to allow for the cording to close the purse. For the circle purse holes are punched around the outer edge of the leather (not too close to the edge or the cording may pull through the leather depending on the weight of the contents of the bag and the thickness of the leather). The holes can be any distance from each other depending on the size of the

leather circle and the thickness of the leather. Remember that a cord must gather the leather together in an accordion pleat fashion (two holes per pleat)(fig.E) The top edge of rectangular money purse is also punched like that of the circle purse (fig.F). Again, be careful as to not punch holes too close to the edge.

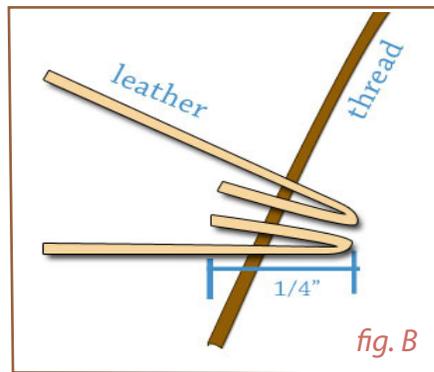


fig. B

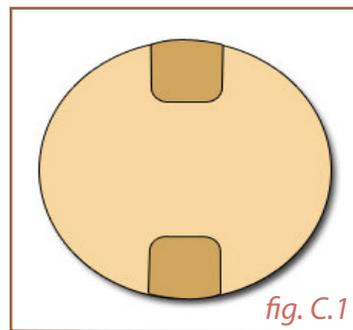


fig. C.1

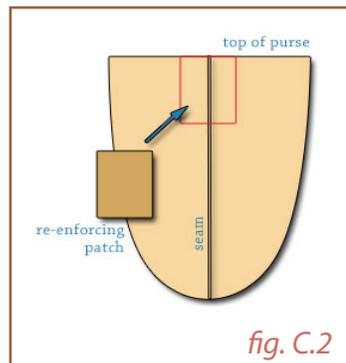


fig. C.2

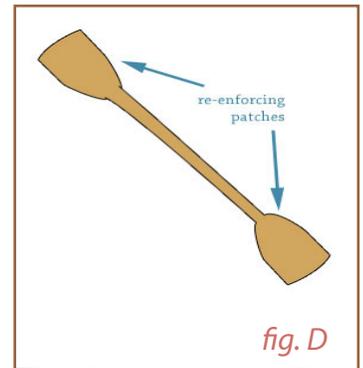


fig. D

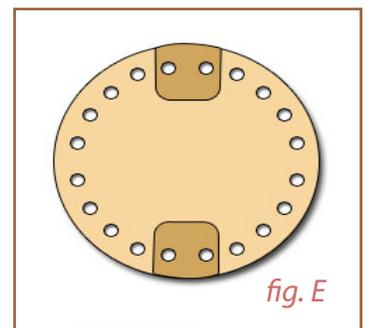


fig. E

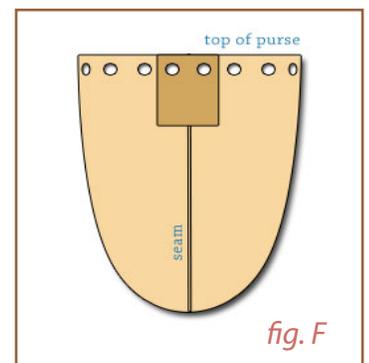
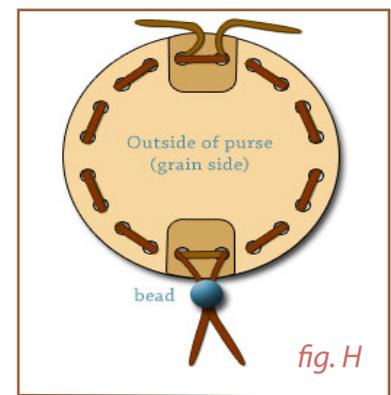
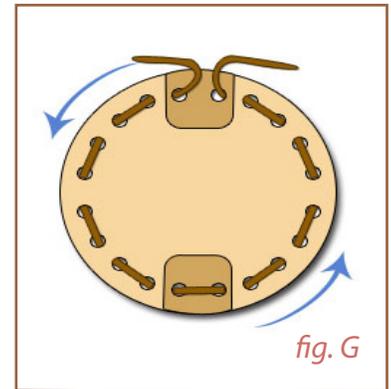


fig. F

continued

Constructing a Money Purse (cont...)

Two cords (of any appropriate material) are threaded through all the holes. One cord will start and stop at one end where one of the reinforcing flaps has been sewn (start by lacing into one of the two holes in the end flaps and end by coming out of the other of the two holes so that both ends of the cord are on the outside of the purse)(fig.G). The other cord will be done the same way but with the opposite flap. The two cords can then be knotted at the ends and then be pulled at opposite sides to close the purse. Before knotting a decorative bead can be threaded through each of the two cords. (fig. H)



Constructing a Pouch Purse

A combination of soft and stiffer leather would have been used to create this purse. The "pouch" part of the purse was normally anywhere from 1/2 - 1oz.in weight. The back part of the purse would have been made of leather from 2 - 4oz in weight. It would have been oiled and/or waxed to waterproof it.

