

EDGE OF THE WILD

A PUBLICATION OF THE MIDDLE-EARTH REENACTMENT SOCIETY

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FROM THE EDITOR:

MÆ GOVANNEN! We, the Middle-earth Reenactment Society, are proud to present you with this fourth installment of Edge of the Wild: a reenactment quality newsletter for the purpose of re-creating the mythical cultures of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.

In this issue, we explore Winter as a season and as a challenge, delving into projects and reading materials to occupy the long dark hours, as well as gear and research to keep you safe, comfortable, and accurate in your own winter journeys.

Thank you for joining us!

The Middle-earth Reenactment Society is dedicated to the furthering of J.R.R. Tolkien cultural studies, within the framework of 'historical' reenactment. We exist to recreate the cultures of Middle-earth in both form and function, and to mold ourselves into peoples fitting to associate with and live as these fully-realized cultures. A part of the online Tolkien re-creation community found at middleearthrangere.org, the Society publishes an online periodical titled 'Edge of the Wild', showcasing new research, methods, materials, and instructional articles, and meets throughout the year at various sites deemed 'wild' enough to still capture the reality and imagination of the wild lands envisioned within the pages of J.R.R. Tolkien's works.

We gathered under the waning moon

whispers cloaked in shadows

In the distance the orcs croon

Their songs that threaten gentle meadows

And as the moon finally sets

and the mist slowly rises

We give the fallen goodbyes and merry-mets

and gladly welcome the sunrise

The mist is pale compared to the smoke

of a troop of Rangers

as they puff and roughly joke

about their daily dangers.

Warg riders bear down on the humble homes

as we bring our bows to bear

no more will they freely roam

as our arrows through their foul ranks tear

The sword is driven home, the arrow quiver'd

among the men comes pipes and weed

a small celebration for a land deliver'd

as bowls are packed and flamed by ember'd

reed.

Finally they take their leave and part their ways

each going where he will

The smell of pipe-weed is the last to stay

as the morning wind sweeps the hills...

K. RANKIN

Packing your Pipe-Weed

J. BOOK

Pipe smoking, a common practice of Men in the North—but most especially by Hobbits of the Shire—is a delicate art. Ensuring that you will have an enjoyable smoke with minimal re-lights all depends on your packing method.

Begin by sprinkling some tobacco into your bowl and gently packing it. This bottom layer needs to allow some air flow so you don't want to just jam it down. Sprinkle another bit of tobacco and again tamp it down a little more firmly this time. Now, sprinkle your final layer and tamp until the tobacco sits right below the rim of the bowl. [These methods may vary from pipe to pipe depending on the size of your bowl.]

Now get your matches (if you're a hobbit) or your flint, steel and charred cloth. When using charred cloth to light, I have found it helpful upon putting the hot ember into the bowl to cover the bowl with my piece of flint and then suck in and out rapidly. This is akin to blowing on a fire through a pipe ensuring it gets enough oxygen.

After you've lit your pipe, sit back and try blowing some smoke rings. If you're really ambitious, try getting a wizard to teach you to blow a smoke-ship out of your mouth!



The Ranger's Cloak

G. LAMMERS

The wearing of the cloak is not only commonplace in Middle-earth, but indeed is nearly a necessity for a Northern Ranger interpretation due to the sheer number of references given to the use of cloaks. The Grey Company wears them, and Aragorn himself is rarely without one.

The most efficient, effective, and/or appropriate-looking cloak design has been discussed, debated, and re-hashed thoroughly at middleearthrangers.org, and I have been a part of this ongoing discussion for quite some time. I have gone through three different cloaks, all of different designs and materials, seeking something that would work best for a Ranger's needs, and all have fallen short in one area or another.

Tolkien himself stated "I visualize with great clarity and detail scenery and 'natural' objects, but not artifacts" (Letters, No. 211). He did not describe many garments in much detail, so design cues have been limited mostly to colors and textures; little is known of structure or pattern.

For this reason, I began taking a new approach to my research on cloaks. Little can be extrapolated from direct descriptions, but so much more can come out of reading into how these cloaks were used. To quote every reference made to a cloak throughout his works would take many pages; indeed, more than would be practical for this publication. Instead, I've selected a short list of references from a wide range of his writings with which to present my case.

Material/Color:

"He will never need to stretch his legs again; and I find your cloak too hot in the sun."(1)

This is clearly suggesting the use of somewhat heavier materials; likely wool or similar, and a primary purpose of a cloak being warmth.

"A travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green cloth was drawn close about him, and in spite of the heat of the room he wore a hood that overshadowed his face; but the gleam of his eyes could be seen as he watched the hobbits."(2)

"They were clad in cloaks of dark grey, and their hoods were cast now over helm and head."(3)

Here, we encounter two differing colors, but both on Rangers. However, Aragorn is the only Ranger specifically described wearing a green cloak; the Rangers in the North who join him (the Grey Company) come in grey cloaks, while the Rangers in Ithilien are never described as wearing cloaks, only Hoods and Masks. Precious few other colors are mentioned, but the vast majority of cloaks described across all cultures are grey.

Use:

"...his hood was dripping into his eyes, his cloak was full of water..."(4)

The use of the cloak and hood during this rainstorm indicates the intended purpose of keeping the wearer protected (or at least insulated somewhat) from the weather, regardless of its failure to succeed in this example. Wool certainly fits the bill here again as the material of choice, as no other material available can keep the wearer remotely warm when it is wet.

