

Pedagogy File: Textile Mobilities across Medieval Afro-Eurasia

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Introduction

Textiles counted among the most precious and prized categories of material culture in the medieval world. Made with care in specialized workshops, handed down over generations as part of family wealth, repurposed until threadbare for use as dress and furnishings, serving as diplomatic gifts and luxury trade goods, cloth played a major cultural role across premodern societies. Such importance stands in contrast to how fabrics are often viewed by students today, as cheaply-made, disposal material outsourced from distant factories for mass consumption. The disjuncture between premodern attitudes toward cloth and prevailing views in our time offers a compelling entry point for students to contemplate historical continuities and difference through the lens of a universally familiar medium of textiles.

This pedagogical file considers textiles' mobilities across premodern Afro-Eurasia to explore medieval global networks through a focus on exchanges evidenced in material culture. The presented examples focus on textiles in European and North American museum collections, thus layering in also more recent mobilities of these objects as artworks with modern collecting histories.

Learning Objectives

This lesson can be adapted to undergraduate or graduate students. Students will:

- Evaluate evidence (textual, archaeological, material, and visual) that documents the mobility of raw materials, craftspeople, and finished textiles across premodern Afro-Eurasia
- Develop a basic knowledge about textiles to feel confident in identifying medium (cotton, silk, gold), structure (plain-weave, tapestry weave, samite/twill), embellishment (block print, resist dye, and embroidery), and function (furnishing, dress)
- Learn how to use a museum online catalogue: how to search for objects, how to read object labels, how download images, how to identify "open access" use

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General Bibliography for Further Reading

Blessing, Patricia, Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, and Eiren Shea. *Medieval Textiles across Eurasia, c. 300–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Mackie, Louise. *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th–21st Century*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2015.

Selected Textile Websites

[The Textile Museum/The George Washington University Museum](#)

[The Cleveland Museum of Art](#)

[The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

[Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection](#)

[Harvard University Art Museums](#)

[Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University](#)

[Victoria and Albert Museum](#)

Textile Terminology

Faculty comfortable with materials, structure, and technique can use the following resources to add in material discussion to the historical and art historical content or to clarify unfamiliar terms.

- [Fiber \(cotton, wool, linen, silk, etc.\)](#)
- [Structure \(plain weave, tapestry weave, twill, etc.\)](#)
- [Textile Techniques \(painted, resist-dyed, block printed, embroidered, etc.\)](#)

In addition, those specialized in textile terminology can refer to the vocabularies proposed by the [Centre International d'Etude des Textiles Anciens \(CIETA\)](#).

Case Studies

The following four case studies can be used to structure the lesson. Although all can be used together, each has also been developed as a self-standing resource. The examples move in chronological order and cover territory reaching from North Africa to Central Asia, with a particular focus on Egypt, as that region's dry climate has preserved thousands of medieval textiles.

Case Study 1: The Mobilities of Cotton

*Object*

Hanging Decorated with Crosses and Floral Motifs. Sixth century CE. Height 270 × width 131 cm (106 5/16 × 51 9/16 in.). Cotton, indigo and red pigment, plain weave, Z-spun; resist-dyed. Harvard Art Museums, 1975.41.31.

Findspot unknown (possibly Bawit?); Hagop Kevorkian, New York (by 1941–62), by descent; to The Hagop Kevorkian Foundation, New York (1962–75), gift; to the Fogg Museum, 1975.

Object record and photographs available online at [the Harvard Art Museum website](https://www.harvardartmuseum.org/objects/1975.41.31).

Background and Key Points

- Egypt was an important producer of cotton from antiquity into the Middle Ages as attested in papyrological evidence (documentary sources attesting to production, taxation, and trade).
- Curiously, however, few textiles made in late antique or medieval Egypt used cotton; most were made of wool and linen. These woolen and linen textiles share technical features suggesting they were woven by local craftspeople.

