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Ancient twined garments of fur, feather, and fiber: Context and variation across the American Desert West

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ABSTRACT

Ancient perishable textiles, once overlooked in favor of other material classes, now are recognized as revealing indicators of style, function, and technology, importantly shaped by complex social and economic processes. With adequate preservation and concerted dating efforts aimed specifically at textiles, archaeologists are asking new questions about technological and stylistic variations and their ability to highlight once obscure social forces, such as learning modes, idiosyncratic behaviors, social interactions and identities, population mobility, and more. Here, I review potential sources of variation in the production and use of fur, feather and fiber open-twined robes/blankets (and their associated cordage components) by ethnohistoric and prehistoric mobile foragers, and semi-settled and sedentary farmers of the American Desert West. With a qualitative approach, I assess the proposition that patterned variation within and between foraging and farming cultures, each with different mobility patterns and diverse social structures, is observable in the mechanical details of such textiles, and that such variation can inform us at different scales of inquiry. Examining limited samples of preserved textiles from dry caves, cliff dwellings, and pueblos, now housed in western museum collections, I consider evidence for variation and regularity in cordage and twined textile production mechanics at the level of the individual, site, community, and region. Finally, I note the persistence and relevance of ancient textile traditions in contemporary contexts of identity.

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1. Introduction

Researchers working with well-preserved perishable fiber assemblages from western North America have been at the forefront of developing new models for how textile regularities and variability might signal social group identity or boundaries, patterns of interaction and enculturation, population movements and replacements, individual agency and learning modes, gendered production, and more (Hedges, 1973; Adovasio and Gunn, 1977; Webster and Drooker, 2000; McBrinn, 2002; Adovasio et al., 2007; Webster, 2007, 2011; Geib and Jolie, 2008; Mabry et al., 2008; McBrinn and Webster, 2008; Hattori and Fowler, 2009; Adovasio, 2010; Camp, 2016; and others).

Textiles, with their many visible and variable patterned attributes, have the potential to embody social inputs at multiple levels—the individual, kin group, culture, and population. Further, single textiles might simultaneously incorporate multiple scales of

inputs. Available plant choices, processing methods, patterned fiber manipulations, personal idiosyncracies, recycling of fiber fragments, and selection of design elements might well be conditioned by local ecological and geographical adaptive strategies, individual learning modes, and variable social structures (Adovasio, 1970a, 2010; Adovasio and Gunn, 1977; Conkey, 1991; Fowler, 1996; Jolie, 2002; Haas, 2006; Adovasio et al., 2007; Webster, 2007; Hayes et al., 2016; Piqué et al., 2016; Berihuete-Azorín, 2016).

Here, I will explore technological variability across culture areas and time periods of the American Desert West, in flat, open-twined fur and/or feathered robes (Fig. 1), capes and blankets, and their associated twisted fiber and skin/hide cordage components. Open-twined textiles are defined by their distinctive wall structure, consisting of stationary elements, or warps, secured and connected by broadly-spaced cordage wefts (Fig. 2). These constitute a remarkable array of functional items, including sandals, mats, bags, robes, burial garments, cradles, hats, fish traps, winnowing and parching trays, seed beaters, baskets and other containers (Andrews and Adovasio, 1996, p. 31; Geib and Jolie, 2008, p. 96; Adovasio, 2010, p. 15).

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Fig. 1. Mohave man in rabbit skin robe, California. P.2999, Courtesy of the Braun Research Library Collection, Autry National Center, Los Angeles. Photograph by Edward Curtis.