"Throwing back his cloak, he laid his hand on the hilt of a sword that had hung concealed by his side."(5)

"Now the sword shall come from under the cloak. I will risk death for mastery of that fire, and even the meat of Orcs would be a prize."(6)

Here we have two distinct mentions (and these are not alone!) of using a cloak to conceal a sword. Aragorn's use of it in Bree may have merely been for purposes of keeping the locals from getting nervous or for concealing the legendary Narsil, but in the Unfinished Tales, it sounds more to me like it is a common practice, rather than an isolated instance. The statement comes across like a Middle-earth equivalent of "The gloves are coming

**"NOW THE
SWORD
SHALL
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FROM UN-
DER THE
CLOAK."**

off” and other such expressions, suggesting one’s aggressive intent. Such statements are always based on common truths, if we assume it to be a generally known or widely used phrase. A cloak on a Ranger, then, should be full enough to conceal--at least in part--a sword at the hip.

Design:

“As for a hat, I have got a spare hood and cloak in my luggage.”(7)

Hood and Cloak are listed here as distinctly separate items. This is but one of dozens of references that support this (though it is possible that not all cloaks were intended to be so.)

“...save only that each cloak was pinned upon the left shoulder by a brooch of silver shaped like a rayed star.”(8)

This line has been interpreted in a number of ways. I have seen cloaks clasped at the throat with a pin or clip, with a rayed star hanging decoratively on the shoulder, like a badge. I have also seen cloaks that were intended to be clasped at the shoulder *with* the star. Still many (myself included) have at one time or another ditched the star entirely for lack of a clear understanding of the text. The one thing this reference doesn’t give us is whether it was intended as a form of closure or merely decoration. I’ve chosen to argue for neither.

“...each
CLOAK WAS
PINNED UP-
ON THE LEFT
SHOULDER
BY A BROOCH
OF SILVER
SHAPED LIKE
A RAYED
STAR.”

The rayed star notwithstanding, there is a historical cloak and hood design that fits the bill of every reference here (and many, many more) which also provides all the function needed for a Northern Dunedain Ranger impression. I’m rather embarrassed it took me this long to come around to liking it.

Years ago, the middleearthrangers.org forum owner (who is responsible for the stitching guides every newsletter) began posting information regarding the construction of the cloak found on the ‘Bocksten Man’ in Sweden in 1936. The cloak was interesting due to the ‘patchwork’ construction methods utilized due to the scarcity of fabric in-period, but I really didn’t find it very intriguing for my own uses. It seemed too much like a poncho to me, and I was far too locked into the cloak aesthetic seen in the New Line Cinema films to be

open-minded about a more period design at the time.

Interestingly, though, the Bocksten cloak (and separate hood) fit the descriptions found on Tolkien’s Rangers strikingly, if you follow the references above.

For starters, the Bocksten cloak is made of wool. We can, of course, make our cloak out of anything, but this corroborates the references to personal temperature management. Moving forward, though, we have use- and design-cues as well. The Bocksten cloak is designed to be worn with the stitched closure on one shoulder, allowing the cloak to nearly completely cover the wearer if desired, front and back. More “typical” cloaks in the fantasy realm are somewhat difficult to close in the front, but this design is very adept at covering both front and back against cold or weather. This design feature is further justified by the fact that one side is *completely* covered with the cloak, allowing a sword, perhaps even a large one, to be entirely hidden (or pretty close), corroborating the several references to Aragorn and others having significant weapons concealed but quickly accessible by “throwing back” the cloak. The fact that the Bocksten Man wore this cloak with a separate but matching hood supports historical function as well as the practical ability to wear the hood in somewhat warmer weather with the cloak set aside because, after all, they are “too hot in the sun.”

None of these are stunning revelations. One of the strongest supports I came across for the use of this cloak, however, came with my idea that the star-shaped brooch pinning the cloak “at the left shoulder” had nothing to do with holding the cloak together, but the context in which the Ranger found themselves in. In no situation that a Ranger wore a sword *underneath* the cloak were they also described as wearing the star. After comparing notes, these were all found to be “incognito” situations of one sort or another, in which the Ranger in question would not have desired to be noticed, or seen as armed. On the other hand, the Rangers that *are* wearing their stars are riding openly to war, where their line of ancestry and their wearing of the sword are no longer things to be hidden. In short, I believe the star-shaped brooch can be used as an identifying mark of status and lineage that also serves the dual purpose of holding the cloak open/out of the way of the arms and general motion, *as well as* giving easier access to the sword itself (and thus would not be worn until the cloak was needed out of the way of the sword). Rather than pinning the cloak together, the star is there to hold it open.

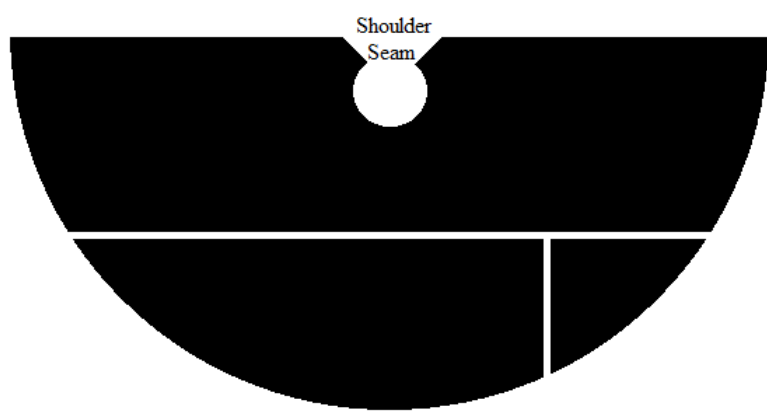
To add to this from practical experience (regrettably without references, because there are no concrete references given for quivers worn on the back) I can also safely state that a cloak which is open at one side rather than the front is much easier to manage with things like quiver straps, bedrolls, etc. without cutting any slits in the body of the garment.