- Nonetheless, there are many thousands of fragments of cotton textiles with provenance linking them to Egypt in museum collections and excavated in situ in Egypt, as in examples from the Red Sea port city of Berenike or in Fustat.
- These objects' technical features (plain-weave ground with block-printed, resist-dyed, and painted decoration) point however to production in India; Gujarat was a particularly important production center for cotton textiles. Textiles associated with India are identifiable thanks to their usually limited color scheme (reds, blues, beiges, sometimes a combination of all three), repeating patterns (achieved by stamping the textiles), and iconography (usually floral or geometric patterns, though occasionally also figural patterning).
- Carbon-dating of cotton fragments further demonstrates that trade over the Indian Ocean and Red Sea went on for centuries, as early as the Roman period, during the late antique and early Byzantine periods, and well into the early modern period. Textual sources including receipts from the Cairo Geniza corroborate this longstanding trade.
- One possibility is that raw cotton from Egypt was transported to India, where it was processed, woven, and decorated, before being shipped back to North Africa as finished textiles.
- Indian textiles were not only traded westward to Egypt, however; fabrics made their way to Indonesia where they were used as as temple banners.
- Such fabrics were possibly even specially ordered from India by clients in Egypt. Geniza documents, for example, specify such orders. The Harvard Art Museum textile, which features elaborate, aniconic figuration with crosses and flowers, could very well have been commissioned as a furnishing textile for an Egyptian church.

Object Questions

Can you identify the medium, structure, and embellishment of this textile?

- Medium: cotton (a lightweight, vegetal fiber ideal for taking dye)
- Structure: plain weave (a simple weave structure consisting of one weft to one warp grid)
- Embellishment: resist-dyed (patterns drawn by hand)

What is the function of this textile? How can we tell?

- Trade object: this textile was discovered in Egypt, suggesting it was traded there
- Furnishing textile: its large format (2.7 m tall) and shape suggest a curtain
- Possibly for a church: crosses, geometric patterns
- Burial object: textiles like these were used in their final function as burial shrouds, meaning in their current state they are fragmentary and often stained

Selected References for Further Reading and Watching

- Barnes, Ruth. *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1997.
- Goitein, S. D., and Mordechai Friedman. *Indian Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Kelley, Anna. “By Land or by Sea: Tracing the Adoption of Cotton in the Economies of the Mediterranean.” In *Transmitting and Circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine Worlds*, edited by Mirela Ivanova and Hugh Jeffries, 274–97. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- Shaikh, Ayesha U. “*Made in India, Found in Egypt: Red Sea Textile Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries.*” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2023.
- Wild, John-Peter, and Felicity Wild. “Berenike and Textile Trade on the Indian Ocean.” In *Textile Trade and Distribution in Antiquity. Textilhandel und -distribution in der Antike*, edited by Kertsin Droß-Krüpe, 91–109. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014.

Case Study 2: The Mobilities of Silk

Child’s Coat with Ducks in Pearl Medallions and Child’s Pants. Eighth century CE. Coat: width across shoulders 84.5 cm × length back of neck to hem 51.4 cm (33 1/4 × 20 1/4 in.); pants: width 52 × length 28 cm (20 1/2 × 11 in.). Coat: silk, weft-faced compound twill weave (samite); pants: silk, twill damask. Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996.2.1 (coat) and 1996.2.2 (pants).

Findspot: unknown. Provenance: Sara Tremayne, Ltd., London, until 1996; purchase, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996. Object record and photographs available online at [the Cleveland Art Museum website](#).

Background and Key Points

- Silk counted among the most prized categories of textile in the premodern world both for its physical qualities of sheen and the technological prowess needed for its weaving.
- Silk fibers were derived from the cocoons of silkworms that fed on the leaves of mulberry trees. Sericulture, or the production of silk, thus required specialized facilities and production for preparing threads for weaving.
- Silk was furthermore produced on a drawloom, a sophisticated machine where patterns were repeated and mirrored. Some describe the drawloom as an early computer because it required a preset pattern to produce repeating and mirroring designs.



