

# Embroidery for Clothing - Anglo-Saxon

## Background

From earliest times, the Anglo-Saxons were famous for their embroidery, particularly that which was worked using gold and silk threads. This fame saw the spread of their work all over Europe, used both in secular and ecclesiastical settings.

There are many references to embroidery in literature (including Beowulf) and also to those who produced it. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there is reference to St. Dunstan working on designs for Queen Aedgytha, wife of Edward the Confessor. Queen Margaret of Scotland, wife of Malcolm III, was known to have decorated copes, chasubles, stoles and altar cloths. Perhaps the most famous is Ælfæd, Queen of Edward the Elder who commissioned the making of a set of vestments (dated by inscription to between 909-916 BCE) for Frithestan, Bishop of Winchester. These vestments eventually came to reside in the tomb of St Cuthbert at Durham, where they still remain today.



**Figure 1 - Roundal Section, Maaseik embroideries**

Gifts of textiles to the Church formed an important part of late Anglo-Saxon society. Vestments, made up of many marks worth of gold, were given to various religious communities during this period. These vestments were often the most valuable items in the treasuries of the communities. Because they were of such value, they were often better cared for than secular embroideries and many of the embroideries that have survived from this period, are therefore of a religious theme or usage.

Because of the intrinsic worth of these items many were destroyed to recover the gold. This explains why so few of these items survive, despite their acknowledged beauty. For example, a cope and two chasubles burnt in the 14th century recovered £250 worth of gold.

Although there are numerous literary references, illustrations and other images of embroidery, and some extant ecclesiastical examples, there is no archeological evidence for embroidery on Anglo-Saxon secular clothing. Therefore, all information in this handout is based on supposition and not hard evidence. The designs and techniques are based on extant sources, but their specific application is an extrapolation.

## Extant Examples

### ***Maaseik Embroidery, late 8<sup>th</sup> – early 9<sup>th</sup> Century***

The Maaseik embroideries, or more properly the Vestments of Sts. Harlindis and Relindis, (now housed in Maaseik, Belgium) were produced in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and are closely related stylistically to the manuscript illumination of the same period. They were made in England and show great use of strong colour with goldwork highlights.

The designs used on this set of vestments is very much in the Anglo-Saxon style, use of intricate knotwork, floral and animal motifs, strong architectural style (the arcades) and the use of roundals to enclose motifs. The gold is worked in surface couching, with the background stitched using polychrome silk in split stitch. There is evidence that at some stage in its life, pearls were attached.



**Figure 2 - Roundals within Arch, Maaseik Embroideries**

Again, one must be careful when using this example as evidence for embroidery on clothing. While the various pieces of embroidery are now on a garment, it is possible that they began life as some other sort of decoration, possibly a wallhanging (this is my personal theory), and we are looking at a religious piece of clothing. However, since this work has so much in common with other elements of Anglo-Saxon design, I think it is a very useful source of patterns.

### ***Milan Fragment, 9<sup>th</sup> Century***

This fragment is housed in the Basilica Ambrosiana in Milan and has been tentatively identified as being of Anglo-Saxon workmanship. The fragment contains two figures standing in an archway. There are also foliate elements in the design. The fragment is worked on linen with silk and gold thread. The gold appears to be worked in surface couching and the figures in silk using split stitch and possibly stem stitch.



**Figure 3 - Fragment from the Museo di S. Ambrogio, Milan**



**Figure 4 - Sixtus II on the Cuthbert or Durham Embroideries**

### ***St Cuthbert Maniple and Stole, 10<sup>th</sup> Century***

This piece of Anglo-Saxon embroidery was produced in England around AD 915, it was rediscovered in 1827 when the tomb of St. Cuthbert was opened at Durham Cathedral.

It shows the Anglo-Saxon love for embroidery worked in gold, for which they were famous throughout Europe. The stole and maniple are made up of a series of figures (of religious personalities) interspersed with foliate elements.

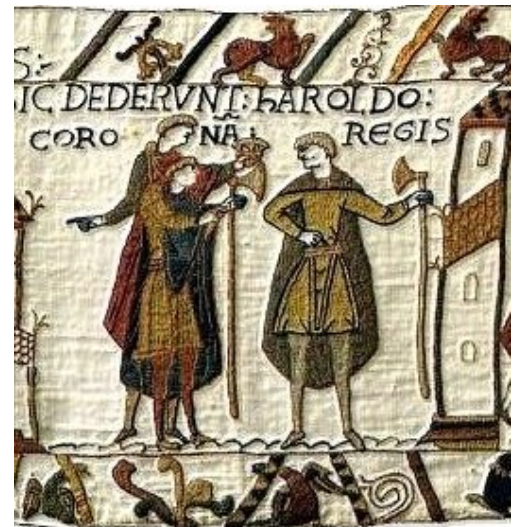
While they are from our period, several things must be kept in mind when using these items as evidence for embroidery on clothing – firstly, and most importantly, they were made for ecclesiastical use. This has an influence on the styles and themes of the works. Secondly, they are not clothing as such by part of a set of religious vestments, rather than ordinary clothing.

### ***The Bayeux Tapestry, 11<sup>th</sup> Century***

The Bayeux Tapestry was produced by English embroiderers in about 1080CE and is one of the most famous pieces of embroidery in the world.

The piece is an interesting source in that it demonstrates Anglo-Saxon stitching techniques (laid and couched work, stem stitch and outline stitch) and materials as well as illustrating Anglo-Saxon clothing styles in the depiction of the Norman Invasion of England.

Again, while not definitive proof of embroidery on clothing, it does show the location of decoration on garments. It is also a great source of actual Anglo-Saxon embroidered motifs, especially those from the top and bottom borders.



**Figure 5 - Panel from the Bayeux Tapestry**

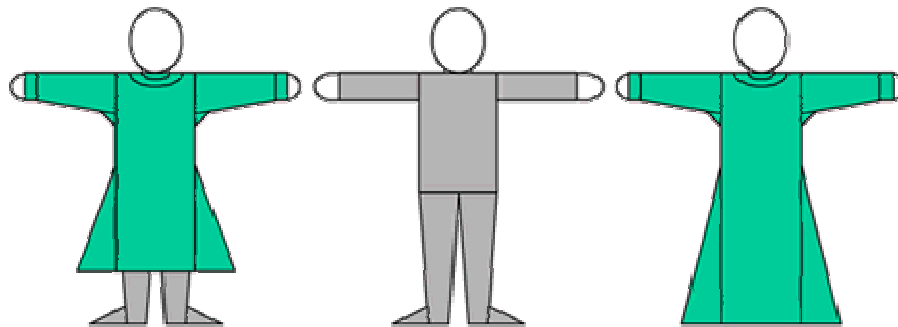
### ***Worcester Fragments, late 11<sup>th</sup> Century***

This set of vestments, made up of a maniple and stole, were discovered in the tomb of William of Blois, Bishop of Worcester in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, the accessories were believed to have been made earlier, in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. They are worked on a silk ground, using polychrome silk and goldwork, in underside couching.

## Materials for Clothing

As with anything made during the Middle Ages, the materials used depended on one's station in life. Linen was commonly used by all levels of society for items such as underclothes. Wool was the most popular cloth for outer clothing for the lower and middle classes and was likely used for every day wear by the nobility. Cloth made of more luxurious fabrics, such as silks, satins, furs etc would have been used mostly by the upper reaches of society, especially for special occasion clothing, such as that worn for appearances at court.