All of this comes together to provide one with a very full, warm, and functional pair of garments that can be used interchangeably to manage one's body temperature and as part of a bedroll setup (such as adding additional insulation underneath).

Now one question remains: would Tolkien have ever encountered the Bocksten cloak during or before his writing? Would he have been familiar with the design at all?

I would guess that he was not familiar with the design when *The Hobbit* was first published in September of 1937, which includes the descriptions of separate cloak-and-hood, but the possibility that the design entered his mind before the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be denied. The Bocksten Man was discovered June 22nd, 1936, just fifteen months before the initial publishing of *The Hobbit*, and went on display in a Swedish museum in 1937. Being a learned man interested in similar historical matters and lore, I have little doubt that, though it most likely had little influence on *The Hobbit*, the professor became acquainted, even briefly and/or secondhand, with the discovery before or during the process of writing *The Lord of the Rings*. It would have been big enough news within the educated community to reach his ears and pique his interest.

There are a lot of ways that this conjecture could be incorrect, and that is acceptable. I have chosen to content myself in knowing that a historical design with a wonderful, extant example lines up superbly with every description of a Ranger's cloak the professor blessed us with.



Reference List:

- 1) Unfinished Tales of Middle-earth
- 2) The Fellowship of the Ring
- 3) The Return of the King
- 4) The Hobbit
- 5) The Fellowship of the Ring
- 6) Unfinished Tales of Middle-earth
- 7) The Hobbit
- 8) The Return of the King



The author models a cloak worn in the manner of the Grey Company.

Left: Basic Pattern for the cloak from the Bocksten find:

The original was pieced together in this way due to a need to conserve the then-precious fabric, as well as the available width of the looms which were weaving fabric at the time.

The shoulder seam is stitched together, and that whole opening runs parallel to the shoulders, so that a vertical line bisecting the pattern at left would travel from the neck straight down one shoulder, and then plunge towards the ground. The original is somewhat shorter, but for our purposes the head hole in this diagram is shown somewhat smaller to indicate a longer cloak.

BOOK REVIEW

J. CORCORAN

Hunting for help with the common tongue of Eriador last year, I ran across a most interesting trio of small paperbacks on Amazon, all put out under the name Codex Regius:

Words of Westernesse

Middle-earth seen by the Barbarians v1: The Indigenous peoples of Eriador and Gondor

Middle-earth seen by the Barbarians v2: The Lost History of the Men of Darkness

They are small, inexpensive little books, illustrated primarily with antique engravings presumably chosen for their out-of-copyright status, and so one might be tempted to pass them by. This is one place however where one should most assuredly not judge the book by the cover!

In each case, the author has laboriously combed Tolkien's works and letters for each scrap of text concerned with these largely "off-screen" subjects, and compiled easy-to-read summaries on the subject.

Words of Westernesse begins with a brief summary of the professor's (admittedly sparse) development of the "common" language, then breaks down what we can infer about its history, form and grammar from the known writings, particularly the Adûnaic *Lament of Atalantë*.

It then explores plausible etymologies between early-period Númenórean speech and latter-day Westron, and gives a fairly complete word list.

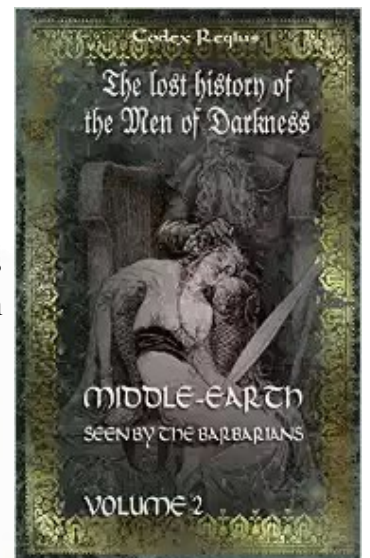
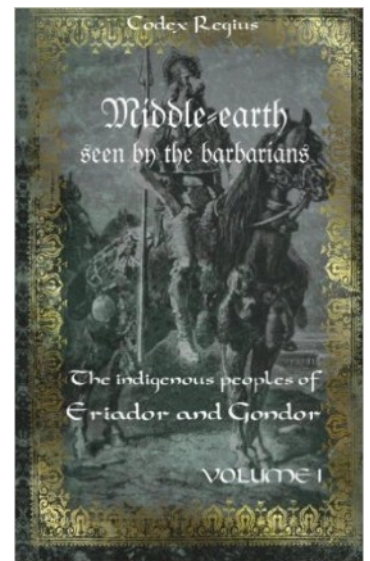
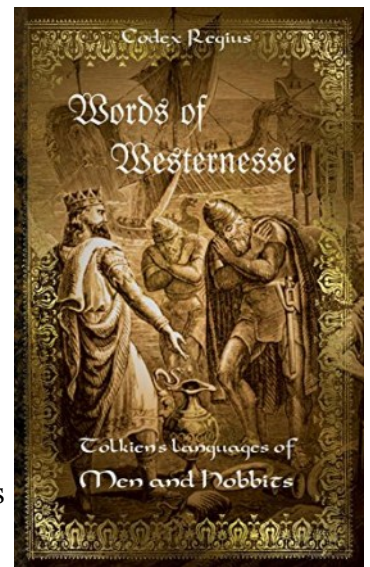
The two volumes of *Middle-earth Seen by the Barbarians* consolidate what can be known about those tribes of men alluded to but rarely seen in the core text of Tolkien's novels. The first volume is particularly enlightening, as it goes Age by Age, discussing migrations and descent of various peoples, and their interactions with those who would become the Dúnedain.