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- Sericulture and silk weaving are believed to have originated in China and to have travelled westward over the course of the premodern period; production was underway in the Mediterranean by late antiquity. Legendary stories about the origins of silk weaving occur in almost every culture where silk was made; these usually concern secrecy around silkworm cultivation and silk-weaving technology.
- Central Asian textiles count as some of the most beautiful and sophisticated silk weavings of the premodern period. The most advanced examples featured colorful designs in multiple hues (up to five colors) with large repeating patterns, indications pointing to technologically advanced and large-format looms. Sogdian silks, in particular, stand out for the colorful aesthetics, enormous patterns, and bold designs.
- Silks were not only produced for local consumption, however. As extremely valuable goods, they also featured in trade and diplomatic exchanges. In the seventh-century CE wall paintings from the “*Hall of the Ambassadors*” at Afrasiab, Uzbekistan (ancient Sogdiana), for example, textiles with typically Central Asian (Sogdian) designs appear in the garments of the processing figures. These includes textiles with repeating patterns of birds (such as ducks) set in pearl medallions.
- Recent archaeological excavations of Central Asian burials of people dressed in silks are increasingly changing how scholars understand the production, trade, and dress practices of these regions. In many cases, it is difficult to tell precisely where such excavated textiles were originally woven, pointing thus to the wide circulation of luxury silk fabrics across the region and production in multiple locales. In contrast to dress practices in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean where draped garments were preferred, however, Central Asian dress distinguishes itself in its tailoring and preference for coats, caftans, and pants. Similar trends would be later incorporated in the development of early Islamic dress practice.
- That such textiles continued to be admired in Byzantium and the early Islamic world becomes clear in the many emulations of Central Asian silk patterns in textiles well into the eighth and ninth centuries CE, as in the famous Umayyad silk known as the “*Ṭirāz of Marwan II*” Although that textile was found in Egypt and features an embroidered inscription naming its production in Ifriqiya, its physical qualities and weaving structure point to Central Asian production.

Object Questions

Can you identify the medium, structure, and embellishment of these textiles?

- Medium: silk
- Structure: coat: weft-faced compound twill weave or samite (a complex structure featuring multiple warps and wefts to create designs); pants: damask (a complex structure where designs float in the weave structure)

- Embellishment: no additional embellishment beyond woven structure; however the garment has been tailored to shape

What is the function of these textiles? How can we tell?

- Clothing: the coat and pants are made of different materials, offering rare evidence of elite fashion preferences; the garments' small size suggests they were for a child
- Trade or diplomatic gift: five-color patterns in the coat point to elite Sogdian production on a highly sophisticated loom; the pants, however, feature Chinese symbols and are woven in a damask typical of production in China.
- Burial object: although the findspot for this piece is unknown, textiles like these have been excavated in prestigious burials in Central Asia

Selected References for Further Reading and Watching

Bellemar, Julie, and Judith A. Lerner. "Afrasiab Mural Paintings." In *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2019.

Dospěl Williams, Elizabeth. "Craft and Aesthetics in Byzantine and Early Islamic Textiles." *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*. Published 19 October 2020.

Gasparini, Mariachiara. *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textiles*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

Hensellek, Betty. "Sogdian Fashion." In *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2019.

Case Study 3: The Mobilities of *Ṭirāz*

Fragment naming the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Qadir bi-Allah. Iraq, 1008/1009 CE (399 AH). Height 8.7 cm × width 48.3 cm (3 7/16 × 19 in.). Weft-faced plain weave *mulham* (cotton warp, silk weft) with chain-stitched embroidery in silk. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, BZ.1933.22.

Findspot: unknown. Provenance: purchased from Tano (dealer), Cairo (through Frances Morris), 1932; collection of Mildred Barnes and Robert Woods Bliss, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks, 1932–40; Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC, 1940.

Inscription (Arabic): [In the name of God the] Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God the Lord of the Worlds. Good things come to those who fear God, for (God) is hostile only to those who practice oppression. May God bless our lord Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, and all his goodly and excellent family. Blessing and glory from God to the caliph and servant of God, Ahmad, the imam al-Qadir-bi-Allah Commander of the Faithful. In the year nine and ninety and three (hundred).

Object record and photographs available on [the Dumbarton Oaks website](#).

