COPTIC AND EARLY ISLAMIC TEXTILES

The Copts can justifiably claim to be one of the longest established communities of Egypt. Their name “Copt” is derived from the Greek “Aigyptios” which was used to distinguish the indigenous population of Egypt from later immigrants of Greek, Roman or Arab origin. Their position varied throughout the centuries after the Roman conquest of 30 B.C. as Egypt then functioned as a province of large empires rather than as an independent country. During the Roman period Egypt was controlled by a few high-ranking Roman civil and military officials who employed Greeks and hellenised Egyptians as provincial administrators. Beneath this élite the population consisted of Copts who mainly worked as agriculturalists and were subject to land and poll taxes. Most Copts were still pagan although Christianity had gained a foothold in Alexandria by the late 2nd century A.D. Christianity spread after the edict of the Emperor Constantine decreed in 313 A.D. that it was to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Egypt until 641 A.D. was to be ruled on behalf of the emperors of Byzantium, the successors to Roman power in the East, by a small group of Greek officials. The Christianity now practised by the Copts had its own local features — receptiveness to new intellectual ideas introduced through the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, rapid development of monasticism, and isolation caused by Egypt’s support of the Monophysite heresy since the Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D. At a popular level certain Christian beliefs found easy acceptance. The Holy Virgin and Infant Jesus for example could be readily identified with the much venerated ancient Egyptian goddess Isis and her son Horus while themes of sacrifice and redemption were paralleled in the resurrection cycle of the god Osiris.

In 641 A.D. the Arab general Amr conquered Egypt for the Moslems and under their rule the Copts became identified specifically as subordinate Christian subjects. The Arabs basically continued the Byzantine administrative system and generally guaranteed freedom of worship to their Coptic subjects and employed them in their service. Conversion to Islam was, however, encouraged and as a poll tax was levied on Christians many Copts became Moslem so that their numbers gradually dwindled until a community of about 3,000,000 only survives today. Together with the Copts absorption into a Moslem culture their language, the last phase of ancient Egyptian written in a
modified Greek alphabet, declined and was replaced by Arabic by the 13th century. At present it
survives in certain rites of the Coptic church and in the vocabulary of colloquial Arabic.

The Copts had survived by adapting to the requirements of the changing rulers of Egypt. Apart from
their main activity as landworking peasants they possessed considerable skills as craftsmen which
they turned to the service of pagan, Christian and Moslem alike. This versatility is especially revealed
in their textile arts.

1 COPTIC TEXTILES
Although the Copts wove textiles both for themselves and for Moslem patrons for convenience
the term Coptic will here refer to pieces made for a Christian community. Coptic textiles are
among the enormous number of fabrics dating from Pharaonic times through to the Moslem
period which have been unearthed from burial sites in Egypt and which are now housed in
museums and private collections throughout the world. As these burial sites were situated in the
desert between the limits of the Nile's inundation and the outlying mountains the dryness of the
climate preserved the grave furnishings. While Coptic textiles were known since the early 19th
century mainly through the activities of grave robbers, it was not until 1881 that systematic
exploration of Graeco-Roman and Christian burial grounds began under the direction of the
Egyptologist Gaston Maspero. Thereafter excavation continued steadily. Two sites in Upper
Egypt, Akhmim and Antinoe, were especially important. Akhmim, the site of the Greek city
Panopolis, had been one of the chief centres of linen manufacture in Egypt. Its burial grounds,
which were used continuously from Graeco-Roman to Arab times were excavated by Maspero in
1884 and yielded numerous textile finds including examples worked in linen and wool tapestry
weave. The city of Antinoe, built by the Emperor Hadrian in 140 A.D., also yielded rich finds of
textiles including wool and silk weaving during two main seasons of excavation from 1896 to 1897
and again from 1906 to 1907. Other important sites are Hawara in the Delta region excavated by
Sir Flinders Petrie 1887-1888 and 1910-1911, Ehnasiya, Armant and Bahnasa. The Royal Scottish
Museum has a total of 175 Coptic textiles including pieces from the sites of Akhmim, Ehnasiya,
Eshmunein, El-Drounka and Hawara acquired either as gifts from archaeological expeditions or by
purchase.

