

## Contribution to: Complex Weavers Archaeological Textiles Study Group

### Mosaic inspirations: The Belt of Alexander the Great

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#### Introduction

In 1831 a wonderful mosaic featuring Alexander the Great was found in the House of the Faun, Pompeii. Dating from the early first century BCE, the mosaic has been the subject of much debate but the consensus is that it depicts the Battle of Issus and shows Alexander and his Persian foe, Darius, in the midst of fighting in 333 BCE.

The mosaic is thought to be a copy of a Greek painting which was made during Alexander's lifetime, perhaps by either Philoxenus of Eretria or Apelles from the 4th century BCE. The mosaic is very informative for scholars because of the details of the equipment and armour of the two armies.

#### *The Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii.*



*Battle of Issus mosaic - Museo Archeologico Nazionale – Naples. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.*

This is the whole of the mosaic which depicts Alexander the Great on the left most damaged side and Darius, in his chariot on the right. Here is a link to an interesting YouTube video about *The Alexander Mosaic* if you want to find out more about this masterpiece of ancient art.

<https://youtu.be/7Srx9RCbz2c>

## Significance of the Belt.

I am fascinated by the significance of belts and have been studying woven belts from many cultures for some time (Foulkes, 2015, 2019). Alexander's flexible green belt with loose ends knotted around his waist is of particular interest. It has tentatively been identified with the term *zoster*, mentioned in the Iliad. This refers a belt or a textile sash worn around the waist over armour. In one reference Aias gave his purple 'loin-guard' to Hector after fighting (Iliad 4.132). Aldrete et al (2013) argue that, as this word is related to *zona*, a woven belt or girdle worn by women, it is likely that this belt is a textile rather than leather. Granger-Taylor describes it as a knotted belt and that it is '*obviously a narrow-width textile of some kind, the colour in this case is green, suggesting green wool.*' (Granger-Taylor, p 65). The research by Aldrete et al on the function and capability of Greek linen armour could find no practical benefit of this type of textile belt. However, it is speculated that some of the linen armour and also the belt may have been woven at a sacred space and time by groups of women. For the Greeks this belt could be seen as having apotropaic power through its creation and the tying and untying of its knot. Knots had a particular significance for Greeks and many temples had rules that stated knots in belts were not permitted within the temple (Brøns, 2017, p. 406).

After the battle, Alexander seized the insignia of powers from Darius after his defeat: the diadem, the tunic and the belt. (Collins, p.379). Collins describes the Persian belt as a '*cultural icon and symbol of loyalty*' symbolising '*the bond between a superior or person in authority and his subjects and close subordinates.*' Casting off a belt could indicate rebellion. (Collins, p 386). Alexander's adoption of the belt of the defeated Darius was thus a powerful appropriation of Persian cultural symbols of power. In this way he sought to demonstrate to the Persians that he was their new king.

## Belts in other cultures.

*'As part of material culture, the encircling belt has practical, decorative and symbolic functions'* (Foulkes, 2019 p. 132).

Belts were also highly significant in other cultures. The Ramesses girdle of ancient Egypt is patterned with the ankh hieroglyphic representing 'life'. The ankh's are arranged in such a way that all the symbols are in the correct orientation when wrapped around the upper torso of the Pharaoh (Foulkes, 2009). Found in the tomb of Tutankhamen, a simple warp-faced red linen sash has attributes linked to colour and usage. The red looped sash worn at the king's waist with its ritual knot shows '*a visual reference to the active protection of a goddess.*' (Art of Counting, nd).

Women have always felt the desire to protect their menfolk when they go away to war. In Japan, the Samurai wore a belt underneath their armour. Little is known about the function of this belt although it is assumed it has to do with giving extra support for the back as well as an additional means of protection for the chest/abdomen, the *hara area*. In Japan, the abdomen is seen as the centre of *ki*, or inner energy, and is an important aspect of Japanese martial arts. Bortner (2008) discusses a variety of articles made for Japanese soldier as amulets in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the first Sino-Japanese war (1894 – 1895) a good luck amulet known as a *senninmusubi* or thousand person knot became popular. Making amulets for soldiers became more widespread at the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905) and developed into a thousand stitch belt. The women in the family of a soldier would beg for knots to be sewn onto a cloth belt by one thousand different women under the

age of forty who were all born in the Year of the Tiger. Those women born in the Year of the Tiger were considered to '*impart a tenacity and fierceness through the stitches to the belt*'. (Bortner, p184). This undertaking must have been arduous for the women to achieve! Senninbari literally means sen – one thousand, nin – person and bari – stitches.