Although Tolkien himself was quite clear the Númenóreans came in their latter evil days as conquerors, some may find the occasional bit of post-modern anti-colonialist flavor in these two books at times out of place. Nevertheless, the sheer quality of the history and tight references to source material more than make these volumes worth a look.

Note: After conversing with the author, I discovered I had out of date copies of the "As Seen by the Barbarians" books. A collective edition of both volumes has subsequently been published on Amazon with additional material.

In summary - I would without hesitation recommend all three books. It is one thing to enjoy bits of legend and story as discrete tales - it is another entirely to see broad histories of peoples summarized in context with each other.

Particularly when read with the added layer of etymology in the *Words of Westernesse* book, I have found Middle-earth to come alive in a new way after reading these books. Even place names like "Bree" and "Combe" take on a new and deeper resonance now, tinged with memories of what came before.

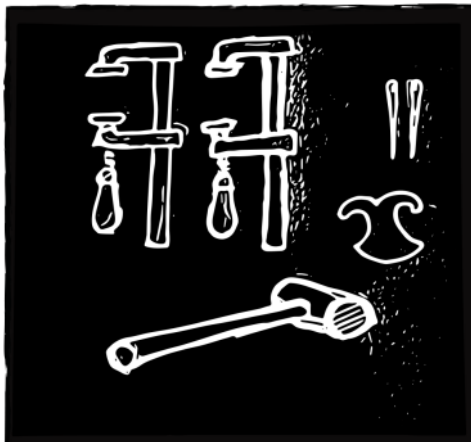
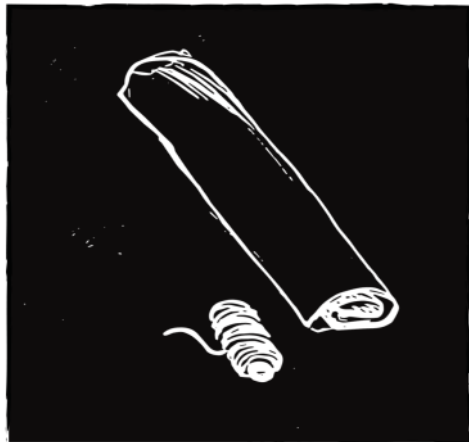


MAKING A KNIFE SHEATH INSPIRED BY 14TH CENTURY EXAMPLES

J. HORNER

I have been fascinated by the asymmetrical sheaths of late 14th-century knives for a few years. The Museum of London book, *Knives & Scabbards* described many in detail, and gives some clues to their construction. I have rather enjoyed figuring it out and I thought I'd share my process.

You don't need much in the way of supplies, and for most of what you do need, you can improvise.



Supplies/Tools:

Leather: 4-6 oz vegetable-tanned
Leather sewing thread
(I use unwaxed linen)

Awl

Leather needles

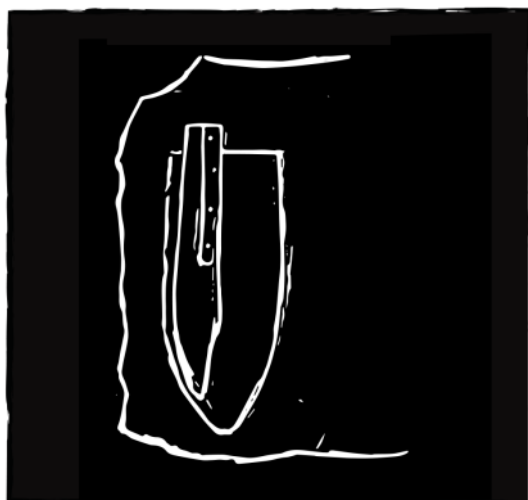
Something to cut leather with: various knives, scissors, x-acto, etc.

Clampy things

Hammer

JIGS/LASTS:

Many people suggest taping up your knife and wet forming the leather around it. I personally have found this to be an excellent way to rust a nice blade. Minus the tape, it's a perfectly period way of doing things. However, it seems that sheaths seem to have been made separately from the knives, and were formed around wooden lasts¹. I use this method, cutting a knife blade and handle blank from 1/4" scrap and find this to be really helpful. I generally make a knife blank, and two clamping boards.

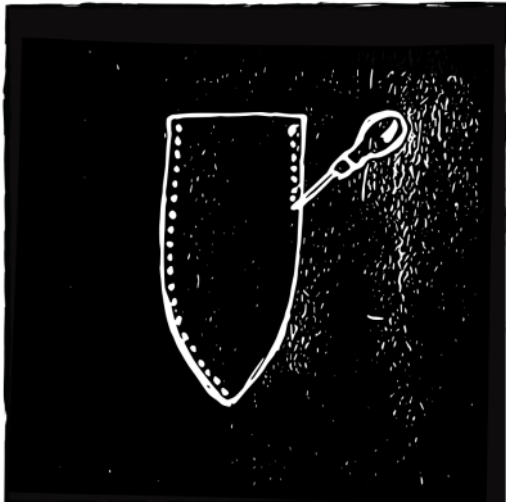


1. Use your knife blank to draw out the pattern for your sheath on the flesh side of the leather.

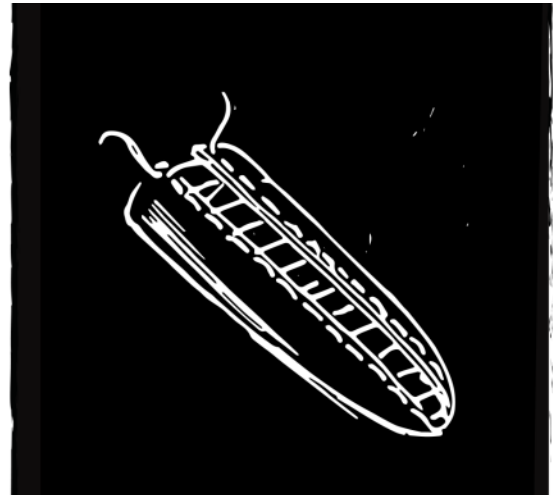
2. Cut the piece out.