The dating of Coptic textiles is by no means definitive as much material has been carelessly and
hastily excavated by grave robbers hoping for a quick profit in the antiquities market.
absence of full documentation and provenance attempts to date the textiles have mainly relied on comparative stylistic analysis which has produced a broad chronological scheme spanning the 4th to 12th centuries into which objects have been classified approximately according to the degree of late Graeco-Roman and Christian influence in their decoration. Such a classification must be regarded as provisional and constantly subject to revision.

Most of the surviving Coptic textiles are fragments but enough large and relatively complete pieces exist to provide a means of reconstructing their use. They were primarily woven into garments — tunics and cloaks, or into large hangings and curtains where a background usually of plain weave linen displayed medallions and borders woven in contrasting wool tapestry weave. The majority of garments excavated from Coptic burial sites were tunics of basically simple shape. They were woven in a single loomwidth in a cross shape which when folded in half at the shoulders produced a T-shaped garment in which back and front were alike. They were woven from sleeve to sleeve so that all the usually horizontal weft threads hung vertically. The style of decoration varied. Basically a band of tapestry weave extended on each side from shoulder to hem and along each sleeve end. Later a band was woven around the wide neck opening and decorative medallions were added to the shoulders. Eventually the body bands became shorter, the neck decoration was omitted and a pair of medallions were added to the tunic at knee level.

Textile production was highly organised with weavers grouped into official guilds. The range of techniques employed ranged from sophisticated tapestry and brocade weaves used in clothing and furnishing fabrics to the knotting used for bags and accessories. Textiles were decorated with motifs woven in various colours, or painted and embroidered. The principal materials used were linen and wool, firmly spun but in varying degrees of fineness. Silks were not in widespread use until the 5th-6th centuries. Linen yarns were usually natural or bleached although there are some examples which have been dyed pale blue. Colours, however, were mainly reserved for wool yarns which were dyed with natural vegetable dyes — madder for red, indigo for blue, rhamnus berries for yellow. Although the basic range was limited rich and varied effects could be achieved by skilfully blending threads of different shades.

Most of the surviving pieces show that two types of weave were combined — plain weave for the background and tapestry weave for decorative motifs. Plain weave was woven in linen and is the simplest weave where horizontal weft threads pass over and under single vertical warp threads in
alternating sequence. In tapestry weave more diverse effects were achieved. Here the wefts are
coloured wools woven as in plain weave but beaten down so that the warp threads are concealed.
Where numerous wefts of different colours were used they were woven as separate blocks leaving
slits or were dovetailed around common warp threads. Shapes were built up by varying the
pressure on the wefts and by the use of additional outline wefts. More complex effects were
created by using supplementary wefts which outlined motifs in a whipped overcast weave
(nos. 3, 6) or by crossing a pair of wefts over the tapestry weave (no. 5) or by simply passing
wefts over several warps to create a smooth satin effect (no. 25). Weft threads could also be
looped to give a towel-like pile when in linen (no. 4) or a tufted raised effect when worked in
coloured wools (no. 18). A different technique was used in silk textiles that of a reversible twill
weave creating a kind of double cloth (nos. 28 & 29).

The schemes of decoration employed in Coptic textiles provided considerable scope for a wide
repertoire of ornament trained into borders, medallions and continuous repeats. Sources of design
lay in a blending of pagan and Christian themes. The treatment of human figures have the freedom
and movement of Graeco-Roman classicism shown by running boys (no. 2), hunters (no. 28) and
winged cupids (no. 10). Later Christian ideas were grafted on to these draped figures as in the
haloed military saints (no. 7). A specifically Egyptian interpretation of a classical theme is shown
by a goddess riding a dolphin with fish swimming around her (no. 14) recalling Nilotic riverscapes.
A lively animal and bird world of lions (no. 28), hares (no. 14), and ducks (no. 8) swarms around
and among the figures or runs along borders. Foliage is fluent and scrolling (nos. 1 & 3) or
organised into disciplined schemes of tendrils and spirals (nos. 22, 23, 24) while single flowers
such as lotus buds (no. 11) and roses (no. 18) can be scattered across a plain field. Geometrical
motifs were used for repeat designs such as the interlaced octagons of a shoulder medallion
(no. 6).
1. MEDALLION FROM HEM OF A TUNIC
Cream linen ground in plain weave. Decoration woven in tapestry weave using cream and purple wool wefts over cream linen warps. Design of an eight-pointed star framed in a scrolling foliage border.
EGYPT, Elephantine, 4th-5th century A.D., 8.5 x 8.5 cm. 1910.111.37.3 Given by the Egypt Exploration Society.