- Linen (for undergarments)
- Wool (for outer garments)
- Silk (for outer garments and trim)
- Fur

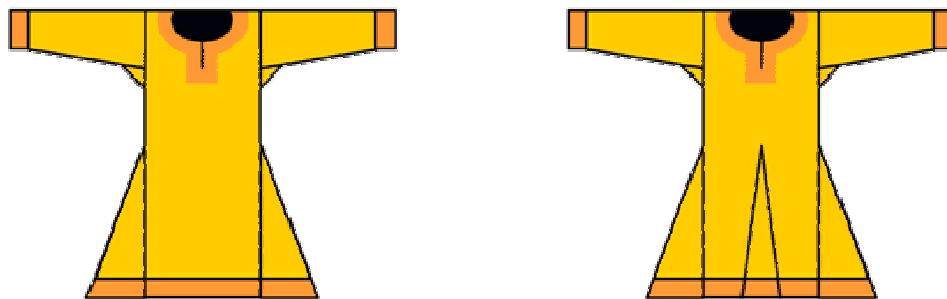


**Figure 6 - Men and Women's Tunic**

(Image kindly supplied by Regia Anglorum – <http://www.regia.org>)

The above illustration gives the basic shape for both men's and women's tunics in the mid and later Anglo-Saxon period. Note that the only real difference is that the men's tunic (on the left) is slightly shorter than the women's tunic (on the right). Please also note that it is likely that both sexes wore multiple layers of clothing, depending on the season. When wearing two layers, the second (topmost) layer of women's tunics were slightly shorter, probably the same length as a man's tunic. Also, the sleeves on this second layer would most likely be wider/baggier to allow for the under tunic.

## Placement



**Figure 7 - Placement of Decoration at Neck, Cuffs and Hem**

(Image kindly supplied by Regia Anglorum – <http://www.regia.org>)

On both men's and women's tunics, the decoration was usually at the neck, cuffs and hem. Again, the material and placement of trim was determined by one's social status. One important tip to keep in mind is contrast. Always try and get contrast between the decorations at the neck, cuffs and hem and the rest of the garment. If you are doing a keyhole neckline, make the keyhole facing light if the tunic is dark and vice versa.

- **Lower Classes** - may not have trim at the hem. Decoration might consist of applied trim at the cuff and neck made from the same woollen material as the rest of the tunic, but in a different colour. For the very lowest classes, decoration may be of plain applied trim or embroidery straight onto the garment at neck and cuffs.
- **Middle class or wealthier person**, the garment may be of wool, with silk trim at all three places.
- **Nobility and royalty**, trim was placed at all three places with possible additional decoration on the body of the garment.

When creating embroidery for use on clothing, it is a good idea to follow period practice, that is, to embroider the design on a separate piece of fabric and when the embroidery is complete, apply it to the garment at the correct locations. This has a couple of benefits, firstly, if the garment needs to be washed, the trim can be removed, this is especially useful when working with delicate silks. Finally, when the body of a garment wears out, the trim can be removed and applied to a new garment. This has the added benefit of also adding rigidity to the neckline, cuffs and hem.

For further information on how to construct clothing in the Anglo-Saxon style, see the following websites:

- **Regia Anglorum Clothing Website:** <http://members.regia.org/basclot5c.htm>

### ***Note on Keyhole Necklines***

There is evidence in several sources for the use of what are termed keyhole necklines by the Anglo-Saxons. In the Bayeux Tapestry, several of the men pictured are wearing tunics with a neck facing and there are several manuscripts with keyhole necklines. However, this is no direct evidence for the use of embroidery on necklines. So it is up to you to decide if you use the designs for embroidered keyhole necklines.

## **Materials for Embroidery**

The materials used for embroidery generally match those used for making the clothes (with the exception of linen). When working embroidery on clothing, it is best to match materials, that is, use wool thread on wool fabric and silk thread on silk fabric. When working an upper/noble class garment, it is also possible to add the use of gold thread as well. It is highly unlikely that gold thread would have been used directly on a woollen garment, there is, however, evidence of gold embroidery on a silk ground fabric which is then applied to a woollen garment.

Mostly, people will have access to embroidery cotton (floss). Cotton for is not period for Anglo-Saxon embroidery. However, if you aren't that worried about authenticity or can't afford silk, then cotton is fine. Just try and stick with cotton embroidery thread on cotton or linen ground and wool thread for wool ground. I would not recommend using cotton to replace wool thread though. It just won't look right, and it will be hard to get the correct coverage on wool ground fabric and it just doesn't work

well for some stitches used, such as split stitch. Silk thread is not as expensive as you may think and is nice to work with, think about using silk, especially if it's a small project.

Also when dealing with noble, especially royal garments, it is possible that other materials such as pearls, gems and gold decorations were also used in combination with embroidery. Pearls might have been used to outline or highlight embroidered elements.

There are numerous brands and types of both wool and silk thread. I have listed a few below to help those new to embroidery. The best way to find out what works best for you is to experiment. Ask the local embroidery person if they will give you a small sample of any threads they may have, so you can see what you like working with, without having to invest too much money.

- **Wool thread on wool ground** – For most people the most easily accessible wool thread will be some sort of DMC thread. DMC wool comes in two types, known as Medici and Tapestry. The Medici is fine embroidery wool used for fine work. Tapestry is the type normally used for working needlepoint canvases. There is another well known thread, called Appleton's, which is a similar size and weight to Medici. Thirdly, if available you could use hand spun thread. This is often available within the recreation community from local spinners. Which one you use depends on several factors.
  - **DMC Medici Wool Thread** – since this thread is finer, it will take longer to complete any given design. However, since it is finer, it is possible to get a greater control of colours and shading etc. It is also probably more suitable to the more experienced embroiderer.
  - **DMC Tapestry Wool Thread** – this is thick wool thread. This means that it is possible to cover a lot of design, very quickly. It is also more suitable for new or not as experienced embroider. It is especially good for working split or stem stitch and for couching work.
  - **Appleton's Wool Thread** – this thread tends to be a slightly more uneven thread than the comparable Medici wool, however, this gives it a more authentic look.
  - **Hand Spun Wool Thread** – produced by individual spinners, the qualities of this thread will vary with the artisan. If you are going for authenticity, this is the wool to use, especially if it is dyed with period dyes.
- **Silk and gold thread on silk ground** - It is also possible to use a linen ground fabric when working with silk thread, but only where the entire ground fabric is covered with silk or gold thread (i.e. when finished, you can't see the linen ground.).
  - **Backing Fabric** - When working with fine silk ground fabric, it may be necessary to back the silk with a strong fabric. For modern use, a finely woven cotton fabric of a similar colour would work well.
  - **Madeira Silk Thread** – this is one of the easier to get hold of brands of silk thread. This thread is a twisted thread. However, it is easy to work with and still produces a nice sheen when the embroidery is finished.
  - **Eterna Stranded Silk Thread** – this silk thread can be a bit harder to get but because it is a flat silk, it is an authentic and gives a much higher sheen to completed work. Please note, however, that this thread can be quite difficult to work with, as it catches on just above anything, including dry skin on your hands.
  - **Imitation Japanese Gold Thread** – this would be suitable for extremely high class clothing. The most available brand of this type of thread is Kreinik. This type of thread would have been worked using surface couching.
  - **YLI Silk Thread #50** – this yellow silk sewing thread is used to couch down the gold thread. However, any thin yellow thread could be substituted.

## Colours

Dyes of the period relied heavily on natural elements, especially botanical ingredients. The colours used in ones clothing (including embroidery thread) were determined by ones social position and wealth. Please remember that the Anglo-Saxons had very different ideas about colours “went together”.