Background and Key Points

- *Ṭirāz* refers to the practice of inscribing textiles with writing developed in the early Islamic dynasties; to the private (caliphal/governmental, *ṭirāz al-khassa*) and public (*ṭirāz al-‘amma*) workshops associated with such textiles’ production; and to the inscribed textiles themselves.
- Although the precise origins of *ṭirāz* remain uncertain, some of the earliest examples have been attributed thanks to their inscriptions and through Carbon-14 dating tests to the Umayyad period (as in the “*Ṭirāz of Marwan II*,” an embroidered silk; or another *ṭirāz fragment*, also naming Marwan but in wool tapestry weave). The etymology of the term “*ṭirāz*,” associated with the Persian word for embroidery, and the visual ties to Central Asian silks have led some to suggest the tradition finds roots in that region.
- At first, the exchange of *ṭirāz* was limited to the upper-most strata of society because of the close control of production in centers associated with the caliphal court. Inscriptions on these earliest textiles follow similar conventions with the name of the caliph, the date and place of production, and prayers including the *shahāda*.

- Early *ṭirāz* production was thus closely aligned with other caliphal prerogatives, including calligraphic conventions developed in coinage and for the chanceries. Some of the most impressive early *ṭirāz* textiles naming caliphs are associated with production in ‘Abbasid Iraq at the court in Baghdad. Storerooms in the imperial wardrobe held valuable textiles; at times they were distributed or gifted to allies, including as “robes of honor” (*khil’a*) in investiture ceremonies and as diplomatic gifts.
- By the ‘Abbasid and Fatimid periods, *ṭirāz* became enormously popular outside these official workshops and in a wide geographic range, resulting in production in innumerable private workshops around North Africa and Mesopotamia. In these periods, the range of *ṭirāz* types expanded greatly in medium and format. Some of the most visually impressive were made in Yemen in cotton in a tie-dye technique known as *ikat*, including **examples** featuring gold lettering. *Ṭirāz* in less expensive and more simply woven wool and linen similarly survive, attesting to the wide range of consumers for these textiles.
- *Ṭirāz* could be used in any number of functions, including furnishing textiles (like curtains, **prayer mats**, or **rugs**), dress (like **garments** and accessories), or even as finished textiles in their own right. Visual evidence for these uses is supported in manuscript paintings, such as the exquisite thirteenth-century CE illuminations of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt* (as, for example, furnishing and dress textiles depicted in MS arabe 5847, fol. 12v).
- By the ‘Abbasid and Fatimid periods, *ṭirāz* textiles came to be used by a wide array of owners, including not only Muslims but also Christians and Jews. Archaeological evidence in Christian cemeteries in Naqlun, for example, features Christian burials of individuals wearing *ṭirāz* garments, inscribed in Arabic with the usual conventions.
- These communities furthermore adopted the practice of inscribing textiles for their own purposes, including producing examples in their own languages. Documentary texts from the Cairo Geniza, a store of documents found in the attic of a synagogue in Cairo, include orders for *ṭirāz*, inscribed in Hebrew, for liturgical purposes. Extant textiles featuring both Coptic and Arabic inscriptions suggest that Christian communities, too, adapted the prevailing traditions to their own context.
- In their final use, *ṭirāz* textiles were purposed as burial shrouds. Recent archaeological excavations of graves in Egypt have suggested that *ṭirāz* inscriptions seem at times purposefully wrapped around deceased’s head, perhaps as a protective gesture, in the grave.

Object Questions

Can you identify the medium, structure, and embellishment of this textile?

- Medium: *mulham* (mixed cotton and silk fabric)
- Structure: plain weave (a simple weave structure consisting of one weft to one warp grid)
- Embellishment: embroidery in silk thread

What is the function of this textile? How can we tell?

- This piece is too fragmentary to tell; however, the scale of the embellishment suggests it was once a relatively small textile, most likely a garment or dress accessory.
- The inscription names the caliph (al-Qadir-bi-Allah) and its date of production (399 AH or 1008/1009 CE, suggesting it was produced in Iraq.
- The piece was purchased in Egypt, suggesting it was a prestigious gift, possibly kept as an heirloom, and used ultimately as a burial cloth.