2. MEDALLION FROM HEM OF A TUNIC
Cream linen ground in plain weave with supplementary weft loop pile. Decoration woven in tapestry weave using cream linen and purple wool wefts over cream linen warps. Design of a running boy holding a sickle and bunch of grapes within a plant scroll border.
EGYPT, 4th-5th century A.D., 14 x 14.5 cm. 1960.800, Bequeathed by Mrs Grace M Crowfoot.

3. SLEEVE BAND FROM A TUNIC
Cream linen ground in plain weave with supplementary weft loop pile. Border worked in tapestry weave with cream linen and purple wool wefts over cream linen warps. Supplementary cream linen weft woven as an overcast outline around motifs. Design of plant scrolls terminating in birds.
EGYPT, 4th-5th century A.D., 33 x 11 cm. 1960.799, Bequeathed by Mrs Grace M Crowfoot

4. TOWEL FRAGMENT
Cream linen worked in plain weave with rows of looped weft at intervals. Fringed warp ends.
EGYPT, Hawara, 4th-5th century A.D., 42 x 13 cm. 1889.90D, Given by Miss Amelia Edwards.

5. SLEEVE BAND FROM A TUNIC
Cream wool ground in plain weave. Decoration woven in cream and purple wool tapestry weave wefts over cream wool warps. Design of bands of lozenge network motifs. An additional weft is worked in interlaced overcasting to give a lattice effect.
EGYPT, 5th-6th century A.D., 30.5 x 10 cm. 1960.803, Bequeathed by Mrs Grace M Crowfoot.

6. MEDALLION FROM SHOULDER OF A TUNIC
Cream linen ground in plain weave. Design woven in purple wool tapestry weave wefts over cream linen warps. A supplementary cream linen weft is woven as an overcast outline around motifs. Design a roundel containing repeating interlocked octagons and framed in a looped scrolling border.
EGYPT, 6th century A.D., diam. 28cm. 1887.665
7. **FOUR PIECES ORIGINALLY FORMING A VERTICAL TUNIC BAND**

Cream linen warps woven in tapestry weave with wool wefts in cream, red, purple, dark blue. Design of figure panels. Two haloed figures alternate — one on horseback and one wearing late Roman armour and pleated drapery holding a sword and shield. They are possibly to be identified with Christian saints.

EGYPT, Akhmim 6th-7th century A.D. 23 x 11 cm; 2 at 17 x 11 cm, 20 x 11 cm. 1911.318.

8. **BORDER**

Cream linen ground in plain weave. Design woven in tapestry weave wefts of cream, orange, brick red, greenish blue, navy blue, and black wool over cream linen warps. Design of pairs of navy blue and cream striped ducks alternating with pairs of blue stepped triangles against a red ground and bounded by guard stripes of stepped triangles.

EGYPT, Akhmim, 6th-7th century A.D., 18 x 11.5 cm. 1887.669.

9. **MEDALLION FROM A TUNIC**

Entirely woven in slit tapestry weave in wefts of brick red, ochre yellow, green, dark blue and dark brown and black wools over linen warps. An elaborate design consists of a central portrait head set in a field of deer and pelicans and framed by a border of floral sprays.

EGYPT, 6th-7th century A.D., diam. 15 cm. 1893.439.

