

Whipcording

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See the tutorial at: <http://www.eithni.com/whipcording>

Background

Many braiding and weaving techniques have been used throughout history to turn thin threads into stronger cords. Most people in the SCA are familiar with the cords that can be produced through fingerweaving and lucet work, but there is another type of braiding that may have also been used during the medieval period. Whipcording uses strands and bobbins in groups of four to produce a round cord. Theoretically, braids of eight, twelve, or more strands are possible, but may require more than one person to weave and are not addressed here. There are many examples of four-plaited braids in the SCA period, as well as finds of bobbins that may have been used for whipcording in Scandinavia (Hald), and at least one illustration of whipcording in a 1642 Italian painting (Reni). However, once it is off the bobbins, it is difficult to prove that a cord was made with the assistance of bobbins rather than simply braided by hand. Some of the advantages to whipcording over fingerweaving include that it can be made in much longer lengths and can easily be stopped and picked up again as time and interest allow. I have found whipcording four plait braids to be much faster and easier than either luceting or fingerweaving.

Weaving

Usually, whipcording is worked using one or two colors and while learning it is helpful to use strongly contrasting colors so you may recognize mistakes more easily. Measure your threads so that each is at least 125% as long as you want the completed cord to be. Cut four lengths, two of each color and wind each piece onto a bobbin and secure the thread, leaving a foot long tail of thread. Tie all the tails together and suspend the threads and bobbins from a point at eye level or higher.

When first learning the basic principles of whipcording, it can be helpful to practice with a partner for a few minutes. Each partner should control two threads, one with each hand and stand facing one another, about two feet apart. Be careful not to actually grasp the threads – simply let the threads run over your hands, leaving the bobbins to dangle. The bobbins keep the threads from tangling and provide the necessary tension and if you grasp them, your tension will be poorly controlled. Then carefully trade threads with your partner – right hand to right hand and left hand to left hand. Make certain that you always rotate the threads in the same direction - which direction does not matter, consistency does! If you notice that two strands that have just been passed begin curling around the outside strings instead of each other, stop, undo, then redo the last stitch, rotating the threads in the other direction. As you use up thread, carefully release more from the bobbin and adjust the cord's height to a comfortable level. After a few successful passes, you can begin gently swinging the threads at each other and catching them, rather than directly passing the threads hand to hand. Before long, you'll see why this was a popular game with Scandinavian children until recent times!

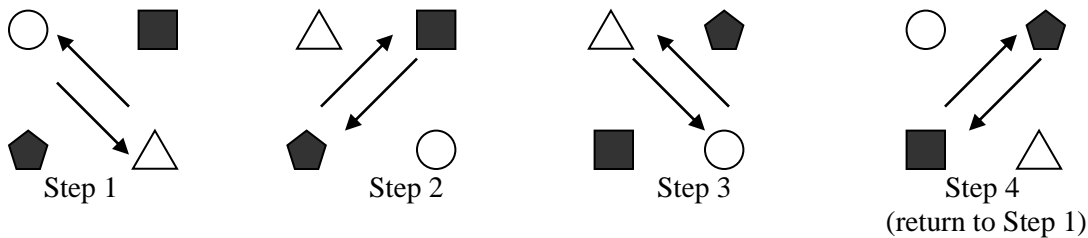
Once you have mastered the partner method, you may want to move on to the single-weaver method. This method involves one person passing all four threads, still passing on a diagonal as is done in two-person weaving. I find it easiest to place my hands in the weaving so that one string runs over the outside of my thumb and the other runs over my middle, ring, and pinkie fingers. The index finger sticks up between the two strands and helps guide and separate them. Carefully begin to pass the threads back and forth, following the same diagonal pattern as when weaving with a partner. The thread on your left thumb should always trade with the thread on your right pinky and the thread on your left pinky should always trade with the thread on your right thumb. Keep the thread running over your fingers – never try to hold it in the palm-side of your fingers as it is very easy to drop from that posture. Be very patient. Most people will fumble along clumsily for about a half an hour before their fingers suddenly get it. Once your fingers have learned the required motion, however, whipcording is a very satisfying and productive way of making cord. You can change the tension of the weave – that is, how tightly the cord is woven – by moving your hands closer to the weaving point for a tighter weave or further down for a looser weave.

Patterns

You may work your whipcording with threads of all with one color to produce a single color cord (which also hides mistakes nicely) or with four different colors which produces a speckled cord, but when you use two threads each of two colors you can produce either stripes or spirals.

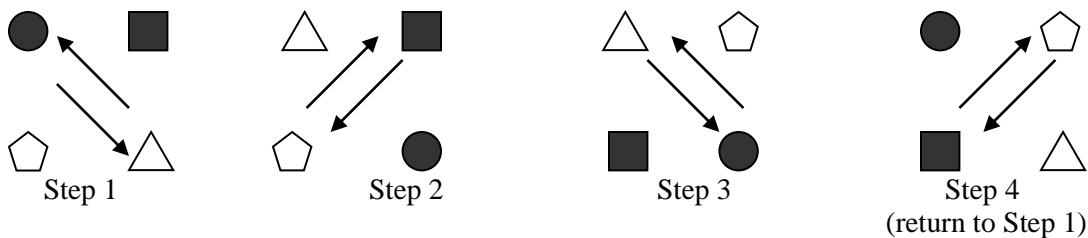
Stripes

Stripes result when you always trade the same colors between opposite positions on your hands during a stitch. Begin this cord by having the same colors on diagonals from one another.



Spirals

Spirals result when you pass different colors between opposite positions on your hands during a stitch. Begin this cord by having the same colors next to one another.



Bobbins

Bobbins may be as simple or as fancy as you like, from four reasonably straight sticks of roughly the same size to custom turned pieces, including items not originally made for use as bobbins. When teaching classes, I use round-headed wooden clothespins of the sort sold to make dolls and do crafts. For my own use, I utilize turned-wood items that can be purchased at your local craft store. My current favorite is a doll or angel form, but other options include candlesticks, curtain finials, or a combination of pieces (like a Shaker peg plus a doll head). Round items are best as they avoid tangling. Also, you want a bobbin with a weight compatible with the item you are weaving (i.e. thin threads can make do with little dolls, while leather or heavy cord will need more substantial bobbins).

Making whipcording mobile

Whipcording can be done anywhere the cord can be suspended at eye level or higher, usually to a hook in the ceiling, a tree, or some other overhang. However, there is also an easy way to make it portable. The whipcording figure in Reni's *The Education of the Virgin* uses a cross-shaped stick to hold her whipcording at the appropriate height. The stick is used by tucking it securely under the arm so that the cross-shaped end is higher than your head and the straight end is at your waist. I have found that tucking the waist end into one's belt or waistband is helpful to steady the stick. As you weave, the cord can be coiled around the top of the stick, maintaining an optimal height and keeping the finished cord neat. Making one of these sticks is quite easy – you just need a 3' dowel, a 6" dowel piece (or a popsicle stick), a strong glue, and a piece of string or yarn. Glue the middle of the short dowel piece perpendicular to the long dowel, approximately 3" from one end. Wrap around the glued spot with the string to support the joint, tie tightly, and allow it to dry. This makes a little t with a long stem. Suspend your bobbins from the top arm of the stick, angle the strings away from you a little, and you are now a mobile weaver!

Further information For more information, references, photographs, and videos, please see the website!

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