The power of many women as exemplified by the thousand stitches was thought to harness protection and safe return for the wearer as the tiger travels and returns safely after his journey. These *senninbari* could also be blessed at the local shrine. The most common colour for the *senninbari* was white with red stitches: white for purity and red which represents good luck and protection against illness as well as being a reflection of the national flag. This belt becomes an amulet of protection on many levels.

### **Weaving the Alexander Belt.**

Here is a close up of the belt that Alexander is wearing.

*Close up of Alexander's belt.* Photograph by M E Foulkes



I could not resist trying to weave an approximation to the belt depicted in the mosaic using some wool from my stash. I thought that I could design a belt from this mosaic. My design is an attempt to reproduce the mosaic belt which in turn was taken from a painting which in turn came from the imagination of the original painter. So, it is not a reconstruction - more a creative response to the mosaic. I chose two methods of weaving, a four shaft loom and a specialist rigid heddle.

Narrow, warp-faced bands where the pattern is in the order of the coloured warp threads appear early in the archaeological record. There are many complete examples from ancient Egypt (Hoskins, 2013, Foulkes, 2009). I designed this belt in warp-faced plain weave with supplementary warp pattern threads.

The centre of the belt is depicted in two shades of green, so I used two shades of green wool for the centre. The border selvedge is a dotted pattern in a yellow and burgundy. As the yellow pattern stands out, I chose to interpret this as a set of yellow threads which float on the surface of the belt so that the burgundy background threads appear the same length as the floats.

### Method One: Weaving on a 4 shaft loom.

My design was woven on a four shaft loom using 4 ply sock yarn. The centre section is in two shades of green. The yellow pattern threads on each side used double yarn so that they are prominent. The border threads are burgundy as is the weft.

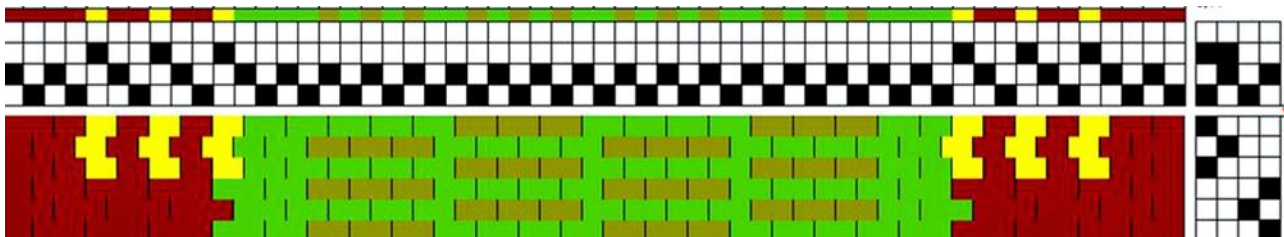
**Number of background warp ends:** 56

**Number of pattern threads:** 6 (use a double thread for each pattern warp end).

**Weft:** same colour as border threads.

Only three shafts are used. The background and border threads are on shafts 1 and 2. The doubled pattern threads are on shaft 3. There are always two background threads in between each pattern thread. The weave diagram does not show the bar of yellow pattern threads because the diagram also indicates the hidden background warp threads.

*Weave drawdown for four shaft loom.*



**Threading for a four shaft loom.** Note the background threading on shafts 1 & 2 is for plain weave across the warp. If you use a loom, the sett will depend upon the type of yarn you are using. The background is in warp-faced plain weave. Ensure that when you weave, the weft does not show through in the centre section. The pattern threads on each side stay on top for three picks then go underneath for three picks.