10. **MEDALLION FROM A TUNIC**

Entirely woven in slit tapestry weave in wefts of brick red, pink, ochre yellow, dark blue and black wools over linen warps. A supplementary weft is woven in outline overcasting around some motifs. Design of a central figure framed in an elaborate border of classical putti holding jars, dishes piled with fruit and prancing dogs.

EGYPT, Akhmim, 6th-7th century A.D., diam. 20 cm. 1887.668.

11. **MOTIF PROBABLY FROM A LARGE CURTAIN**

Woven in slit tapestry wefts of green, navy blue, ochre yellow and brick red wools. Design a triple spray of lotus buds.

EGYPT, 7th century A.D., 10 x 6 cm. 1910.111.37.2 Given by the Egypt Exploration Society.

12 & 13. **TWO MOTIFS PROBABLY FROM A HANGING**

Cream linen ground in plain weave woven with slit tapestry wefts in pink, blue and cream wools. Designs of open feathery flower and a spiked bud.

EGYPT, 7th century A.D., 9 x 7 cm; 10 x 12 cm. 1911.314. A & B.

14. **MEDALLION FROM A TUNIC**

Entirely woven in slit tapestry weave in wefts of red, pink, blue, mustard, cream and black wools over linen warps. Some motifs outlined by a supplementary weft. An elaborate design based on classical Nilotic themes. A winged nude goddess rides on a dolphin accompanied by fish. Around her is a border of stylised putti and running hares.

EGYPT, 8th century A.D., 26 x 25 cm. 1893.438.
15-17. THREE MOTIFS PROBABLY FROM A HANGING
Cream linen ground in plain weave woven in tapestry weave with wefts of cream, light red, crimson, blue, olive green wools. Designs of plant and flower motifs — leaf containing flower buds, open lotus, and a stylised rose.
EGYPT, Akhmim, 8th century A.D., 10 x 7 cm; 10 x 11 cm; 9 x 7 cm.
1911.314 & a-B.

18. CORNER OF A CLOTH OR HANGING
Cream linen ground in plain weave. Decoration woven in wefts looped to create a pile effect in deep rose and light pink, cream, turquoise, yellow, orange and dark brown wools. Design of an open four-petalled rose and looped guilloche border.
EGYPT, Akhmim, 8th century A.D., 37 x 37 cm.
1911.319

19. END OF A SCARF OR HANGING
 Entirely worked in slit tapestry weave using red, cream and purple wool wefts over red wool warps. Some supplementary wefts used to outline motifs. Design of stepped oval and pine cone motifs arranged into borders and squares. Selvage of weft overcasting over a thickness of four warps. Deep cording fringe of green, yellow and red wool.
EGYPT, 8th-9th century A.D., 46 x 16.5 cm.
1911.210.16.57 Given by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt.

20 & 21. MEDALLIONS FROM A TUNIC
Cream linen ground in plain weave. Design worked in tapestry weave using crimson, green and orange wool and cream linen wefts. Figurative designs of a man riding a winged griffin and a curious horse-like animal.
EGYPT, Akhmim, 9th century A.D., 14 x 13 cm; 13 x 8 cm.
1911.320 & A.

22. BAND FROM NECK OF A TUNIC
Worked in tapestry weave using red and cream wool wefts over linen warps. Design of pairs of heart-shaped leaf motifs in which outlines are worked in supplementary overcast cream wefts. Border of hooked motifs.
EGYPT, Akhmim, 9th century A.D., 42 x 8 cm.
1887.666

23. VERTICAL BAND FROM A TUNIC
Ground of cream wool warps woven with red stripes. Decorative band woven in tapestry weave in wefts of purple, red, green, blue and cream wool. Continuous design of stylised heart-shaped floral motifs.
EGYPT, 9th century A.D., 34 x 21 cm.
1911.210.16.51A, Given by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt.

24. BORDER FROM A TUNIC
Worked in purple wool tapestry weave wefts on cream linen warps. Supplementary cream wool wefts outline motifs. Design of heart-shaped foliate tendrils alternating with pairs of spirals.
EGYPT, 9th century A.D., 35.5 x 13.5 cm.
1911.210.16.27, Given by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt.
25. CLOTH
Cream linen warps woven with stripes of dark blue and red wool in a weft-faced satin weave. Supplementary cream wool wefts used to make a lozenge design.
EGYPT, 9th century A.D., 33 x 32 cm.
1911.210.16.41, Given by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt.