Selected References for Further Reading and Watching

Dospěl Williams, Elizabeth. "Adoption, Adaptation, and Reinterpretation: Inscribed Textiles among Medieval Egypt's Christian and Jewish Communities." In *Social Fabrics: Inscribed Textiles from Egyptian Tombs, 9th–12th Century*, edited by Mary McWilliams and Jochen Sokoly, 30–37. Boston and New Haven: Harvard University Art Museums and Yale University Press, 2021.

Gordon, S. D., ed. *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

McWilliams, Mary, and Jochen Sokoly, eds. *Social Fabrics: Inscribed Textiles from Medieval Egyptian Tombs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2022.

Stillman, Yedida, Paula Sanders, and Nasser Rabbat. "Ṭirāz." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. Peri Bearman et al. Leiden: Brill, 1954–2005.

Winter, Meredyth Lynn. "[Tiraz](#)." *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*. Published 9 December 2021.

Winter, Meredyth Lynn. "[Khil'a](#)." *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*. Published 9 December 2021.



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Case Study 4: The Mobilities of *Nasij* (Cloth of Gold)

“Cloth of Gold” with Felines and Eagles. Northeast Iran, 1225–75 CE. Height 170.5 × width 109 cm (67 1/8 × 42 15/16 in.). Silk and gold thread; lampas. The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1990.2.

Findspot: unknown. Provenance: Thupten Zong Lo, Hong Kong (1988? –90); purchase, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1990.

Inscription: Illegible (Pseudo-Arabic)

Object record and photographs available on [the Cleveland Art Museum website](#).

Background and Key Points

- By the later medieval period, increasingly advanced weaving technology developed in innumerable centers across North Africa and Eurasia that resulted in sophisticated and complex weave structures building on earlier techniques.
- Perhaps the most renowned of these weaves was known as “cloth of gold” (*nasij*), a technique featuring a complex silk-weaving structure known as lampas completed with silk and gold metal threads to create sumptuous, glittering fabrics. Gold formed both ground and design on these textiles, creating a visually stunning effect in the movements of light and shadow over textile’s surface.
- *Nasij* developed in Central Asia and Eastern Iran in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, with stunning examples attributed to workshops in these zones. However, Mongols (often forcibly) translocated weavers and goldsmiths to production centers around Asia, where the meeting of different traditions resulted in the production of magnificent golden cloths that combined weaving technology and metalworking advancements from diverse regions. As a result, it is often difficult to attribute Mongol textiles to specific workshops or geographic areas because of the technical overlaps in the meeting of craftspeople trained in [different traditions](#).
- *Nasij* fabrics stand out not only for their innovative technical features, however. They also feature new combinations of imagery derived from numerous visual traditions, including [griffins](#), [dragons](#), phoenixes, cloud patterns, [floral motifs](#), and legible and pseudo-Arabic inscriptions that testify to weavers’ training in both Central Asian and Chinese visual traditions.
- Given the resources invested in the materials and technology of textile production, fabrics were highly valued as currency and portable wealth. Mongol elites invested substantially in textile production, which included both government-sanctioned production as well as control over private workshops.
- In medieval Central and East Asia, “cloth of gold” was used for garments (including [caftans](#) and robes), headwear, and other accessories among a limited elite. Records suggest that such textiles featured as part of gift-giving, investiture, and diplomatic exchange.

- *Nasij* were also traded and gifted westward, into Mamluk Egypt and Western Europe. In European trade documents and inventories, luxury Mongol textiles (and Asian textiles more generally) are referred to as “panni tartarici” (“Tartar cloth”); these included “cloth of gold.” Today, numerous *nasij* survive in the form of liturgical dress in European ecclesiastical treasuries, where they can be found with other luxury textiles of Central Asian, North African, and East Asian origin.

Object Questions

Can you identify the medium, structure, and embellishment of this textile?

- Medium: silk and gold-wrapped thread
- Structure: *nasij* “cloth of gold,” a fabric with lampas structure (a complex silk-weaving technique with multiple warps and wefts)
- Embellishment: none (the decoration and ground are one weaving structure)

What is the function of this textile? How can we tell?