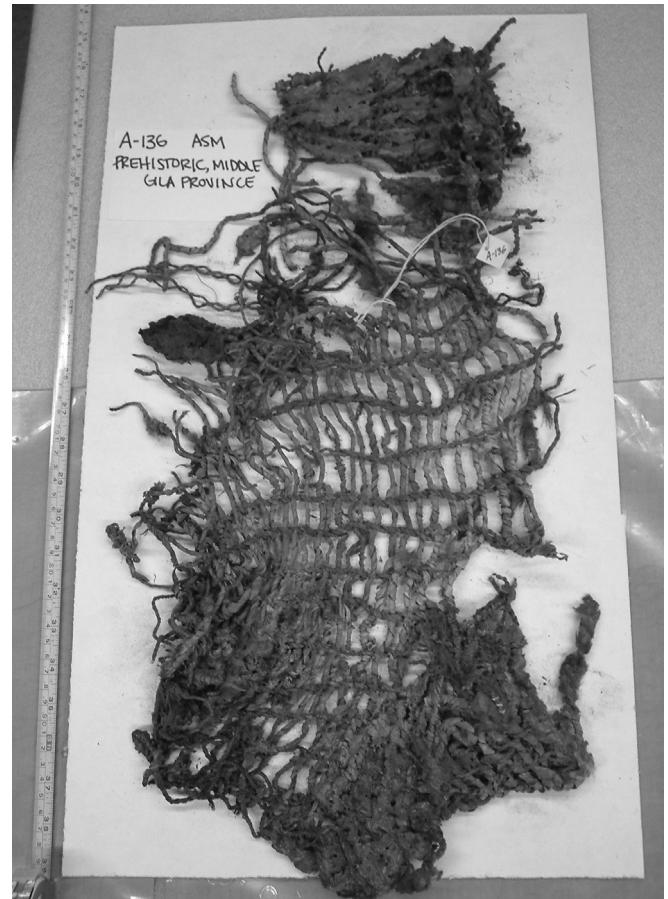


Fig. 2. Open-twined fur and fiber textile, Middle Gila Province. ASM.069.A-136, Courtesy of Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona. Photograph by Melinda Leach.

Specifically, I will evaluate the proposition that foragers and farmers from different time periods and cultural spheres should reveal distinctive patterning in the mechanics of their open-twined textiles and associated warp and weft cordage. Using museum collections and ethnographic records from cultures along the foraging-farming continuum, I will consider how variation in these open-twined textile assemblages might best be understood in light of current models of geographical and cultural variability.

2. Regional culture histories of open-twined textiles in the Desert West

The use of animal and plant fibers in the production of twined textiles and twisted cordage has a deep and global history, reaching well into the Upper Paleolithic (Soffer et al., 1998, 2000; Soffer, 2004; Adovasio et al., 1996, 1997, 2000). Thus, many scholars have asserted that fully developed and sophisticated twined and twisted fiber industries almost certainly arrived with the first peoples occupying the western regions of the North American continent (cf. Adovasio et al., 2007; Good, 2001; Connolly et al., 2014). Significant and patterned shifts in the technologies of these ancient industries, to be explored here, would be expected in the markedly different environments and social contexts in which foragers and, later, farmers found themselves.

Evidence of these textile industries is particularly well-represented in the American Great Basin and Southwestern deserts, where preservation of perishable fibers is enhanced by arid climates and dry habitation microenvironments. Pueblos, cliff dwellings, caves and rockshelters have provided astonishing

assemblages of fibers and textiles that reveal methods of manufacture, storage, use and discard in the contexts of prehistoric households, trash mounds, caches, storage features, burials and more (see Loud and Harrington, 1929; Haury, 1950; Martin et al., 1952; Heizer and Krieger, 1956; Jennings, 1957; Rozaire, 1974; and others).

From the earliest occupation of the Desert West, people cached pre-prepared cordage, processed fibers, cut mammal and bird skin strips destined to become warp materials, and completed garments, for both future utilitarian and ceremonial use. In Lovelock Cave, Nevada, for example, ancient caches were found to contain hundreds of fragments of twined fur and feather blankets, entire robes and mats, bundles of prepared fibers (Fig. 3), rope and cordage supplies, strips of skin and hide with fur and feathers for possible use as warp materials, sandals, aprons, duck decoys, and nets (Loud and Harrington, 1929).

Feather or fur robes and blankets were essential utilitarian textiles, acting as warm garments and sleeping mats. Indeed, the open-twining process that connects thick fur and feather warps produces such warm, highly effective cloaks and blankets that they have been shown to outperform modern winter clothing for warmth (Yoder et al., 2005, p. 63). Newborn infants were bundled in them and children and adults of both sexes used them as soft sleeping blankets and wind and rain-proof robes and capes for cool evenings and in the winter (Steward, 1943, p. 274; Wheat, 1967; d'Azevedo, 1986, pp. 479–481; Kelly and Fowler, 1986, p. 373;

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