Sock it! Knitting a Coptic Sock

This is a guide to knitting a pair of socks like these on display in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology and adapting ancient techniques for today. These socks, from about 400 AD, have been the centre of an experimental archaeology project.

There are numerous ways to do the stitch. For this pattern, we have chosen one which resembles the socks in the museum (a slight slant in the stitch) and is easiest to reproduce.

The Stitch

1. To start the single needle knitting, thread a needle with approximately a metre of wool and make a loop.

2. To make the first stitch, pull the needle through the centre of the loop. Repeat this step until you have the required number of stitches.

3. Then depending on whether you are knitting backwards and forwards or in the round, either straighten this foundation row into a straight line, or pull the short end until the stitches are in a tight circle.

4. Pull the needle through each stitch creating a loop in the palm of your hand. The needle should go on top of the yarn creating something similar to a blanket stitch.

5. Continue doing this in the round until the knitting is long enough, or if you are going back and forth knit to the end of your stitches and then turn the work and knit the other way.

Joining new lengths of yarn or changing colour: Secure the stitch when you can no longer make any more stitches. This will be your final stitch with that length of wool. Thread another piece of wool and secure the length where you finished off and continue knitting. You will have lots of threads sticking out of the sock – just cut these ends off.

For more information please see the blog: http://ancientegyptiansock.blogspot.com/
Knitting a Coptic Sock: The Practical Bit

The Pattern

Materials: 100g Jacobs Fleece Wool (or pure wool), 1 darning needle, scissors

Size 7/8

To make smaller socks, per foot size reduce the opening line of stitches on the toes by 2 stitches and the number of rows to the end by 3. Increase up for larger sizes. The same rule can be applied to the ankle, though it is worth measuring it for the correct width.

Tension is based on 10 stitches = 5cm and 3 rows = 1cm

Experimenting with the stitch and your tension is important before you start. If your ‘comfortable’ tension is different to the above, you need to work out how many stitches and rows it takes to get the required size, and then work from that. Keep trying the sock on and adapt your sizing to fit. Everybody's feet are different!

Big Toe

Create 18 stitches

Row 1: Stitch the 18 stitches from left to right
Round 2: Join stitch 18 to stitch 1 and start knitting in the round
Continue to knit in the round until
Round 12: Knit every other stitch (9 stitches)
Knit in the round until
Round 15: Knit one stitch and then knit very other stitch (5 stitches remain)
Round 17: Knit every other stitch until 2 stitches remain
Round 18: Knit the remaining stitches together to close the hole

Other toes

Create 36 stitches

Row 1: Stitch the 36 stitches from left to right
Round 2: Join stitch 36 to stitch 1 and start knitting in the round
Continue to knit in the round until
Round 12: Knit 3 stitches then skip 1; repeat until to end (27 stitches)
Knit in the round until
Round 15: Knit one stitch and then knit very other for the next 10 stitches, knit every stitch end to end (22 stitches remain)
Round 16: Knit one stitch and then knit very other for the next 10 stitches, knit every stitch end to end (17 stitches remain)
Round 17: Knit one stitch and then knit very other for the next 10 stitches, knit every stitch end to end (12 stitches remain)
Round 18: Knit every stitch
Round 19: Knit the remaining stitches together to close the hole
Foot

Place both completed toes alongside each other so the open ends are aligned. (You may find it easier to pin them together). Using the stitches along this bottom edge, knit 54 stitches in the round joining the two toes together.

Continue knitting in the round until the foot both reaches your ankle and the underside can be pulled to the back of your foot/heel.

To get the right size and fit, keep trying the the sock on.

Ankle

Create 60 stitches
Round 1 – Foundation chain of 60 stitches
Round 2 – Join stitch 60 to stitch 1
Continue to knit in the round until
Round 5: Knit 5 stitches then skip a stitch, then 5 stitches and skip a stitch again until you reduce the stitches to 50.
Continue to knit in the round until it measure 6 cm or the length required from the top of the sock to top of the foot.

Heel Flap

When the Ankle reaches the top of the foot part of the sock, stop knitting in the round.
Count 17 stitches in from the first stitch and pick up 16 stitches centrally from the ankle piece to create the heel flap – there should be 17 stitches on either side of the flap.
Knit these 16 stitches backwards and forwards until the flap measures 8 cm or reaches to the base of the foot.

You then need to knit a rectangular piece, 17 stitches wide, which reaches from the bottom of the right hand side of the ankle of the sock under your foot round to the bottom on the left hand side of the ankle.
This can either be knitted separately and stitched to the sock at the end, or it can be knitted onto the bottom of the ankle by the heel flap and grafted to the sole of the sock before being joined to the other side of the ankle. Again, keep trying on the ankle to check it fits!

You now have a two-toed Coptic sock

Note: Remember that you need a left and a right pair, so which way round you stitch the foot part to the ankle part of the sock is very important when making your second sock!

If you get small holes across the sock just back-fill them with the same stitch.
Knitting a Coptic Sock: The Historical Bit

Life of a Coptic Sock

Egypt in 4th and 5th centuries AD has been described as Greek occupied under Roman rule. There was a mixture of Greeks, Romans and Egyptians. Hawara in the Fayum, where the socks in the Petrie Museum come from, was a good example of this.

The socks come from a period of transition from the Roman Empire to Byzantine, moving from a predominately pagan world to Christian or Coptic Egypt. It was a complex and developed society.

Clothing

The dominant material for clothes in late antiquity was wool. In antiquity good quality clothing was a way of storing wealth. Much of the clothing was made at home, though there was also a considerable textile and clothing industry. The making of clothes is usually referred to through the raw materials such as linen and wool.

The Egyptians kept both sheep and goats, classified as “small cattle” in the records. The sheep were of three varieties, a semi-bred variety of a hairy medium-fleece type, and later a fleece-less thin-tailed sheep with corkscrew horns, and then a shorter, fatter, variety with curved horns. The goats were a “hairy” or “shaggy” type. For these socks we recommend readily available pure wool, such as Jacob’s Sheep wool.

Excavation

The two-toed Egyptian socks were discovered by Flinders Petrie in a tomb dating from the Fourth Century AD in the cemetery of Hawara in his 1887-8 season there. They were found with pieces of a wooden casket, a glass vial, pieces of embroidery and pieces of a crimson hairnet, seen in the plate from Petrie’s excavation journal on the left.

The distinctive separate toe allowed the socks to be worn with thonged or strapped sandals. The socks (and soles of sandals) are on display in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London.

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