- **Lower Classes** – Wool – various undyed colours, cream, full range of browns, greys. Probably unbleached Linen. Also faded middle class dyes such as pale yellows, yellow greens, moss greens, salmony pinks, woad blues and combinations of all those already mentioned.
- **Middle Classes** – All the colours available to lower classes plus richer/stronger colours of woad blue, pinks, greens – leaf and bottle greens, also orange/browns and rusty reds.
- **Nobility** – all of the above plus small amounts of cardinal red (made with kermes dye).
- **Royalty** – all of the above plus more reds and purples.



Figure 8 - A section of the Bayeux Tapestry, illustrating the colours used

# Stitches

## Split Stitch

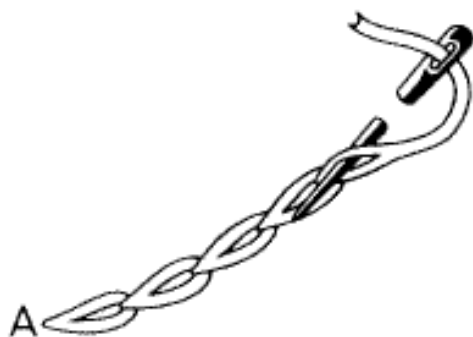


Figure 9 - Split Stitch

**Stitch Split** stitch is one of the oldest, most widely used (both geographically and timeframe) and easiest embroidery stitches used in the period covered by the SCA.

Because split stitch follows a curve well, it is a good basic outlining stitch and can also be used as a filling stitch. The densely packed stitching can give an almost painting like effect.

It can be used for both wool and silk embroidery. To do this stitch, bring the needle through at A and, following the line to be covered, take a small back stitch so that the needle comes up through the working thread, as shown in the diagram.

When starting to learn this stitch, it might be easier to use what is called a “stab stitch” method. This means making a stitch (as in the first part of the above instructions), but while the needle is “underneath” the fabric, pull the thread all the way through. Then, bring the needle up through the working thread. You are basically doing the same as above, but doing it in two motions rather than one.

## Stem Stitch

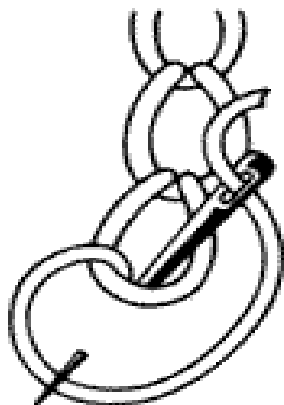


Figure 10 - Stem Stitch

Stem stitch was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as an outlining stitch but also used as a filling stitch.

Work from left to right, taking regular small stitches along the line of the design. The thread always emerges on the left side of the previous stitch. It can also be worked as a filling stitch if worked closely together within a shape until it is completely filled.

## Chain Stitch



Chain stitch was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as a fill stitch and also for things such as stems on vines or plants.

Bring the thread up at the top of the line and hold it down with the left thumb. Insert the needle where it last emerged and bring the point out a short distance away. Pull the thread through, keeping the working thread under the needle point.

Figure 11 - Chain Stitch

## Surface Couching



Figure 12 - Couching

Couching was used throughout the SCA period. It was often used as a decorative stitch on clothing, either as a filling stitch or to outline and highlight designs.

Lay down the thread to be couched, and with another thread catch it down with small stitches worked over the top.

## Laid and Couched Work

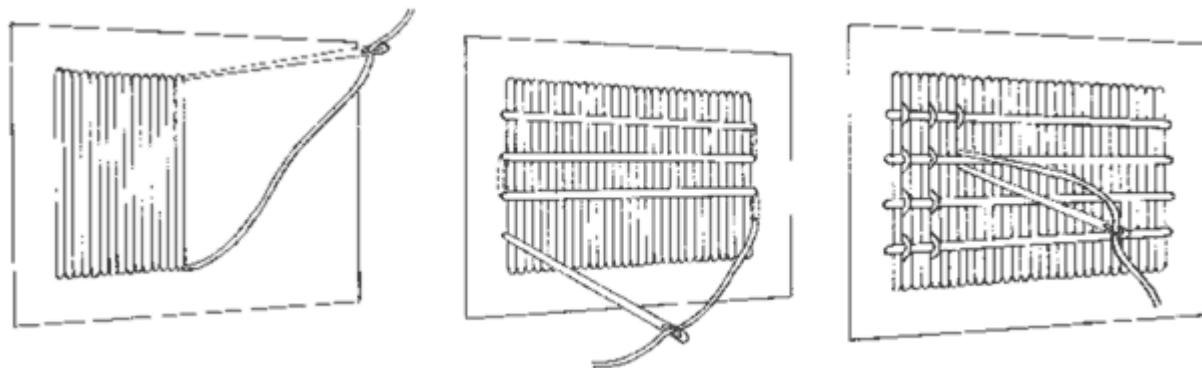


Figure 13 - Laid and Couched Work

This stitch is created by laying a set of ground threads (Figure 13 – a), that work from one side of the pattern to the other. Over these threads, in the opposite direction, are laid another set of threads at regular intervals (Figure 13 – b). These cross threads are then held down by a series of couching stitches (Figure 13 – c). The whole process results in an area completely covered in thread. This is the predominant stitch (along with stem stitch) used on the Bayeux Tapestry.

## Running Stitch

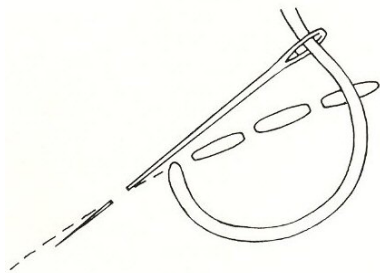


Figure 14 - Running Stitch

Pass the needle in and out of the fabric, making the surface stitches of equal length. The stitches on the underside should also be of equal length, but half the size or less than the upper stitches.

## Sources for Designs

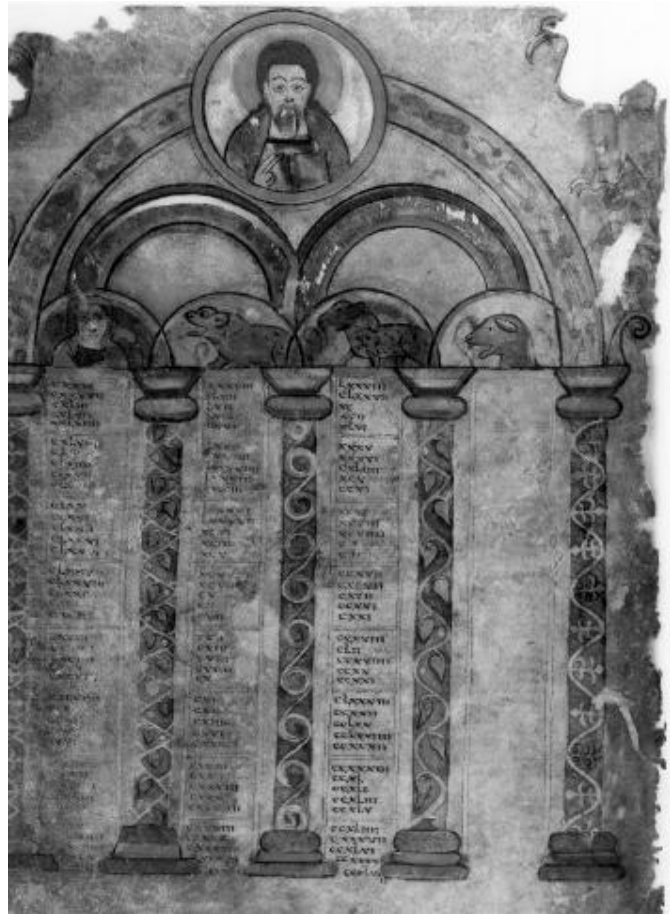
Anglo-Saxon designs in embroidery reflected design in other mediums such as carving, metalwork and illumination. There was extensive use of interlaced patterns, foliate, figural and animal designs as well as architecturally inspired structure within the needlework design layout.

