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Updating knitting history: a connection between Egypt and Armenia?

Introduction

Knitting history has received little scholarly attention despite knitting's popularity as a living craft practiced around the world (Strawn 2012). The majority of knitting books are designed for knitters and focus on providing patterns that can be replicated. While some of these books offer a chapter on the history of knitting, a lack of academic research and organised cataloguing of artefacts limits what can be referenced in these books for the general public. While research on early European knitting has gained ground in recent years (Malcolm-Davies and Mearns 2018; Gilbert 2018; Ringgard 2018; O'Connell Edwards 2018; Odstrčilová 2018; Lundin 2018; Willemsen 2018), more work on early knitting in north Africa, the location of knitting's earliest finds, is needed.

The gap in scholarly writing about early knitted and other non-woven objects is attributed to minimal material evidence, inconsistent data collection, and limited acceptance of knitting as an academic subject (Malcolm-Davies 2018, 3; Strawn 2012, 1). This project aims to demonstrate the research potential of knitting by taking a granular look at two objects – one from the Egyptian site of Quasr Ibrim at the British Museum in London and another from Armenia in the collection of the History Museum of Armenia in Yerevan (fig. 1). An in-depth analysis of these knitted objects will illustrate the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural study potential of knitted artefacts and knitting traditions. As a case study, this project will contribute to the foundation of a larger inventory of knitted

object analysis and research that will collectively shine a brighter light on the earliest chapters of knitting history.



Fig. 1: Knitted socks from Armenia (dated 20th century CE), History Museum of Armenia, inventory number 1203 (Image: Irene Waggener)

Research landscape

The available source material for the study of knitting is extremely uneven. Researchers have a handful of early evidence for knitting on the one hand and the living craft of the present on the other; however, it is unclear how they connect. Further complicating this task is a poorly catalogued corpus of knitted artefacts as well as the active loss of “traditional” knitting knowledge. Unlike researchers working with woven textiles, the knitting researcher must make do with a small, scattered, poorly documented collection of knitted objects; little to no identified evidence for tools; and limited information about older knitting practices. However, it would be remiss to dismiss knitting research outright because of the paucity of available evidence. Knitting researchers must carefully document and analyse available objects and living traditions to organise and develop a corpus of material that is better able to inform and shape future research.

To date, the earliest archaeological evidence for knitting comes from Egypt’s medieval period when the Fatimids and Mamluks were in power. The highly skilled nature of this evidence suggests that knitting likely replaced nalbinding in Egypt sometime between 500 and 1200 CE and was mostly used for producing footwear (Rutt 1987, 39). This hypothesis is based on a handful of publications largely from the first half of the 20th century that focused on individual artefacts of technical complexity (Lamm 1937; Thomas 1938; Bellinger 1954; Norbury 1973; Turnau 1991). From this limited dataset, a history of knitting that connects it to the spread of Islam across north Africa and into the Iberian peninsula has been shared with a global audience via knitting books marketed for the general public (Rutt 1987; Bush 1994; Nargi 2011; Pomar 2013). In general, very little detail is provided about the social, historical, economic, cultural, and environmental contexts in which knitting developed and spread.

Separate from these medieval Egyptian artefacts are a handful of ethnographic collections and publications that reveal knitting practices in the western half of north Africa (Bel and Ricard 1913; Euloge 1956; Ferchiou 1971; Besancenot 2000; Rabaté and Sorber 2007; Huet and Lamazou 2012; Waggener 2020). Although knitted artefacts rivalling the antiquity of those from Egypt are not yet known from the lands west of the Nile, the ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that knitting traditions in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia may have deep roots as well as a connection to the practice of knitting in Egypt (Waggener 2020, 99–118). However, these traditions have attracted even

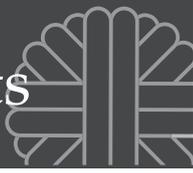


Fig. 2: Knitter from Morocco’s High Atlas Mountains, 2019 (Image: Irene Waggener)

less attention from scholars and knitters than Egypt’s knitted artefacts.

