



Angharad Thomas & Lesley O'Connell Edwards

# Holy hands: studies of knitted liturgical gloves

## Introduction

The *Holy hands: studies of knitted liturgical gloves* project is funded by a Janet Arnold grant awarded by the Society of Antiquaries in early 2020. This report outlines the aims and objectives of the project, reports on the progress of the work and outlines plans for future action.

The project runs from April 2020 to March 2021. It is being undertaken by Angharad Thomas and Lesley O'Connell Edwards, independent scholars, both of whom have an active research interest in liturgical gloves. These gloves, sometimes referred to as ecclesiastical gloves, pontifical gloves, or bishop's gloves, were worn by high ranking clergy in the catholic church from the 10th century. They were initially constructed from woven fabric, leather or using looping techniques, but by the 12th century, they were often knitted. Initial research and information suggests that there is little material about these artefacts, and none that is organised in one location, despite the fact that they survive in a variety of collections and museums.

These cleverly crafted and often very beautiful symbols of high office were generally made in silk and frequently decorated with embroidery or lace in metallic thread. Online catalogues such as that of the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London (UK) shows the sumptuous nature of some (V&A, inventory number 437&A-1892). As techniques developed, the patterns were worked into the knitted fabric (fig. 1). Examples of these gloves, such as William Warham's at New College, Oxford (UK), are preserved in collections, ecclesiastical treasuries and museums across Europe and in the United States. Extant gloves, paired, singly or in fragments, owe their continued

existence to a variety of circumstance: some were found in burials with their owners, and many pairs were preserved in private collections from which they reached institutional holdings. Liturgical gloves are mentioned, in passing, in histories of knitting and clothing but a detailed and specific study of them in English does not exist, although they were clearly an important element of ecclesiastical dress and, as such, are worthy of attention.

The *Holy hands* project aims to build academic and practical foundations for a major study of knitted silk gloves worn by elite clergy in the Early Modern era from 1200 to 1700. There are four elements to the project as outlined in the grant application: a review of the literature on liturgical gloves in English and other European languages; the compilation of a database listing the known extant gloves and their principal features; the construction of a protocol for recording information when studying gloves; and the assembly of materials and tools for reconstructing elements of the gloves or a full glove (Davidson 2019). These elements were carefully planned with the objective of laying the foundation for a more extensive project in the future. This is a topic lacking in research and one which is worthy of in-depth study.

The methods of investigation proposed include desk research with some travel to libraries and institutions to read and see material not otherwise available. However, at the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited this activity and it is hard to plan for future action as outlined in the project plan. However, there is much material online, both literature and artefacts, and progress is being made, as reported here.

The purpose of the literature review was to trace sources of information about liturgical gloves across

a range of literature from academic journals and specialist costume publications to consumer or leisure magazines and books, both printed and online. These sources will be critically assessed and synthesised to make an informed summary of current knowledge and identify fields for further work. Initially, the project intended to use only English, French and German language sources of information, but initial research revealed recent literature on gloves which have only been written about in Dutch (de Kruijf 2009, 64, 71-72; Willemsen 2015), or in Spanish (see, for instance, Socorro 1995; Carbonell, 2007). The scope of the review will now be expanded to include other languages. Internet translation services such as Google Translate expand the availability of material to those researchers who do not speak the relevant language. References to liturgical gloves exist in academic works and mass market publications, occasionally included as curiosities, such as the illustrations in Nargi (2011, 19-20) but sometimes enabling researchers to discover gloves of which they were previously unaware, as was the case for two pairs in Portugal (Pomar 2020/2013, 13-14). Knitted liturgical gloves are only occasionally mentioned in material on liturgical vestments, and usually only as a passing reference.

There are two major published overviews of liturgical gloves: both were made well over 100 years ago in French and German: Barbier de Montault 1876-7 and Braun 1907. One or both of these are often mentioned

by subsequent writers. Much of each concentrates on the whole history and rationale for all types of liturgical gloves, with knitted gloves occupying only a small number of pages (Barbier de Montault, 1876, 797-801, 1877, 8-15, 23-25; Braun 1907, 369-373). Two English language publications from the end of the 20th century provide general summaries of knitted liturgical gloves (Rutt 1987, 56-58; Turnau 1991, 16-18, 131-135), but these do not go into details of construction or use. The pictures in all these four publications are in black and white, and are of a poor quality. Further, Warr's (2019) article on gloves in liturgical ritual included a detailed study of the pair of gloves in the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester.