1. *The moulding was done when the leather was wet and elastic, probably using a wooden last of standard shape and size. The few scabbards that may have been commissioned to fit a specific knife (for example No.391, PL8) may have been moulded around the knife itself.* " p. 35 *Knives and Scabbards Medieval Find from excavations in London.* J. Cowgill, M. de Neergaard and N. Griffiths 1987 Boydell & Brewer, Limited



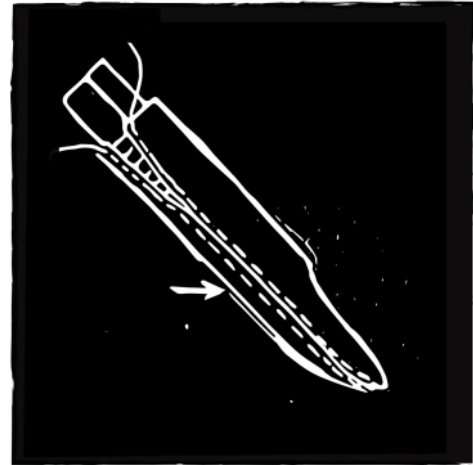
3. Use an awl (or similar pokey thing) to cut your holes.



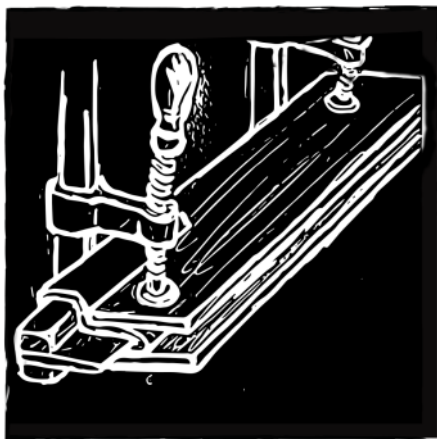
4. Sew your piece loosely. I use two needles on an edge/grain stitch, but many stitches were used.



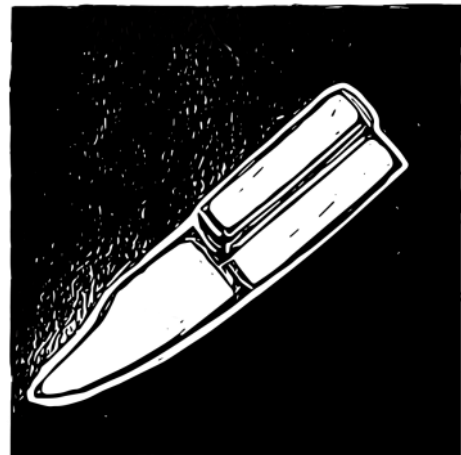
5. Wet down your sheath. I submerge in in cold water for about 10 minutes.



6. Insert your wooden blank, and pull your stitches tight. The arrow shows that I suggest trying to keep the seam slightly forward of the handle.



7. Add the clamping blocks, and clamp the piece until dry. Patience pays off here. Especially with a wooden core, leaving it a few extra days helps with getting your last out with minimal fuss.



And you're done. Of course you now have all of that beautiful blank leather to decorate. Incisions and embossing/painting were all very common historically and I see no reason they should not have been used in a Dúnedain context.



KEEPING WARM IN WINTER

a. hOLLIS

At this time of year, as Old Man Winter's strength waxes, I become more aware of the need to preserve my body's heat while adventuring in the wilds. While I strongly believe that acclimatization to cold plays a large part in one's comfort (which is why, in my experience, a second or third night of outdoor sleep is almost always better than the first), with the right preparations, one can have a pleasant outing even in the worst of winter weather.

In these cases, I take inspiration from the four-legged animals who live in the wild lands year-round! What lessons can those of us who go on two legs learn from them to help to make our travels more comfortable?

A quick word on acclimatization. Our animal brothers and sisters spend their whole year outdoors, and so are perfectly adjusted to outdoor living (and many have faster metabolisms as a result). However, we humans *can* take steps to adjust ourselves to adverse conditions well before beginning an outdoor journey, so that we are not 'shocked' when we set foot outside our carefully-constructed modern shelters. Try getting in the practice of wearing less clothing around the house, or lowering your thermostat (unless your house is heated only by burning wood, this will also save you money! If your family complains, tell them to put on a hat!). After all, the people of Middle-earth whom we aspire to imitate did not live in climate-controlled houses—they, like the majority of people throughout history, likely were used to being just a *little* bit uncomfortable. *After all, this is living history, damn it! Cutting corners is for weekend reenactors and rendezvous-ers!*

Additionally, there are exercises one can practice with the goal of increasing one's tolerance for cold; the 'Wim Hof Method' is one such example. With that said...

When it comes to sleeping arrangements, I find it is best to imitate the squirrels, who form their nests from great piles of dry leaves. As you prepare your camp, the time spent gathering blanketfuls of such insulating materials will be well-spent when the temperature begins to drop. As I do not pack a 'mattress' or tick to fill with leaves, I like to make a big pile to sleep on, lay my blanket(s) on it, and then add several more loads of leaves on top. When

it's time to sleep, I crawl into the blankets in the center of my nest! Next, we move onto considerations for clothing.