The book, *Keepers of the Sheep: Knitting in Morocco’s High Atlas and Beyond* (Waggener 2020), is currently the only publication that addresses in detail the practice and history of knitting in north Africa with a specific focus on knitting in Morocco. This book combines ethnographic work with knitters in the High Atlas and a review of the available historical, material, artistic, and linguistic evidence for the history of knitting across north Africa (fig. 2). By piecing together these sources along a continuum from the present to the past, an attempt is made to stitch together the broken story of north African knitting. The result is a more nuanced hypothesis for the development and diffusion of knitting across north Africa.

Interestingly, this book notes the possibility for a connection between north African and west Asian knitting. Sources cited remark on similarities between Algerian knitting and Turkish knitting as well as a reference to the growth of Tunisia’s *chéchia* cap knitting industry when the country was part of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the book notes that (some) Arabic (dialects), Turkish, and Farsi share terminology for knitted items, which suggests that there could be a connection between knitting in north Africa and west Asia (Waggener 2020, 106–110). Although largely anecdotal, these observations about a possible relationship between north African and



west Asian knitting are worth exploring. Beyond what is noted in this book, there have been no formal studies comparing knitting from north Africa and west Asia despite the long history of exchange between the two regions (fig. 3).

Most of the information about west Asian knitting is relatively modern and written for the general public (Özbel 1981; Avagyan 1983; Harrell 1981; Rutt 1987; Zilboorg 1994; Gibson-Roberts 1995; Nargi 2011).

Many of these works document “traditional” knitting patterns and techniques of unknown antiquity that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Currently, the oldest known piece of knitting from west Asia is a sock fragment that was found in a cave near the border between modern Georgia and Armenia (Bakhtadze 2013, 14). While the toe of the sock is visible, its heel has been destroyed. However, a brief look at the sock shows that its toe is strikingly



Fig. 3: a) Qasr Ibrim; b) Armenia, Azerbaijan, northern Iran, and southern Georgia (Image: Google Maps)



Fig. 4: Knitter from Armenia, 2024 (Image: Eugene Ho)

similar to the toes made by knitters in both Georgia and Armenia today (fig. 4). The fragment's suggested date is the 12th–14th centuries CE, which places it within the date range for many medieval Egyptian socks and knitted fragments from the late Fatimid and Mamluk periods. Significantly, people from west Asia, such as the Armenians, were present in Fatimid Egypt and actively contributed to the politics, culture, and economy there (Jiwa 2023; Dadoyan 1997; Brett 2017; McKenney 2011).

The historical, material, and ethnographic evidence for knitting in north Africa and west Asia coupled with these regions' intertwined histories suggests that their knitting traditions should not be studied in a vacuum. Rather, they should be considered in tandem. Since the medieval Egyptian artefacts first came to light in the 20th century, new findings in a variety of fields have updated understandings of the cultural, historical, environmental, economic, and political contexts in which those fragments existed.

Moreover, advances in chemical analysis provide further opportunities to more securely date these artefacts and identify geological signatures that could more definitively identify raw material origins. The time is ripe to revisit the knitted artefacts from Egypt that were published in the 20th century. They, along with the many undocumented knitted fragments held in museum collections around the world, should be (re)documented, analysed, and considered against the backdrop of a broader range of multidisciplinary evidence available today.

Research problem

A knitted fragment at the British Museum illustrates how knitted objects from north Africa and west Asia are intertwined. This fragment's geometric bird motif, in which birds are placed back-to-back and inverted one from the other so that one's head is above and the other's below, can also be found on knitted socks and pile carpets from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran (fig. 5). In fact, there is a knitted sock in the Armenian National History Museum's collection bearing the same motif (fig. 1). However, these examples from west Asia are considerably newer than the Qasr Ibrim fragment. While a date ranging from the 11th–12th centuries CE is suggested for the Qasr Ibrim fragment, the example from Armenia dates to the 20th century. This considerable difference in age poses a challenge in identifying a direct relationship between the two objects. Nevertheless, the presence of this particular bird motif on knitted textiles from Egypt and Armenia is noteworthy and immediately raises several questions. Why does this bird motif appear on the knitted fragment from Qasr Ibrim and the socks from Armenia? Are the knitting traditions related?