### Method Two: Weaving using a Sigga heddle

The Sigga heddle is a special heddle designed for weaving Samí pattern with ‘jumping’ pattern threads that is, pattern threads which are raised and lowered as a group. The Sigga heddle comes in 8, 16 and 24 pattern slot sizes

**Threading diagram for 24 Sigga heddle.**

Here is the threading diagram for the 24 pattern slot Sigga heddle. Colour indicates the colour of the warp or pattern threads in the slot or hole.



Key: **M** = centre thread. **E** = Empty. Numbered squares are the shorter pattern thread slots.

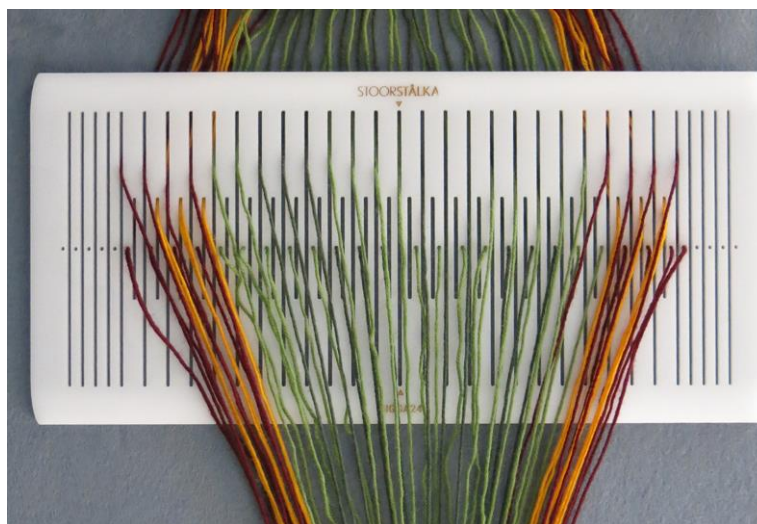
	Maximum of 11 border threads						Background and pattern threads												M
Shorter slot							1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Hole	E	E	E	E	E	E													
Long slot	E	E	E	E	E														

This is the left **half** of the threading. The centre green thread **M** goes through the long slot.

	Background and pattern threads												Maximum of 11 border threads			
Shorter slot	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24				
Hole																
Long slot																

This is the right **half** of the threading.

Here is the completed threading on the Sigga heddle. The Sigga heddle has long slot in the centre in between pattern slots 12 and 13. The two sets of three pattern threads are on either end of the band. They are threaded through pattern slots 2, 3 and 4 and 22, 23 and 24. These pattern threads appear on the surface as a group.



**The 24 pattern slot Sigga heddle in use: Weaving the Belt of Alexander the Great.**

I made a short YouTube video showing how to weave this belt with the Sigga heddle. Click here for the link. [https://youtu.be/HNMZoc5\\_8Ds](https://youtu.be/HNMZoc5_8Ds)



Sigga heddle threaded with a long warp to weave a full size belt with the two samples.

### Similarities and differences.

Here is a comparison of the two belts, woven by two methods. Using doubled warp ends for the pattern threads makes them stand out. They are also clearer on the reverse side of the belt.



Here is a close up of both belts. The left version was woven on a loom; the right version was woven using the Sigga heddle.

Look carefully at the centre of the belt on the right. You will see that the brown weft occasionally shows through. The width of the two belts is slightly different. The loom woven belt is 3.4 cm in width. The Sigga woven belt is 3 cm in width.

The loom-woven belt on the left has the warp ends evenly spaced across the width. The warp ends are threaded through the reed which spaces them evenly. The final width of the belt is determined before weaving starts.

The belt woven with a Sigga heddle and back strap is slightly less evenly spaced. The borders tend to be more tightly packed than the centre of the belt. This is usual for this type of weaving using a backstrap. Here the side of the shuttle beats the weft into place. The width of the belt is determined directly by the weaver during weaving.

I hope that you have found this topic as interesting as I have.

*Happy Weaving*

**Susan J Foulkes**      **2023**      My blog: <https://durhamweaver64.blogspot.com/>

**Equipment.** The Sigga heddle is available from Stoorstalka who have a dedicated web site for customers in the USA. <https://bandweaving.com/>

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