As would be expected, ecclesiastical embroideries drew heavily from Biblical and religious themes for depictions on vestments and other church decorations.

For this handout, I have relied heavily on two types of sources, extant examples (the Maaseik Embroideries and the Bayeux Tapestry) and contemporary manuscripts. There was a strong connection between embroidered work and manuscripts.

The illustrators who worked on manuscripts were often employed to draw the designs onto the base fabric which was then worked by the embroiderers. I have used designs found in the columns of the Codex

Eyckensis (also held at Maaseik) as inspiration for the keyhole neckline designs and the matching cuff and hem patterns. It was produced at the same time as the Maaseik Embroideries and in the same general area, that is, southern England. It shares many design elements with the Maaseik Embroideries (use of architectural elements such as arches, roundels, repeating semi-geometric patterns, foliate and animal images etc). Since extant examples of embroidery on secular clothing are non-existent, we must rely on extrapolation from ecclesiastical and other design sources.



**Figure 15 - Detail from Codex Eyckensis**



The Bayeux Tapestry has been used as a design source to develop a set of animal motifs within roundels. Also, I have used some of the simple, flowing floral designs from the Bayeux Tapestry boards as additional inspiration for some simple linear designs that could be applied on various parts of tunics (collars, cuffs, hems).

**Figure 16 - Page from the Codex Eyckensis, 9th Century**

# Using the Patterns

## ***Sizing the Designs***

I have designed these patterns to fit onto A4 paper. For the keyhole necklines, if you blow the design up on most photocopiers, using the auto-enlarge feature of A4->A3, the designs should fit just about anyone. I would recommend that you cut out an enlarged photocopy of the pattern you intend to use and test fit it before proceeding with the embroidery.

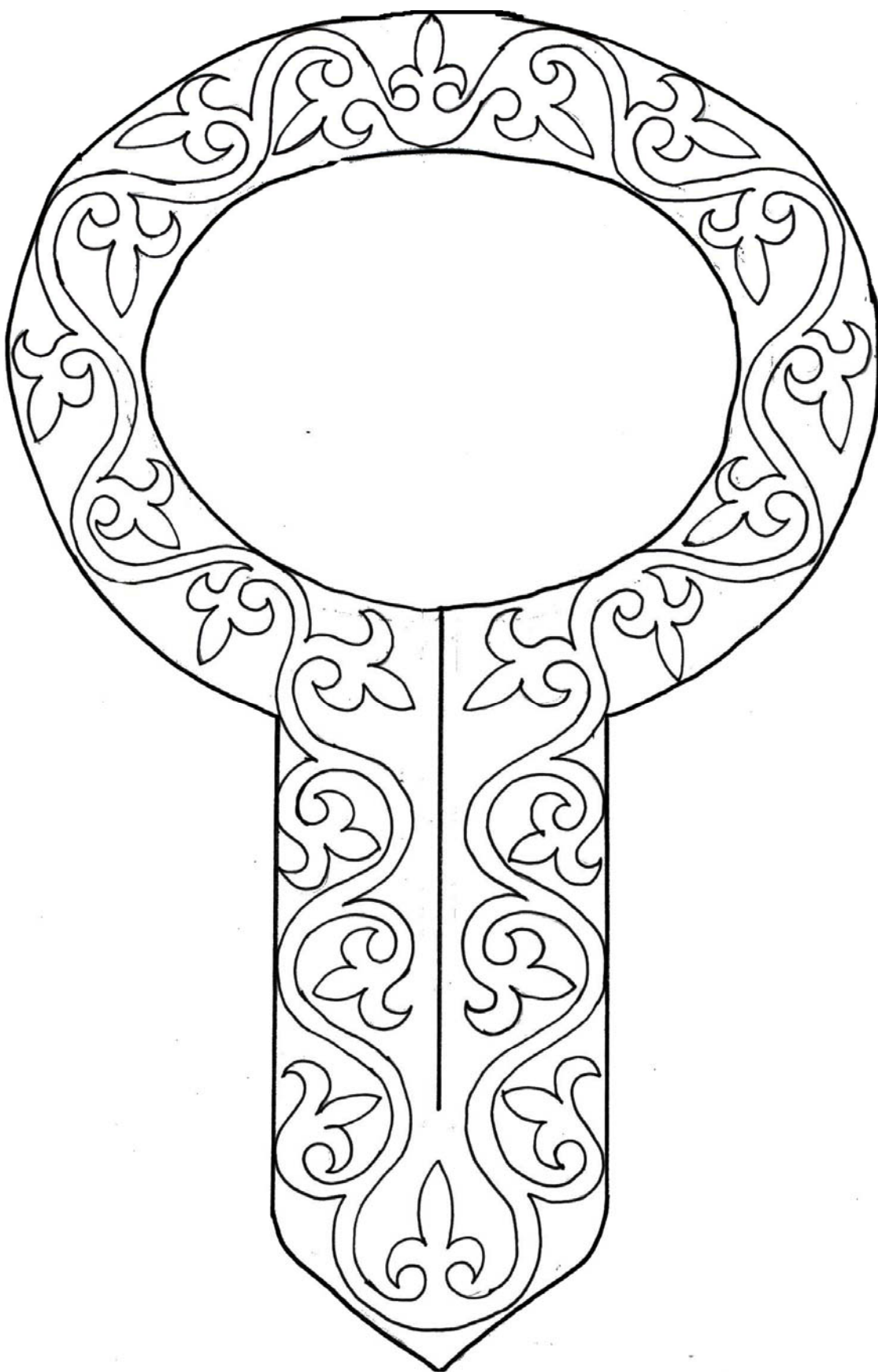
The other patterns in this handout are not designed for use at any specific size. That is, you can use them at the size they are in the handout, or blow them up to the size you would like to use.