26. VERTICAL BAND FROM A TUNIC
Woven in slit tapestry weave using crimson, ochre yellow, green, blue, brown and black wool wefts on cream linen warps. A design of stylised foliage loops contains lion, bird and figure motifs.
EGYPT, Akhmim, 10th century A.D., 66.5 x 9.5 cm.
1911.269.

27. VERTICAL BAND FROM A TUNIC
Woven in slit tapestry weave using crimson, yellow, green, blue, brown and black wool wefts on cream linen warps. A design of hallowed figures, lions and birds within a foliage scroll.
EGYPT, 10th century A.D., 26 x 10 cm.
1950.317.

28. PANEL FROM A TUNIC
Light brown and cream silk woven in a reversible twill damask weave. A design of four roundels contain classical motifs—a roaring lion, hunters armed with shield, spear, bow and arrow, and a leopard.
EGYPT, 6th century A.D., 17.7 x 19.2 cm.
1975.299.

29. VERTICAL BORDER FROM A TUNIC
Light brown and cream silk woven in a reversible twill damask weave. Design of lions among foliage and pairs of birds.
EGYPT, El Droumka, 6th century A.D., 17 x 5 cm.
1898.492.

30. BAG
Knotted in sprang technique using brown yellow and cream wools. Repeated design of circular motifs.
EGYPT, Eshmunen, c. 5th century A.D., 17 x 19 cm.
1911.316.

31. CHILD’S TUNIC
Bell shaped with loose straight sleeves. Skirt shaping achieved by adding triangular sections to sides of straight centre piece. Woven in cream linen in plain weave. Decoration confined to a narrow band on each shoulder in weft brocaded brown silk of hexagon and S-motifs alternating. Garment sewn together with linen thread using rund and fell seams.
EGYPT, El-Droumka, 9th-10th century, 41.4 cm.
1924.328.
II EARLY ISLAMIC TEXTILES

Several of the burial grounds such as Akhmim, Antinoe and Ehnasiya, which have been such a fruitful source of Coptic textiles also continued to be in use after the Arab conquest of Egypt and have therefore yielded comparable material made for Moslem patrons. The sites of El-Drounka, Dair ed-Dik and Dair el-A’zam were especially rich in Moslem finds. The main pieces now in the Royal Scottish Museum’s collection have been attributed to El-Drounka.

Accurate dating of both Coptic and Moslem textiles shares similar problems. Often the pieces were excavated in uncontrolled conditions so that precious information concerning provenance is not available. Coptic and Islamic textiles overlap in time and it is therefore often difficult to separate them as they shared techniques and many decorative motifs. Certain pieces, however, have survived woven or embroidered with dated Arabic inscriptions ranging from the late 9th through to the 12th century which provides a basic chronological framework.

Egypt’s Arab rulers realising that the Copts were skilled weavers who had developed and advanced textile industry naturally employed them. Coptic techniques and designs therefore influenced fabrics made for Arab customers though in time independent features appeared especially in the style of ornament which became increasingly more abstract and formalised. The Coptic tunic was adopted by the Arabs but the decoration was modified and confined to narrow bands below the neck and along the top of the sleeves worked in tapestry weave, embroidery or painting. These bands were in turn adapted in the tunics worn by royalty or given as robes of honour. Here the lively scrolling foliage and figure motifs of the Copts gave way to Arabic inscriptions written in angular Kufic calligraphy which included the ruler’s name, place and sometimes the date of manufacture. This group of inscribed textiles is known as tiraz. A second group of textiles, of which examples are exhibited here, more closely resembles the Coptic types. They are woven in linen in plain weave or in silk which came to be more frequently used under the Arabs. Decoration continued to be worked either in plain weave stripes (no. 8) or in tapestry weave bands in linen, wool and silk dyed blue, red, green and yellow (nos. 2 & 3). Designs and inscriptions were also embroidered. Motifs continued the Coptic repertoire of scrolling foliage, guilloche borders (nos. 2 & 3), medallions enclosing running hares (no. 3) and birds, but excluded the figures drawn from pagan Nilotic themes and Christian imagery. The style is more delicate and given a definite Islamic character by the inclusion of bands of Kufic calligraphy (no. 2).
CATALOGUE

