COPTIC TEXTILES.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND.

CATALOGUE 12 N.M.I.

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

FACULTY OF DESIGN

DEPARTMENT OF WOVEN TEXTILES

"COPTIC TEXTILES IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND"

BY

AILISH MC DAID

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of BA in History of Art and Textile Design.

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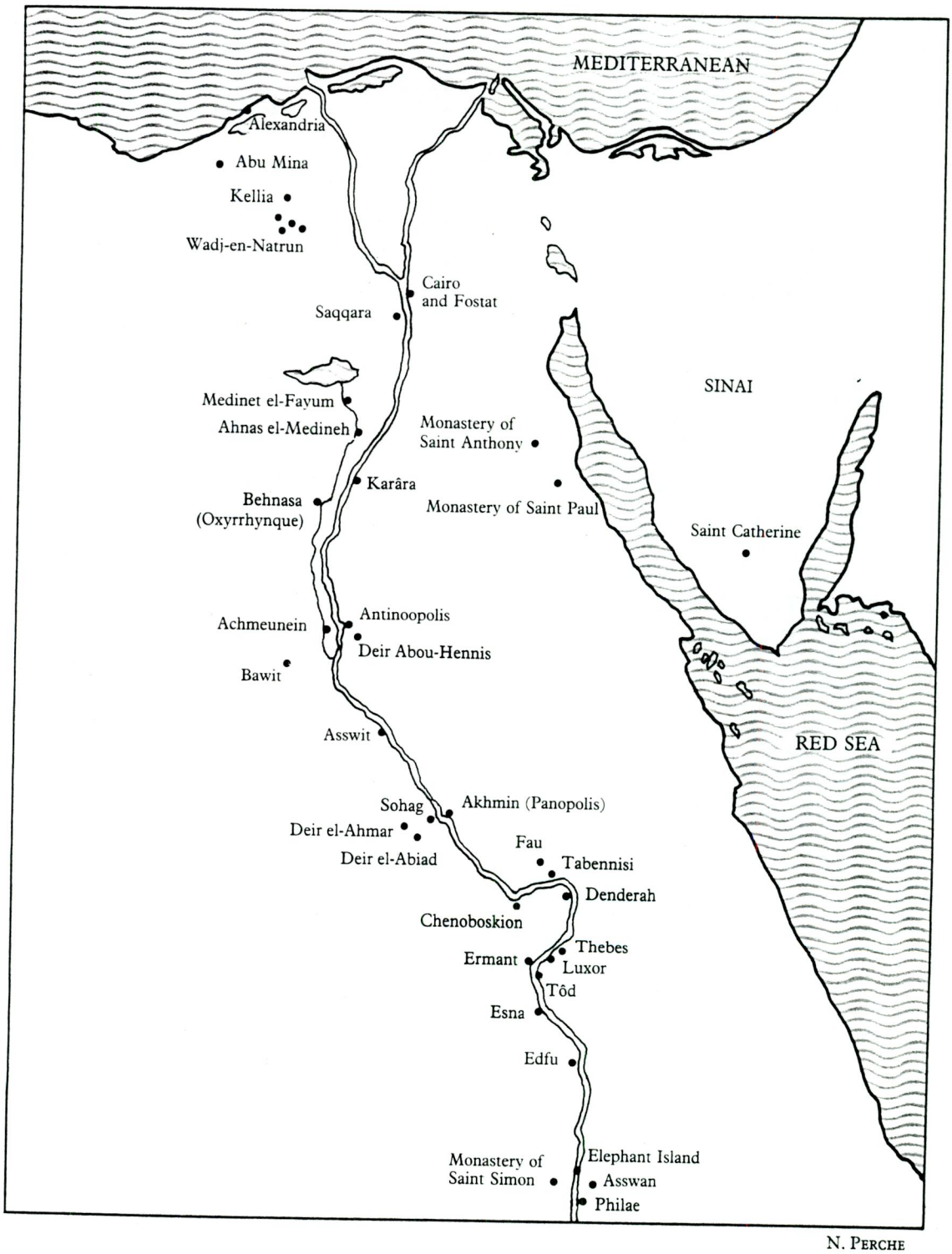

Map of Coptic Egypt

CHRONOLOGY.

Prehistoric and predynastic periods	Before 3000 B.C.
Old kingdom and middle kingdom	3000 - 1600 B.C.
New kingdom and late period	1600 - 304 B.C.
Ptolemaic period	30 B.C. - A.D. 395
Roman period	A.D. 395 - 647
Byzantine period	A.D. 620
Fatimid dynasty in Egypt	A.D. 969 - 1171

What is commonly called the Coptic period is a cultural period in Egypt. The stylistic forerunners appear first towards the end of the third century A.D. in the Roman art of Egypt and develops fully during the Byzantine period and is then restricted to Christian features of Islamic Egypt.