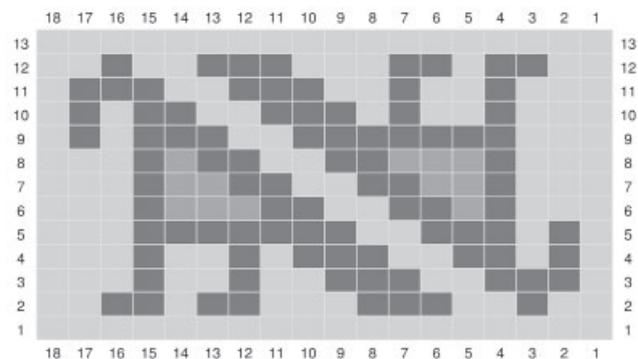
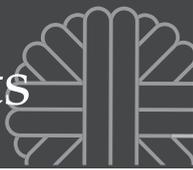


Fig. 5: Example schema of bird motif found on knitted and woven textiles from medieval Egypt and modern Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran: light grey represents the main colour; dark grey the contrast colour 1; and mid-dark grey the optional contrast colour 2 (Image: Irene Waggener)



What might connect the Armenian people, and people from west Asia in general, to Egypt, especially in the Fatimid period? Does this geometric bird motif exist in other forms, and can it help researchers trace lines of connection via trade and/or migration?

Proposed methodology

As in the book, *Keepers of the Sheep: Knitting in Morocco's High Atlas and Beyond*, this project will take a multidisciplinary approach to investigate these questions. Ethnographic, historical, material, artistic, and linguistic evidence will be used to piece together a hypothesis for a connection between medieval Egyptian and 20th century Armenian knitting. At the heart of this case study will be an analysis of the objects from Qasr Ibrim and Armenia utilising the protocol for knitted objects proposed by Jane Malcolm-Davies, Ruth Gilbert, and Susanne Lervad (Malcolm-Davies et al. 2018, 10–24). This will be accompanied by a thorough review of the history, politics, events, culture, and economy of Egypt in the 11th–12th centuries to provide background information and illuminate the relationship between north Africa and west Asia in this time period. Special attention will be given to the role of Armenians in Egypt since the comparative material in this case study comes from Armenia. While strontium isotope analysis and carbon-14 dating is likely not possible for the scope of this project, a review of other archaeological and historical evidence from Qasr Ibrim dating to around the time period proposed for the knitted fragment will be considered. This information taken in conjunction with historical accounts of trade networks, like that of the Armenians which spanned from east Asia to India to north Africa and Europe, might provide further insight on the object.

Expected results and future plans

It is expected that this project will establish a relationship between medieval Egyptian knitting and west Asian knitting traditions, with a special focus on Armenian knitting. The project will build a case for this hypothesis by:

- 1) Documenting and analysing the Qasr Ibrim fragment and Armenian knitted socks, which will result in:
 - a description of the objects' materials;
 - the identification of techniques used in their production;
 - a comparison of the objects based on the collected data;

- a hypothesis for how the Qasr Ibrim fragment may have been used based on the comparison of that data; and
- an argument for the transmission of knitting knowledge in the medieval period between north Africa and west Asia and the sustained use of that knowledge in west Asia based on the use of similar techniques and design motifs in the creation of both objects.

2) Surveying historical records and events as well as archaeological findings, which will provide:

- a description of the political, economic, and cultural context of north Africa and west Asia at the time of the Qasr Ibrim fragment;
- a description of the diverse peoples who resided in Egypt and participated in Fatimid Egyptian life;
- a description of Armenian communities in Fatimid Egypt and their contributions to the political, artistic, economic, and religious spheres of the Fatimid empire; and
- information about the nature of trade and cotton production at the time of the Qasr Ibrim fragment.

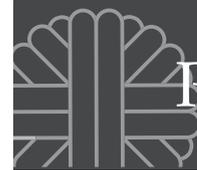
3) Referencing linguistics, related crafts, artefacts, and artistic depictions of clothing from west Asia and north Africa, which will:

- provide further evidence for the circulation of products and craft skills between the two regions; and
- shed light on the possible direction of influence - whether in a single direction or successive waves going back and forth.

The insights gained through this case study will inform the development of a larger project on the history and practice of knitting in north Africa and west Asia. This project will be centred around the creation of a database of knitted objects from these regions. The detailed analysis of the objects in this database, as in this case study, will result in a larger corpus of material for knitting researchers to draw from and extract the broader themes and patterns needed to further unravel the history of knitting.

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