1. CHILD’S TUNIC
T-shaped with loose sleeves. Width achieved by adding straight sections at sides of centre piece. Woven in cream linen in plain weave. Decoration of narrow spaced vertical striped embroidered with small lozenges in satin stitch in brown wool. This example should be compared with no. 31 in the Coptic section.
EGYPT, El-Drounka, 11th-12th century A.D., 40 cm. 1924.329.

2. BORDER
Woven in golden yellow and crimson silk tapestry weave over cream silk warps. Some remains of blue silk. Supplementary crimson silk were used to outline motifs. Design of horizontal bands of Arabic calligraphy in Kufic and naskh scripts alternating with rows of guilloche scroll enclosing motifs of stylised running hares.
EGYPT, mid 12th century A.D., 24 x 9 cm. 1879.161.

3. BORDER
Woven in cream linen in plain weave. Decorated with two horizontal bands woven in yellow, crimson, blue and black silk tapestry weave over cream linen warps. A design of interlaced guilloche scroll enclosing stylised bird medallions and the Arabic inscription “power” in Kufic calligraphy repeated.
EGYPT, Akhmim, mid 12th century A.D., 18 x 15 cm. 1911.268.

4. BORDER PROBABLY FROM A ROBE
Background of silk woven in plain weave in checks of yellow red and blue. Deep border woven in yellow, red and blue silk tapestry weave. Design of an interlaced plaited band and two rows of Arabic inscription in naskh and Kufic scripts.
EGYPT, El-Drounka, late 12th century A.D., 21 x 29 cm. 1898.491.

5. BORDER PROBABLY FROM A SCARF
Woven in cream linen in plain weave. Embroidered with blue and black silks in cross stitch. Two bands of repeated cross and lozenge motifs.
EGYPT, Ehnasiya, 12th century A.D., 24 x 16 cm. 1910.111.37.1, Given by the Egypt Exploration Fund.

6. BORDER
Woven in cream linen in plain weave. Embroidered with blue, brown and black silks in stem, chain, satin and feather stitches. Band of stylised naskh calligraphy against a scrolling ground.
EGYPT, El-Drounka, late 11th century A.D., 37 x 10.5 cm. 1898.489.
7. BORDER
Cream linen ground woven in coarse plain weave. Embroidered with crimson, blue, green and brown silks in stem stitch. Design of stylised block-like Kufic calligraphy.
EGYPT, El-Drounka, 12th century A.D., 36 x 15 cm.
1898.486.

8. FRAGMENT PROBABLY FROM A GARMENT
Fine silk woven in plain weave using cream warps and weft stripes of blue, red, yellow and green.
EGYPT, El-Drounka, 12th century A.D., 37 x 28 cm.
1898.483.

9. FRAGMENT PROBABLY FROM A GARMENT
Background of cream silk woven in plain weave. Design woven in supplementary floating wefts in crimson, rose, brick red, three shades of blue and yellow silks, and gold thread wrapped around a silk core. Repeated design of cockerel motifs within octagons set in a lattice background of small hexagons.
IRAQ, Baghdad?, c. 9th century A.D., 17.5 x 32 cm.
1934.482.

There are identical pieces to this fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Kunstindustrimuseet, Copenhagen, and the Cooper Union Museum, New York. They have obviously been cut from one original and reputedly were excavated in Egypt. Comparative studies of similar textile fragments and other material suggest that the designs are derived from Sassanian Persian sources of 6th-7th centuries A.D. and that the centres of production are more likely to be found in Iraq. Certainly the cockerel motifs do not relate to anything in the Coptic/Arab traditions of Egypt.

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EGYPT, mid 12 century A.D., 24 x 9 cm. 1979.161.

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