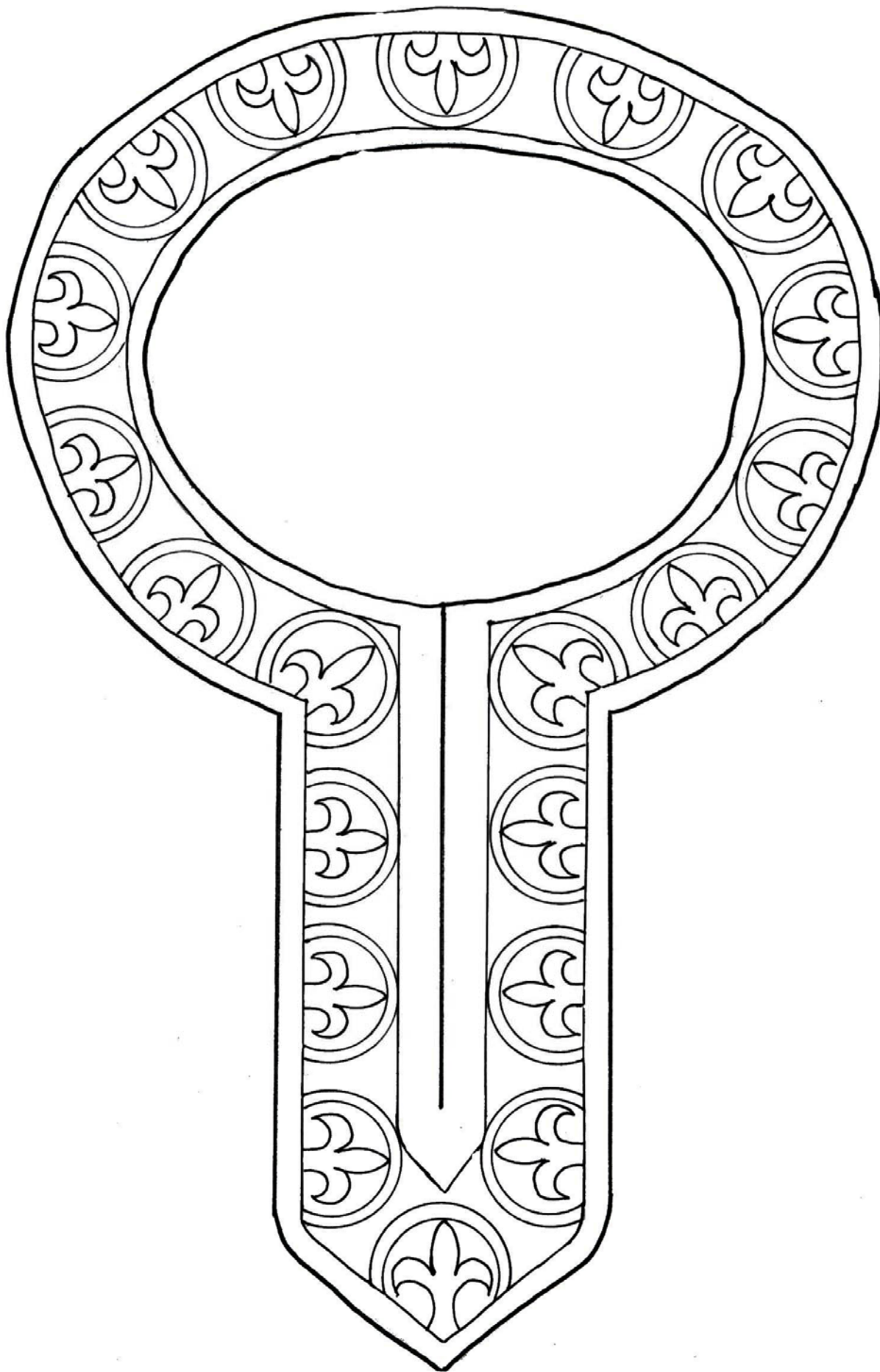
## ***Transferring the Designs***

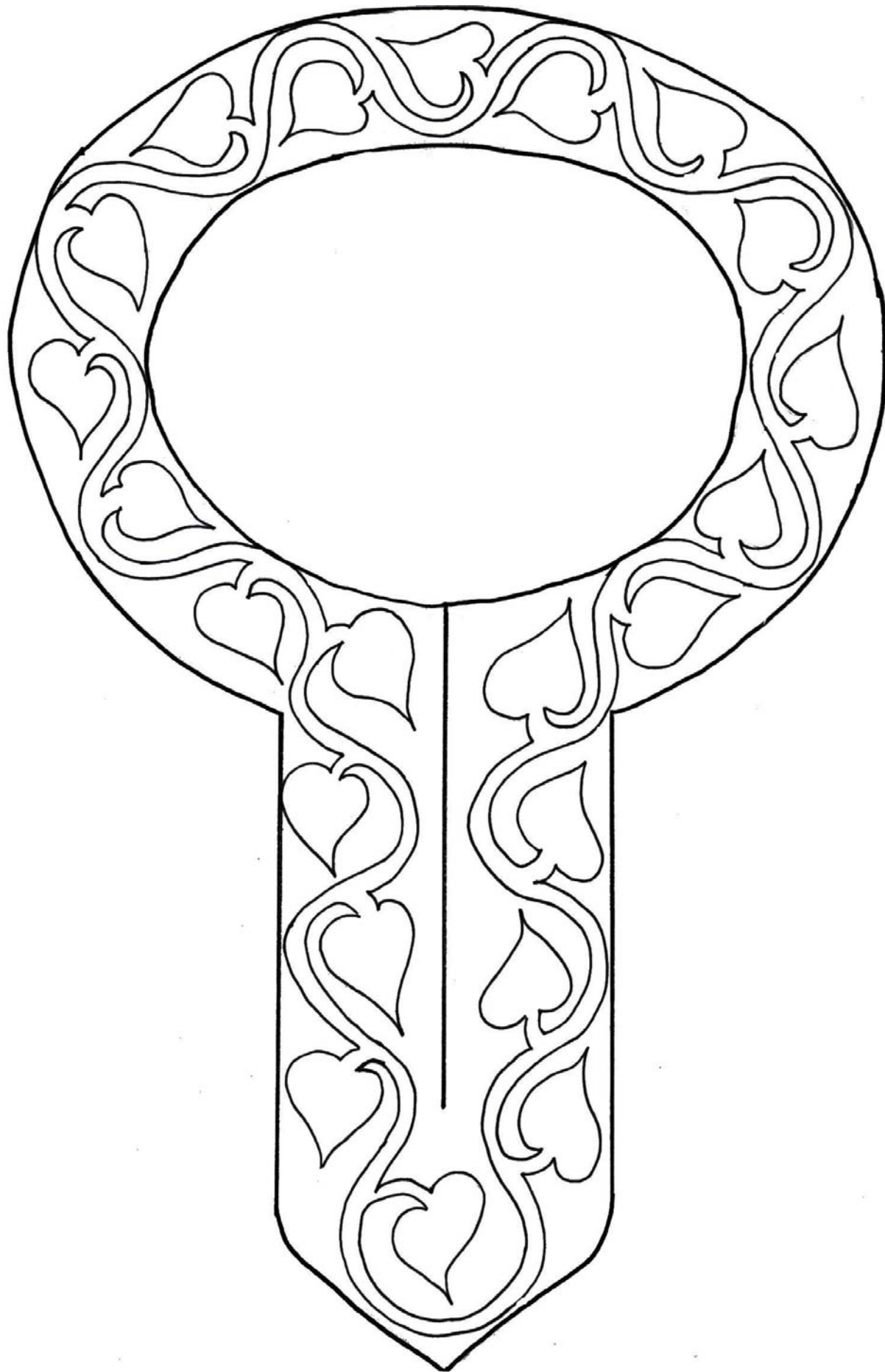
There are several ways to transfer the designs onto you fabric:

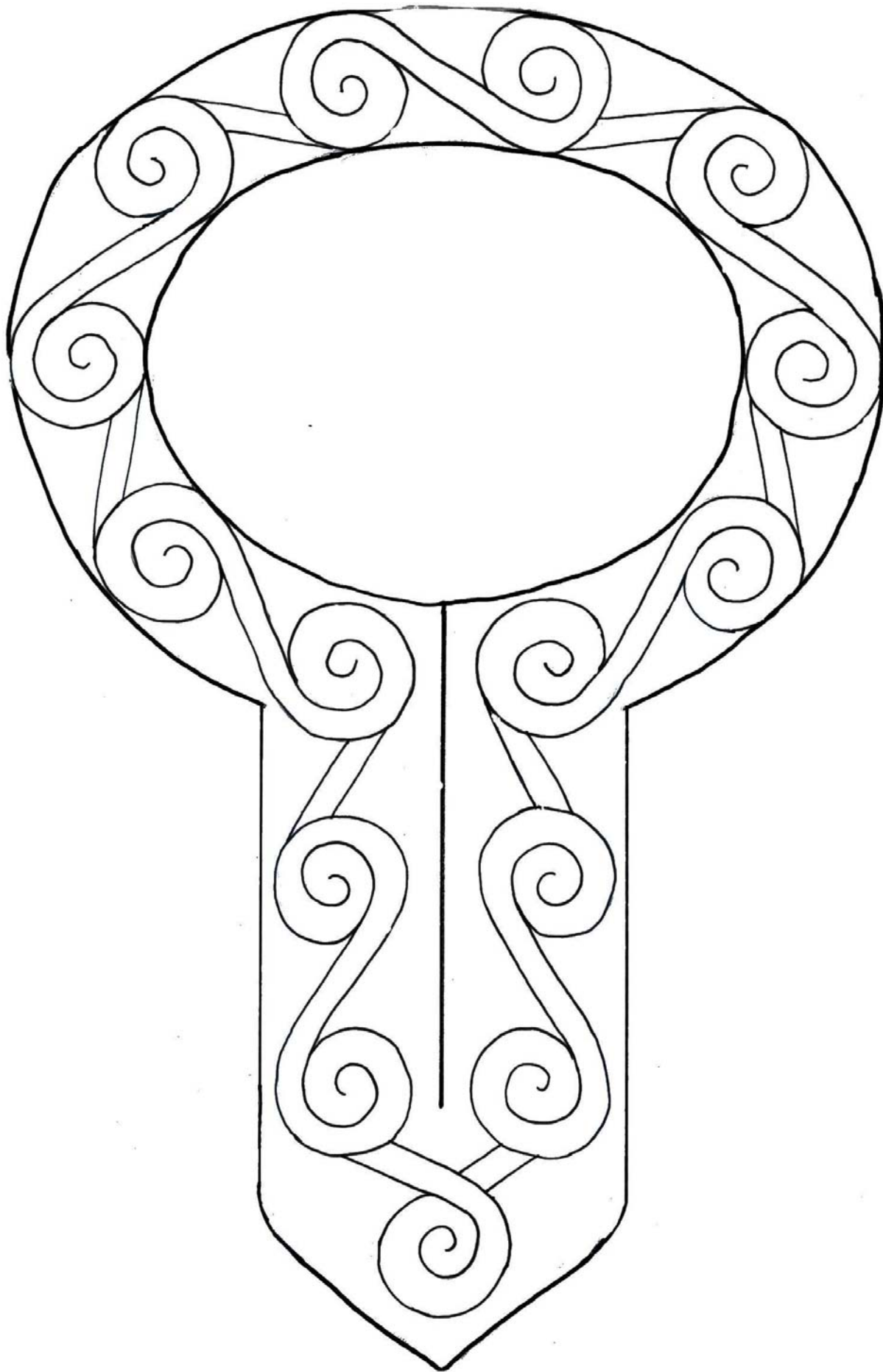
- **Transfer Pencil** - If you are using a light coloured fabric, you might like to buy in a transfer pencil and some tracing paper. For this method, place the tracing paper over the design and trace using the transfer pencil. **Note:** when using this method, your pattern will come out reversed. Then place the tracing paper (with the side with transfer pencil design in contact with the fabric) onto the fabric and iron the pattern onto the fabric.
- **Water Soluble Pen** – Using a light coloured cloth, trace over design on a light table. Dampen to remove once the embroidery is complete (do not iron before you remove pen or it will set)
- **Prick and Pounce** – This is a very period way of transferring the design. Gets the pattern to the desired size, then using either a needle or an unthreaded sewing machine (with an already blunt needle in it), put holes all the way around the design. If using a light coloured fabric use a dark coloured chalk pounce bag to tap around the pattern over the holes. For a dark coloured fabric, use light pouncing chalk (pouncing bags can be bought at most sewing shops). Once you have pounced the design, use a chalk pencil or a very fine paintbrush and gauche to join the dots up. **Please note:** this can be a messy method and as such, take great care when using on fine fabrics.
- **Tracing Paper** – in this method, the design is drawn or traced onto very thin paper. The paper is then sewn onto the ground fabric and the outline of the design is stitched through the paper. When the outline is complete, the paper is carefully removed. This is not recommended for fine silk work.
- **Freehand Drawing** – the patterns can be drawn freehand onto the fabric.