- The precise function of this piece is unknown because there are no details to point to its use as a garment (such as tailoring) or furnishing (such as loops or other evidence for hanging).
- The piece does preserve its edges (selvedges) at the top and bottom; thus its enormous height (170.5 cm) corresponds to the width of a loom.
- At top, the piece features a band with a pseudo-Arabic inscription in kufic script. This suggests the textile was meant to be viewed in its entirety oriented as in the photograph.
- Without further details about the textile’s findspot or provenance, however, it is difficult to tell exactly what function this textile once had.

Selected References for Further Reading and Watching

Luyster, Amanda. “Reassembling Textile Networks: Treasuries and Re-Collecting Practices in Thirteenth-Century England.” *Speculum* 96, no. 4 (2021): 1039–78.

Mühlemann, Corinne. “Inscribed Horizontal Bands on Two Cloth-of-Gold Panels and Their Function as Part of an Īlkhānīd Dress.” *Ars Orientalis* 47 (2017): 43–68.

Rosati, Maria Ludovica. “*Panni tartarici*: Fortune, Use, and the Cultural Reception of Oriental Silks in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth-century European Mindset.” In *Seri-Technics: Historical Silk Technologies*. Berlin: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, 2020.

Shea, Eiren. *Mongol Court Dress, Identity Formation, and Global Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Wardwell, Anne. "Panni Tartarici: Eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silver (13th and 14th Centuries)." *Islamic Art* 3 (1988–89): 4–147.

Wardwell, Anne, and James Watt, eds. *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.

Suggested Activities

The above information can be used to structure any number of class activities, either in class or at home. The following suggestions are intended to be modular, so that any single activity can be used independently or in conjunction with another.

PowerPoint lecture

(In-class activity)

The goal of this activity is to summarize major trends in the mobilities of textiles across Afro-Eurasia through a focus on four exemplary case studies.

- Each case study provides notes and background for different textile mobilities.
- Linked webpages provide additional comparative material, including images and further notes.
- "Object questions" can be used to provoke class discussion.

Guided museum database exploration, focus on gathering data

(In-class activity; small group and class discussion)

The goal of this activity is to walk students through the elements of a museum database and to consider how information about textiles is recorded in online catalogues.

- Students visit museum databases for Harvard Art Museums, Cleveland Museum of Art, Dumbarton Oaks, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art indicated for the objects above.
- In small groups, students look carefully at the website entries on their own computers to familiarize themselves with the information they find. This can include high-res photographs, detail photographs, archival photographs, measurements, place of production, date, materials and technique, provenance information, bibliography, and exhibition history, among other possibilities.
- Instructor circulates among these small groups, checking in that students are finding this information in the database.

- In larger group discussion, instructor can direct conversation along the following lines:
 - Where does the database indicate your textile was made? Does the database say where the textile was (or may have been) found?
 - What is the textile's provenance history? When did it enter the current repository and how did it get there?
 - Where has it been published or exhibited? Do you see any trends there? Can you tell if this is an important object and if so, how?

Self-guided museum database exploration, focus on critically assessing data

(In-class activity or at-home assignment; small group or class discussion)

The goal of this activity is to get students to learn how to search through an online catalogue. Looking through online catalogues will highlight how such databases, built on ideas about fixed taxonomies and categorizations, are poorly suited to finding information about textiles.

- After learning about four case study examples, students are directed to visit the respective museum websites on their own to select a textile that interests them.
- Students should look carefully at the website entries to familiarize themselves with the information they find. This can include high-res photographs, detail photographs, archival photographs, measurements, place of production, date, materials and technique, provenance information, bibliography, and exhibition history, among other possibilities.
- Instructor circulates among these small groups, checking in that students are finding this information in the database.
- In small groups or as a larger class discussion, students address the following questions:
 - Why did you pick this textile? How did you find it?
 - What information was included in the catalogue entry? What was missing?
 - Is there any evidence in the online entry for the mobility of this textile? If so, what is it?
 - How might you search for a similar textile again?
 - Can you tell whether this image is freely available/open access? If so, explain how. If not, discuss why not.