Buck the leaper changes his jacket at the beginning of autumn, swapping his thin red Summer coat for a thick Winter coat of hollow hairs (all the better to trap dead air). We woods-wanderers should do the same in our own way: don't try to get by in Winter wearing the same clothes you would wear in Summer. Dress for the season!

Even more than Temperature, probably the one factor that makes the difference between comfort and misery in the wilds is Wind. Consider a daytime outing at 10°F: without wind, the air may be cold, but if one is active and properly

*"..WE HUMANS
CAN TAKE STEPS
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BEGINNING AN
OUTDOOR
JOURNEY.."*



The author, following his own advice and fully attired for a cold-weather adventure!

clothed, there is little risk of frostbite or other dangers. However, even a 10 mile-per-hour wind will quickly drop that 10°F to -4°; naturally, the effects become more severe given lower temperatures and stronger wind: see NOAA's chart (www.tinyurl.com/nzm255e).

Therefore, as the point of winter clothing is to help one maintain a warm personal environment, such items should be effective at blocking wind. Why rely solely on your own skin to cut the wind? *Use someone else's skin too—in the form of leather!* Unlike fabric, skin is a continuous sheet, lacking the woven holes through which wind will inevitably send its icy, searching fingers. The best type of leather for outdoor wear (not only in winter) is braintanned, which not only has fluffy (i.e. air-trapping) surfaces, but is also—by its grain-less nature—quite breathable.

Even when dealing with modern materials, the most effective winter clothing combines wind-cutting ability with quality *insulation*, but how shall we address this need using period materials? By noting that the rest of our fellow land animals carry their own thick blankets with them wherever they go – so instead of trying to re-grow your own fur coat, again, *why not make use of someone else's? In other words, wear fur and wool!*

Wool is without a doubt the ideal fabric for winter wear. It insulates supremely, continues to conduct a certain degree of warmth even while wet, is somewhat fire-retardant (so you can sleep closer to the fire), and, given a tight weave, thick nap, and the presence of natural lanolins, can even repel water! It's great stuff! But that said, venturing out in just a wool tunic won't get you very far.

Consider Beaver the builder, who wears two fur coats at once, and so can be cold and wet all he wants! His outer coat is long and coarse, and his under-fur is thick and water-repellant. Emulate him—dress in layers! Winter clothing should be neither too tight (which is constricting and limits the air to be warmed) nor too baggy (imagine trying to heat an empty mead-hall with a candle!), but allow us to wear several layers to trap air and yet move comfortably.

However, since we do not have waterproof coats like beavers, it pays to keep dry. When temperatures drop, moisture (inside and outside our clothes) can be quite dangerous.

As I wear braintanned deer over my inner tunic(s) to cut the wind, it is especially important that I take care to avoid getting it wet—wet braintan is like spongy Jell-O! To do this, I wear thick wool of some sort over my deer tunic—either another tunic, jacket, or even a blanket pinned about me.

It is also worth the momentary discomfort to 'under-dress' before activity – in order to avoid overheating, and so prevent sweating. If I am going to chop firewood or fell a tree for example, I will usually strip down to a single layer; my body will soon heat itself through exertion, and then I will be toasty warm again. If my inner clothing *does* get damp, I must either dry it by the fire before sleep, or else pack a spare garment for wearing at night. Otherwise, the sweat-dampened clothing will freeze during the night – and so will I!

With these suggestions in mind, I would like to briefly lay out my personal clothing choices for winter wear. On my lower body I wear woolen 'Thorsberg' trousers and braintanned leggings; thick felted wool boots wrapped with wool *winnings* take care of my bottom half.

On my upper body I wear a thin woolen kirtle under my braintanned tunic (in deep cold, I will add a Bronze Age-style tunic of thicker wool under this).

For cold hands, fingerless wool mitts inside braintan/fur-lined mittens cover all my bases.

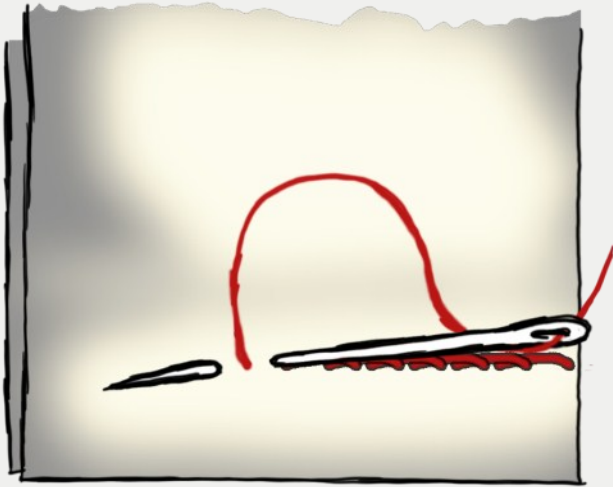
My shoulders, neck, and head are kept warm by a three-layered (2x wool, plus linen lining) hood. Finally, over all is pinned a doubled wool blanket. For more layer-by-layer details of my winter clothing, see the Complete Kits section of middleearthrangers.org/wiki.

Again, this is what I *personally* wear in my winter interpretation of a common Man in the Anduin valley. Your own clothing will certainly vary, but if you follow the animal-wisdom I have related above, you should have a much warmer time on your outdoor adventuring!