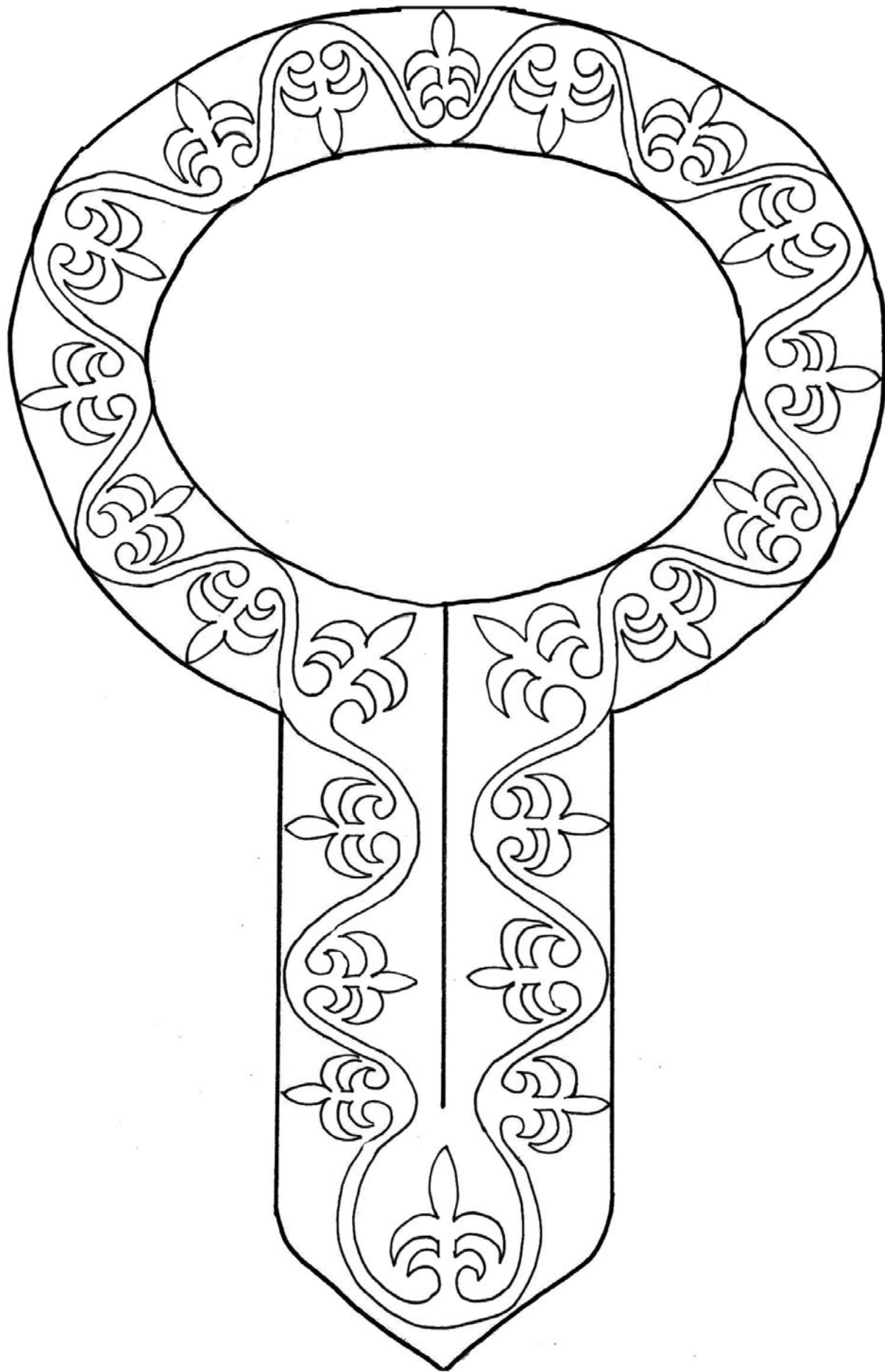
## The Patterns

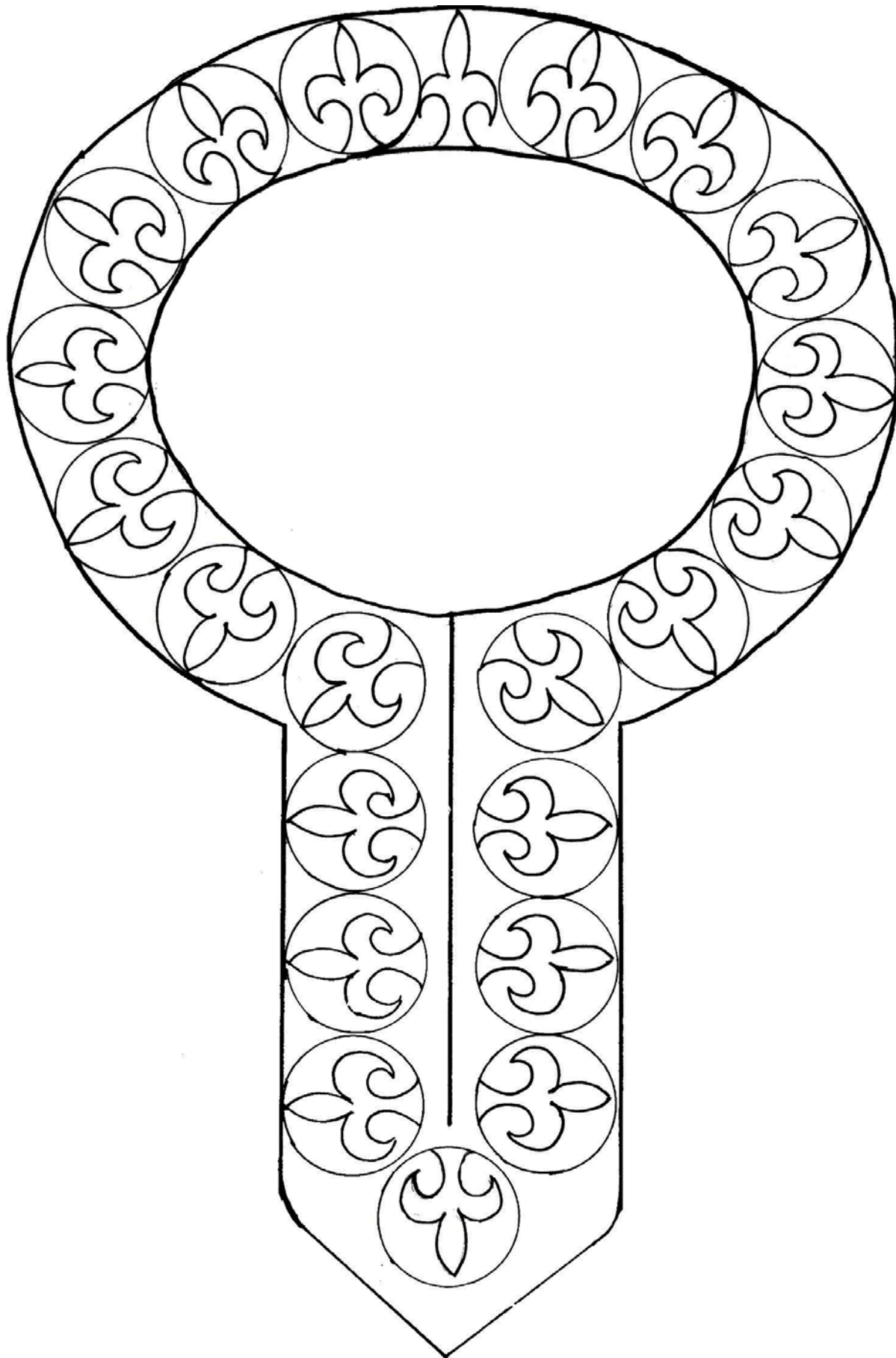


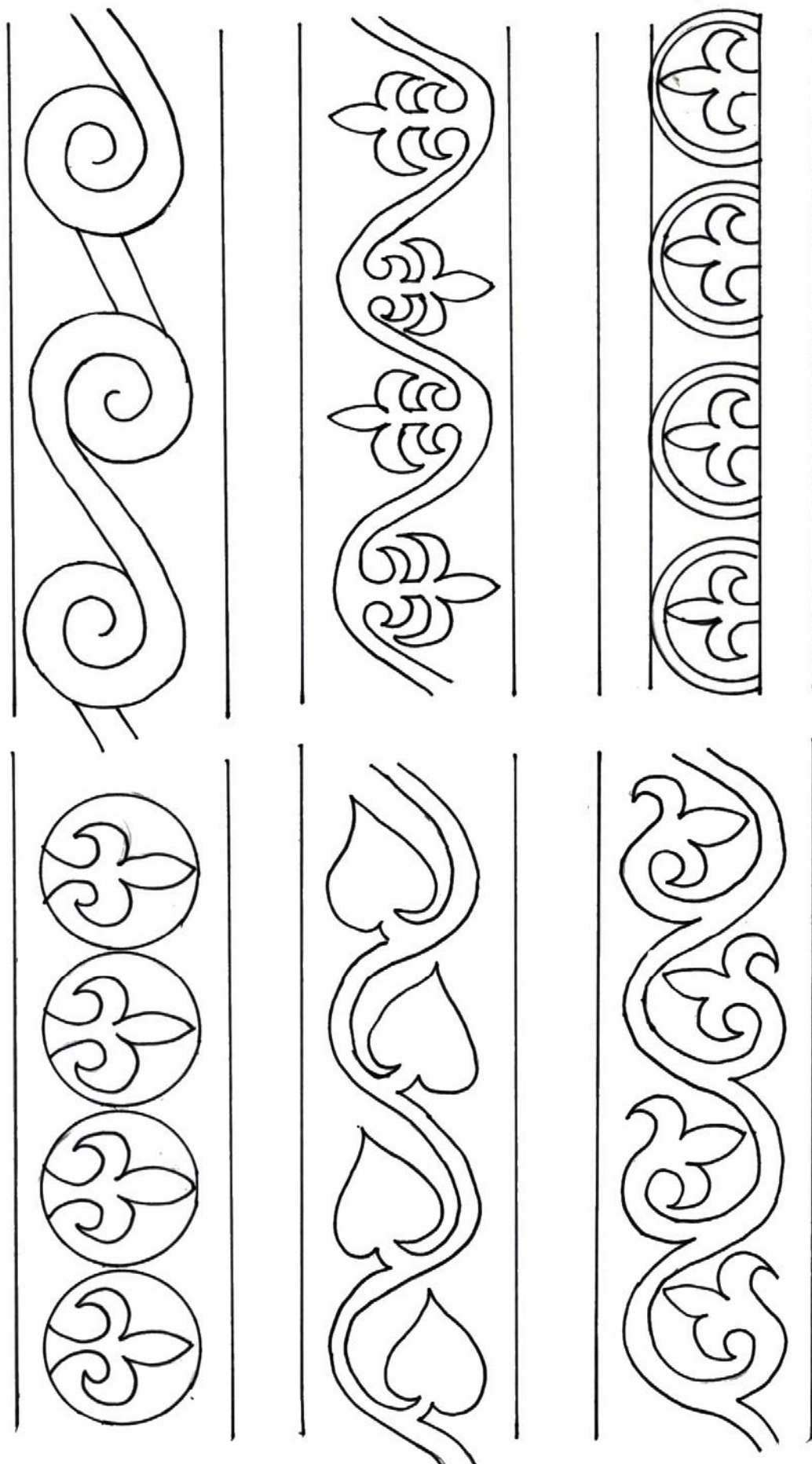






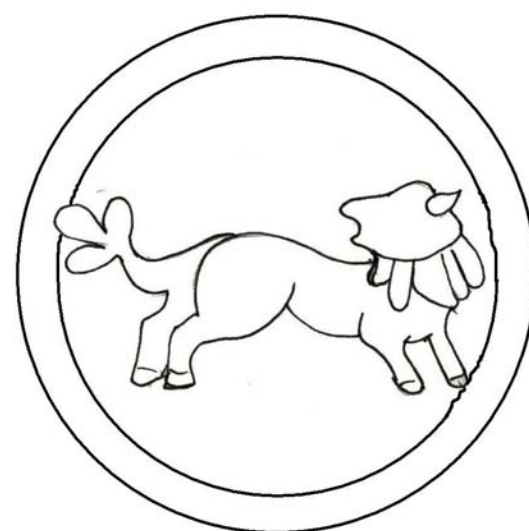




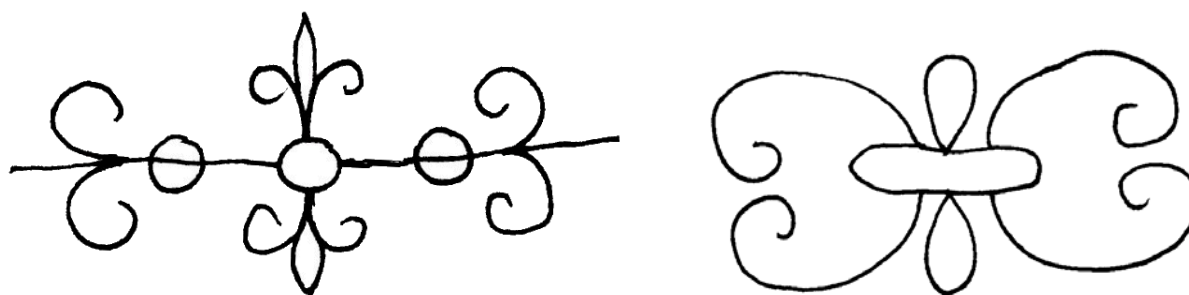
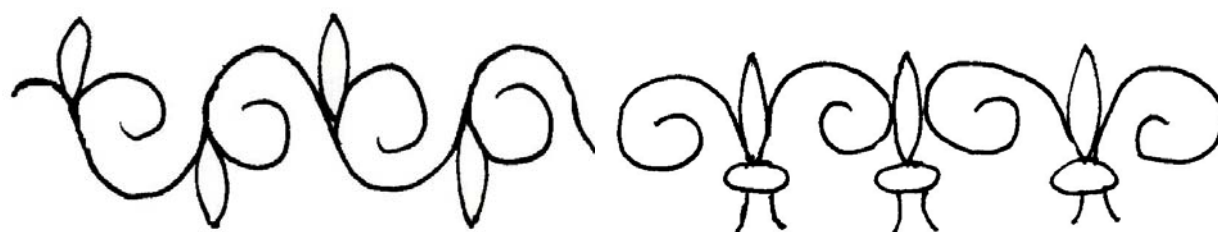
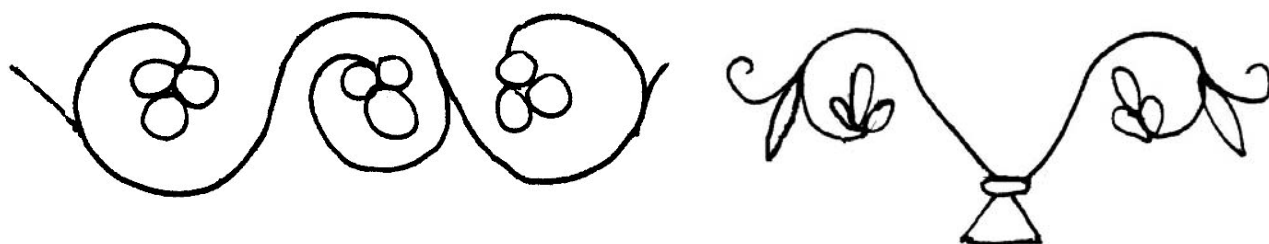


## Roundels





## Borders/Lines



## Links of Interest

### ***Embroidery***

**Embroidery Techniques— Regia Anglorum - <http://www.regia.org/embroid.htm>**

This website has a brief background on Anglo-Saxon embroidery as well as some examples of members work.

**Anglo-Saxon Embroidery - [http://medieval.webcon.net.au/loc\\_england\\_anglo\\_saxon.html](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/loc_england_anglo_saxon.html)**

This page is part of one of my websites. It lists information on extant Anglo-Saxon embroideries as well as colour photos and links to various other sources of information including articles and websites.

**Anglo-Saxon and Viking Works of the Needle: Some Artistic Currents in Cross-Cultural Exchange - <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/asvembroid.html>**

An excellent website by Carolyn Priest-Dorman about the characteristics of and interchange between Anglo-Saxon and Viking needlework.

### ***Other Design Sources***

**The Story of St. Mary and St. Hardulph Church - The Anglo Saxon Carvings  
[http://www.benefice.org.uk/breedon\\_church/the\\_breedon\\_story/part\\_07.php](http://www.benefice.org.uk/breedon_church/the_breedon_story/part_07.php)**

This website describes some of the elements of stonework found in the church and has some nice images of the stonework which could be used as the basis for designs.

**Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture - <http://www.dur.ac.uk/corpus/index.php3>**

An extremely comprehensive database (with images) of Anglo-Saxon sculpture. Great for design motifs and styles.

**The British Museum – Compass - <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/>**

The collections database for the British Museum. Search for “Anglo-Saxon” and you will be able to view a wide variety of Anglo-Saxon items.

**Anglo-Saxon Culture – Labyrinth at Georgetown University -  
[http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/subjects/british\\_isles/anglo-saxon/anglo-saxon.html](http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/subjects/british_isles/anglo-saxon/anglo-saxon.html)**

A comprehensive site, no longer updated but with a link to new material.

**Anglo-Saxon Index - <http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/sdk13/asindex.html>**

A list of various Anglo-Saxon resources at Trinity College.

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If you would like to see any works in progress or links to various extant examples of medieval embroidery, check out my blog: <http://laren.blogspot.com/>

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