Individual studies of gloves are rare but they do exist. Some gloves have been the subject of several articles in varying depth, such as those of William Warham mentioned above (Coatsworth and Owen-Crocker 2018, 408-410). Odstrčilová (2016) has studied the St Adalbert's glove in Prague (Czech Republic) in great detail, and Cardon (1993, 38-39) has examined those in Toulouse and Saint Bertrand de Comminges. Conservation reports or articles based on these can provide adequate details of the construction of a glove, such as those of Bishop Nikolaus Schiner and Archbishop Roderigo de Rada, conserved at the Abegg Foundation, Switzerland (Flury-Lemberg 1988, 66, 244-47, 468, 488). Other conservation reports may only exist as 'grey literature' within an institution. Any details of construction and the work carried out on a glove they record are not in the public domain.

The project has already noted that as knowledge about looped and knitted structures has improved since the mid-20th century so too has the understanding of liturgical gloves. Gloves previously thought to be knitted have now been identified as having been made using a different craft. An example of this is the gloves at St German-des-Pres (Barbier de Montault 1876, 797-800), which are now identified as a type of macramé (Beaulieu 1968, 148-149; Laget 1971). Some gloves which were previously reported have disappeared. This is the case with knitted stockings and gloves dated to the 14th century from a bishop's tomb in Fortrose (Scotland) (Stuart 1851). These were in private hands in the 1960s (Levey 1968-70, 186) but their current location is unknown.

The review also set out to consider the theological context for the gloves, and how this can assist an understanding of the construction of gloves. It has been suggested that gloves were always placed on bishops' hands by another person, and that might affect their shape (see, for instance, Warr 2019). However, very few medieval clerics wrote on liturgical gloves, and



Fig. 1: Liturgical glove from the Glovers Company Collection , Fashion Museum, Bath (UK), accession number 2007.25 (Image: © Glove Collection Trust/Courtesy of The Worshipful Company of Glovers of London)



the comments of those who did, especially Durand in his *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* (Thibodeau 2010), are occasionally quoted by modern writers.

Evidence as to why gloves have been dated to specific periods is minimal and rarely explained. Occasionally, there is a reasonable provenance, such as those of William Warham at New College (Ashton 1929, 39). The gloves in the Gertrudiskathedraal in Utrecht have been dated to the later 17th century through their embroidery (de Kruijf 2009, 64). As early as 1877, Barbier de Montault (1877, 12-15) suggested that a glove from a later period could be linked with a saint from an earlier period, as the former was used to embellish the latter. In such cases, the attribution to a specific saint did not mean that the glove was of the same era. The Greek Orthodox tradition continues this practice today - replacing an artefact of a saint as it is worn out by physical contact with believers (Carroll 2017, 194).

The bibliography below is not a complete list of all the sources that have been traced; there are other texts which are not included here. If anyone would like more information, please contact the authors for a more detailed list of sources. They also welcome information about other gloves and relevant publications.

An early observation made from the literature review is that little has been written about the construction of the gloves or about their ornamentation, and the project intends to identify these variations by examining the gloves, either in person or virtually. There are several versions of thumb construction, for example, ranging from a gusseted construction to a 'placeholder thumb' (Hemmons Hiatt 2012, 334), but no discussion as to why one style might be used in preference to another. The gauntlets of the gloves differ too – some are very wide, others much narrower, some are ornamented with embroidery or have a metal roundel on the back of the hand. There are others with knitted patterns in the gauntlets or the hands. It may be that a systematic classification of this patterning could identify groups of similar gloves, which in turn might help date them and also locate the place of production. Gloves are described as being of specific national workmanship but there is no literature explaining the rationale for this. The researchers are unaware of any literature on the knitters and merchants who produced and supplied these ornate gloves, although since it is suggested that many are Spanish or Italian, any papers on them may not be widely disseminated.