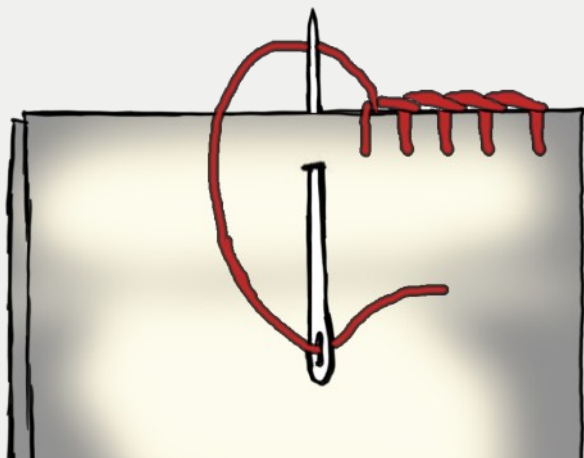
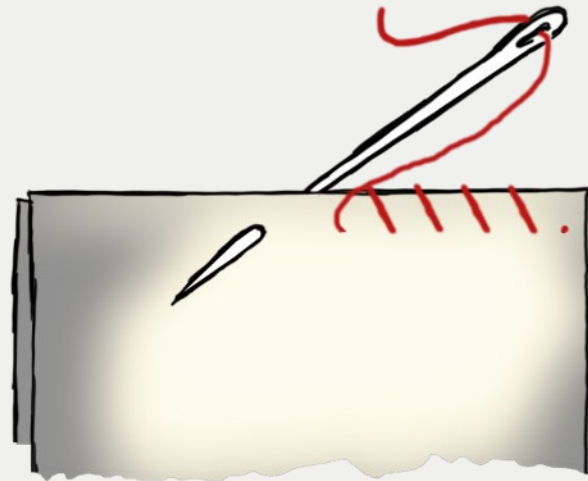
How-to: Historical Stitching

In the last issue I showed you the running stitch and the hem stitch; this time I will show you three stitches, as they are fairly easy to illustrate. I will cover the Back stitch, for areas of clothing needing extra strength. I will also cover the overcast stitch (or whip stitch), and it's variant the buttonhole stitch (or blanket stitch).



Left: The back stitch is a variant of the running stitch, in which you go back a half stitch for every stitch made forward, to form what looks like a continuous chain. This makes for a very tough, hard-wearing stitch.

Right: the overcast stitch is the most basic stitch of all (and the most obvious). It consists of simply sewing a circle around two pieces of cloth.



Left: The buttonhole stitch is a variant of the overcast stitch where you lock every stitch, and is meant to strengthen cloth edges rather than joining pieces of fabric. It is identical to the blanket stitch which is simply bigger and intended to bind the edges of blankets.

In the next issue I will start to show how to put the stitches together for making clothing. Additionally, I will give some pointers on making patterns and the use of human-based measurements. My reenactment emphasis is on the 14th c. in Europe, so techniques will be mostly gleaned from that period, but I will suggest some resources for other periods. ✨



Try This Trekking Tip!

Setting up bedding after sunset can be a pain, especially if you use a wool blanket in a 'sleeping bag' configuration. Marking the points to be pinned together using white wool yarn (dark wool if your blanket is light-coloured) can be seen in the twilight and make it easier to assemble your bed!
(If it's Really dark, you can still feel the 'embroidery' and work by touch.)

RE-HILTING A BLADE

FEATURED ARTISAN: ERIC MEULEMANS

The Sword

"...long, leaf-shaped, and keen, of marvelous workmanship, damasked with serpent-forms in red and gold. They gleamed as he drew them from their black sheaths, wrought of some strange metal, light and strong, and set with many fiery stones. Whether by some virtue in these sheaths or because of the spell that lay on the mound, the blades seemed untouched by time, unruined, sharp, glittering in the sun."¹

Many come to this hobby driven by the allure of the sword, inspired by such passages as these. In our minds and popular media, the image of the hero and their sword is often inextricable, yet this perception is out of proportion with their representation in Tolkien's text. As is his way, he provides few particulars of Middle-earth's material culture, giving us tantalizing clues but scant details, and edged weapons are no exception to this. Those hints he does give, of ancient, masterfully-made weapons that warn of impending danger and bear names that drive Goblins away before them, have brought many among us to desire a fine blade, worthy to be girded at our waist during the greatest of quests, and depended upon in the fiercest of battles.

Though legendary swords often come at legendary prices, and we are commonly constrained by the realities of budget, this is not a unique problem. After all, even the bulk of the Fellowship had to either find or be given their arms! And so it may be odd even to hear a blademaker suggest that for our purposes it rarely makes sense to buy a high-dollar sword, the fact is we are often better off investing in other parts of our kit, including infinitely more useful axes and knives. Realistically, even if we are fortunate enough to afford a commensurately-priced quality blade, there can understandably be some hesitancy to knock it about on

a trek, risk it being dropped into a lake, or otherwise be lost, stolen, or damaged while adventuring.

The Rationale

Today's market offers more choices than ever for affordable and functional “user” blades, and while any notion of greatness about them is typically a product of our optimism, they may be perfectly serviceable and well suited to the quest if not the court. Truthfully, it is often some of these that afford the most pleasure, simply because we are more likely to use them, and are forgiving of the scratches, nicks, and rust. It makes sense then that these should be a good starting point for a practical piece of field kit.

It can be said that in making most anything, 90% of the time spent is in the final 10% of the work, and this is where many manufacturers choose to cut costs. By investing some balance of that 90% ourselves, many of these lower-cost pieces can improve dramatically, standing in for a sword costing three times as much, for half the price. Whether you are inclined to do the work yourself or hire it out, it is very possible to customize, personalize, and markedly improve the handling and appearance of that “munitions grade” blade you're looking to buy or may already have.