To create the back panel of the purse, using the thicker leather, trace and cut out the back panel shape given to you.(fig.I). Using the thinner leather, do the same for the front pouch shape.(fig. I).

Find the center of the straight edge of your front pouch by folding it in half (refer to fig. I). Mark this location with a pencil at the edge. Do the same with the back panel.

With the back panel, cut a vertical slit in the flap at the center point of the small circle large enough to pass through the bead to be used to close the pouch (fig. I)

At this point holes are made for the cording along the top edge (rounded side, fig.I) of the front pouch piece . Punch in an odd number of holes on both sides of the center line (ex. 7 or 9 holes). This will create an accordion pleat.

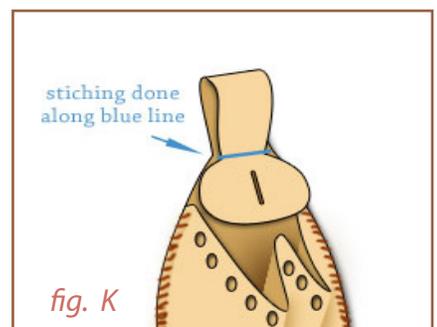
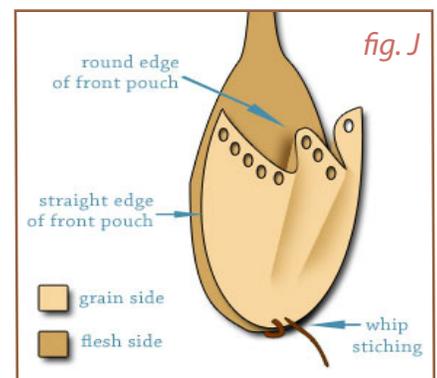
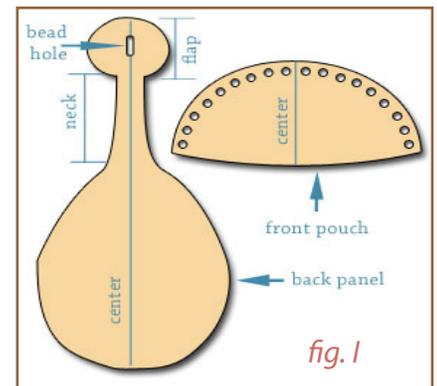
Position the back panel of the purse in front of you with the flesh side facing you. Now lay down the front pouch on top of it with the grain side facing you. Align the two center marks together (fig. J). With your awl punch a hole about an 1/8" - 1/4" in from the very edge of the two pieces of leather. With your needle threaded with the waxed linen thread, thread the first hole, leaving half of the length of thread to sew the other side. Then punch the next hole the same way to either the right or left. Make a whip

stitch through the next hole. Keep going along one side of the purse until you finish sewing the front to the back. Then tie off the thread on that end. Go back and thread the needle with the other half of the thread and sew along the other side of the purse until you are done sewing the other side.

To make the belt loop fold the top section of the neck area in half. Take a measurement to make sure that it is at least 1 1/2" in length (fig K). Mark a line going across the width with your awl 1 1/2" from the folded edge. This can be adjusted when making another purse by lengthening the neck area, to accommodate wider belts.

Punch a hole on one side and start stitching and punching along the neck area until you reach zthe other side. If you wish to use decorative stitches or use a leather thong please refer to the "Stitches" section of this class document.

Cut two holes into the back panel along the area where the holes for the cording in the front pouch meet the back panel. Thread the cording through both holes so that the cord ends go into the front side of the purse. Continue threading the cords through the punched holes until they meet at the center of the front pouch. Take the bead and thread the two cords though it and knot the cords together. Close the pouch and push the bead/cord through the hole.



Finishing the Purse

Finish your purse using the following steps depending on your desired look. The following steps can be done at home.

1. If you wish to dye your purse, now would be the time to do so. If you are making a purse at home, I would suggest dyeing your leather after the pieces have been cut and holes have been punched (for drawstrings). This ensures that all of the leather is dyed and there are no unfinished surfaces. I would suggest using a professional dye of your choice, mine is Feibings. You can also use acrylic paints to color or decorate your purse as well (though, pig skin does not paint well). If there are any surfaces on the purse that you have not painted, continue with steps 2 and 3 for those areas.

2. If you wish to darken the color of the leather naturally, then apply a few coats of Olive oil or

neatsfoot oil till you reach the desired color. Wait for each coat to soak in and dry before applying the next coat. You can use a rag or a wad of wool to apply the oil. This also acts as a natural protectant and extends the life of the leather and increases the strength and flexibility. This also can help act as a water barrier. If you have also dyed your leather, it is suggested that at least two coats of oil be applied to help with conditioning the leather as well.

3. The final step is to take the cake of bees wax (given to you in class) and rub all the surfaces of the leather. Make sure the purse is warm (leave by the heater for a while) before doing this. The cold will prevent the wax from penetrating the surface layer of the leather and will not work as well. OR you can apply an acrylic sealer to the purse to help it become water resistant. This is the easier of the two choices,

but the wax is more durable in the long run.

Reference

I highly recommend the following book if you wish to learn more about purses from the Middle Ages of Europe -

Olaf Goubitz and ed. Hemmy Clevis, trans. Xandra Bardet, **Purses in Pieces** (Uitgevers, Zwolle: Stichiting Promotie Archeologie. 2009)