This lack of information on construction and patterning in the literature demonstrates the need for another aspect of this project: the study of these gloves as individual artefacts to expand our knowledge and



Fig. 2: Reconstruction of patterning on the cuff of glove 2007.25 (see fig. 1) (Image: Courtesy of Lesley O'Connell Edwards)

develop our understanding of the anonymous knitters who constructed them and their methods of working. The level of detail concerning the knitting varies from publication to publication, as does the quality of the photographs. Some photographs can be examined in detail to identify modes of construction: for example, the exact patterns on a gauntlet cuff or the roundel on

the back of a hand may be identified. Others are not of such good quality. When museums post pictures of their gloves on their websites, some can be expanded to make the patterning and construction very clear, whereas others start to blur once they are magnified. The quality of available images is also of relevance to the second major component of the *Holy hands* project, which is a database. This aims to tabulate existing information about extant liturgical gloves in a systematic way. As was noted with respect to the literature survey, information about liturgical gloves does exist and they have been studied, but the material is spread between many published and online sources. The compilation of the database will bring together information about extant gloves, providing the opportunity to compare and contrast materials, construction and patterning across all of the known gloves.

Information for each glove, pair of gloves or fragment will be collated under a series of headings, of which there are currently 26, ranging from location, materials and colour, to notes about the existence of literature or images for each entry. This information should permit a classification of glove constructions and ornamentations and identify areas for further work. It is hoped that if common patterns are identifiable, possible sources for particular groups of gloves may be suggested. The database is being constructed using an Excel spreadsheet allowing further analysis of the entries. Links may be established between, for example, design features and country of origin by using pivot tables. The database and the recording protocol will conform to the standardised knitting vocabulary detailed in Malcolm-Davies et al. (2018).

Currently, the database has more than 60 entries, ranging from well documented gloves, such as those at the V&A Museum, to some referred to in old publications, the continued existence of which are uncertain. An important part of this documentation is the verification of the existence of a particular entry through a variety of direct and indirect contacts.

The third element of the *Holy hands* project, the protocol for standardising observations of gloves, has not yet begun (at the time of writing). However, it will include a list of features to be noted when examining gloves in collections and the order in which these are to be noted. Describing and recording a pair of gloves is complex and time consuming as there are several elements of their construction including cuff, thumb, fingers, shaping, and ornamentation. Pairs are not always matching, which creates a further complication. A template will be constructed to enable this recording to be done in a systematic way with

the aid of diagrams on which measurements will be entered. This is currently being designed. When visits to collections are once more possible, both of the researchers will test the protocol with a sample in a collection accessible to them. After this, modifications will be made to it, as necessary.

The final part of the *Holy hands* project proposes the reconstruction of a glove or part of a glove to enable a deeper understanding of their making. Consideration will be given to the availability of yarns and tools in the period of their production and the tools and materials required for their production currently. Work on knitting articles similar to known examples is being undertaken by both the project's researchers (fig. 2). This aspect of the project aims to extend knowledge and understanding of liturgical gloves and their production, in particular, the change from non-woven fabric techniques, such as looping, to knitting. This is a development little studied or understood.

Although liturgical gloves are known to textile scholars and featured in books for hobby makers illustrated with examples preserved in many collections, little is known about their makers, their dates or provenance. Even less is known about the tools, construction methods and cultural context for their production, although the skill level required for this was high. No republished construction of a knitted liturgical glove is currently known to the authors. Such work could form the foundation for a larger project using citizen science methodology as adopted in both the Knitting in Early Modern Europe (KEME) project and the Textile Research Centre's Texel Stockings project (see internet sources below).

It is anticipated that the project will result in articles to be offered to both academic journals and non-specialist magazines with a wide readership, such as *Piecework*. It is hoped that the database will be published as an online resource, similar to that of the KEME project for knitted caps. It is also hoped that the project will form the basis for further work on these fascinating and understudied textiles.

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Author:

[gloveknitter@gmail.com](mailto:gloveknitter@gmail.com)

[lesleyoconnelledwards@outlook.com](mailto:lesleyoconnelledwards@outlook.com)