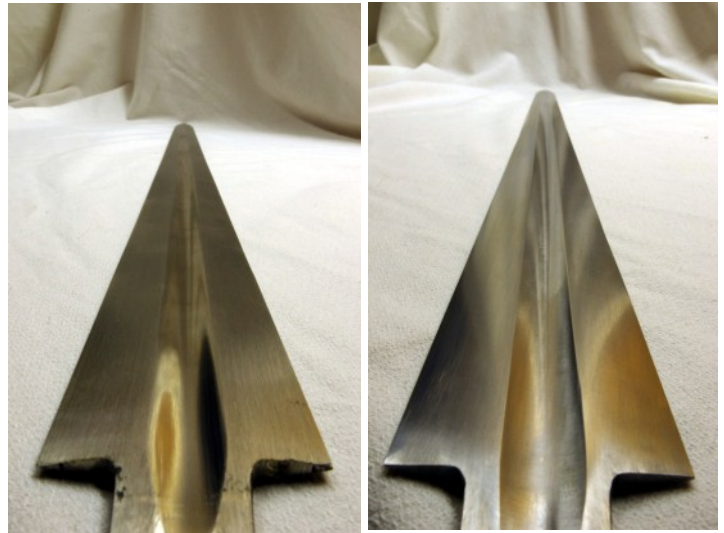
There is of course a practical limit to how far this sort of “upgrading” can (or should) be taken and remain cost effective, as the quality of the steel, its heat treatment, and potential casting flaws must be considered. I would say also that there are always those who will thumb their noses at lower-tier blades, or the thought of trying to improve them, but there's nothing wrong with giving these “inferior” pieces a new lease on life, so long as we are realistic about their abilities and our expectations.

This is not a “how-to,” but I will briefly describe one such upgrade made to a Hanwei-Tinker “single hand sword,” to give an idea of what can be done. This is the product of a full refurbishment and customization as requested by a client, which involved regrinding and refinishing the blade and hilt components, a new grip, and an etched blade design (the subject of a future article).

The Process

For this project, nearly all grinding was done on a Burr-King model 960-272, but can also be accomplished with lots of time, some good files, emery cloth, and/or judicious use of an angle grinder. With power tools things can happen much faster, including mistakes!

Following disassembly, the blade was re-ground to remove as much waviness and distortion as was reasonable, while refining the overall geometry and lenticular form. The fuller was ground more deeply to improve its straightness and definition, removing 5.5% of the blade's weight in the process. Distal taper (decrease in thickness from base to tip) was minimal over the final 1/3 (toward the tip) of the blade, so while the starting weight was actually quite good, the distribution of that weight left it feeling “heavy” in the hand. It can be tempting to grind a blade to be as light as possible, but this can often detract from both performance and handling, and consideration must be made for the type of blade, its intended function, and from where the material is removed.

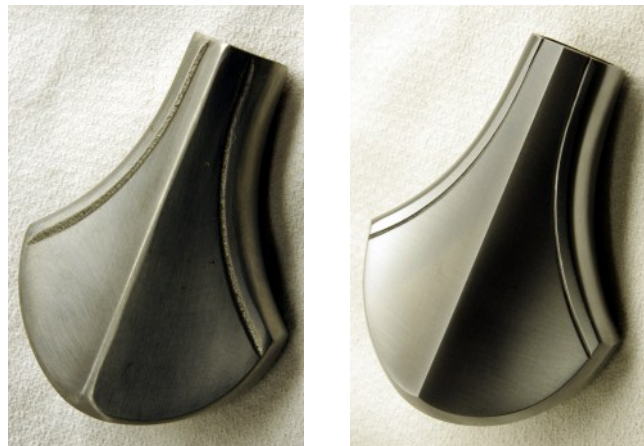


H/T Blade before...

...and after.

It was requested that the guard shape be fundamentally altered to have a more pronounced curve, so into the forge it went, to be shaped as required before grinding. There wasn't much material to work with here, so grinding was very light to retain as much material as possible while still establishing crisp edges. Lines were filed in for simple adornment.

The original wheel pommel was replaced with one from a Valiant Armory Bristol supplied by the client. This received deeper hollows on its faces to crisp up its form and shed much unneeded weight. The decorative lines which were cast into it were re-established using a small cut-off wheel, as they were mostly ground away during shaping.



VA Bristol Pommel Before...

...and after.

The original grip core was retained and shaped to match the new pommel, creating a waist as well. The wooden core was given an underwrap for strength, and risers of cord applied before the leather wrap. The client requested the use of a natural black dye, so Vinegaroon (“Iron Dye”) was used, and finally a liberal application of beeswax. The choice was made to retain the threaded assembly, but due to difference in size of pommel nuts, a new, larger one was fabricated to fit.

By time of this writing, the whole was test-fit together and weighed in at only 20 grams lighter overall from the starting piece, but because of the changes in where that was lost, it feels (and looks) like a completely different sword. The supplied tables provide details as to these changes for those interested.



Eric is reachable for work through his website, at www.meuleurgy.com

	Starting Weight	Finished Weight	% Change
<i>Overall</i>	1062 g	1042 g	~2
<i>Bare blade</i>	716 g	635 g	~9
<i>Guard</i>	96 g	91 g	~5
<i>Pommel</i>	315 g (replacement) 235 g (original)	293 g	~7

Thickness at:	Original Dimensions	After Grinding	% Change
<i>Base of Blade</i>	5.4 mm	5.3 mm	~2
<i>Middle of Blade</i>	4 mm	3.7 mm	~7
<i>End of Fuller</i>	3.8 mm	3.6 mm	~5
<i>25mm from tip</i>	3 mm	2.9 mm	~3



1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine, 1965) 201. On Tom Bombadil's selection of the barrow-blades for the Hobbits.