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INTRODUCTION.

For the general public, Coptic Egypt is the world of Coptic weavers whose work was so spectacularly brought to light by archaeologists at the turn of the century. The finds revealed to art lovers a previously unsuspected genre, surprising not only for the size of the discoveries but also for their quality and technical originality.

Since them, museums and temporary exhibitions have displayed thousands of Coptic fabrics, and books about the period never fail to make way for Coptic Egypt and its weaving techniques.

This thesis will document the rich heritage of Coptic textiles from beginning in the Pharonic period through to their zenith in the early days of Christianity.

It will discuss the history of these fabrics, the techniques involved and the stylistic evolution of motifs whose simplicity and constrasting colour ways has attracted much attention.

Finally, I will discuss the wonderful examples of Coptic fabrics in our own National Museum.

CHAPTER ONE.

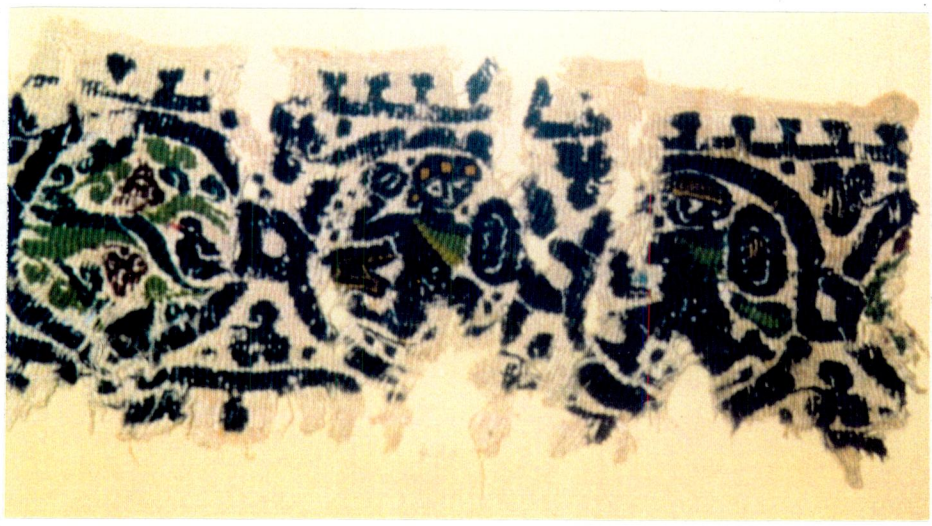
BACKGROUND

TO

COPTIC EGYPT

AND ITS

TEXTILES



CATALOGUE 6 NMI

Between the two great periods of Egyptian history, the age of the Pharaohs and that of Islam, lies "Coptic Egypt". There are various ideas on where and how the word "Copt" or "Coptic" originated. One school of thought claims that the word "Copt" or "Coptic" derived from the Greek "Aigyptios" which in Arabic becomes "Kipt" from which we get Copt. The Greeks gave this name to the inhabitants of the land of Pharaohs. Other schools however, assert that after the Arab conquest in the middle of the seventh century, the word was reduced to its consonants. In Arabic script, which does not have vowels, the word becomes "qbt" which in our own pronunciation becomes "Copt".

When the Arabs arrived in Egypt in 641/642, the country was entirely Christianised. The word Copt referred not only to its inhabitants, but also to the Christians, in opposition to the Muslim invaders. As time passed on, the term ended up being applied to the religious rite followed in Egypt by the Christians.

But the history of the Copts does not end abruptly in the middle of the seventh century. The Copts have always been regarded as the intellectual elite of the Egyptian nation and occupied many of the highest functions in administration.

Nevertheless, the heavy taxes which burdened the non-Muslims lead many of the Copts to embrace the religion of the visitors and by the middle of the ninth century they had lost the numerical superiority. Today the Copts make up only about 10% of the population.

The word "Coptic" not only designates an ethnic group and a church, it is also a language. The first traces of Coptic writing appeared in the second century B.C. and it flourished from the third century A.D. From the beginning of the eight century Arabic was proclaimed the official language and Coptic was strictly confined to the liturgical function it still retains, in part, today.

There is however, another sense to the word "Coptic". During the fourth century a new artistic style began to make itself felt at a time when the country was still largely pagan. The word "Coptic" is therefore used to describe and refer to Egyptians, both pagan and Christian, as well as their artistic production from the fourth century to the end of the twelfth century, when the arts and crafts of the Egyptian now often copying from Byzantine and Islamic models, finally faded out.

Before this date however Christianity flourished under Muslim rule. The Copts played a dominant role in the development of an Islamic art in Egypt.

So from the fourth century to the fifth century there was the development of Coptic art which was largely pagan. Then from the mid fifth century to the eight century Coptic art flourished as it gradually became Christian. From the eight to the twelfth century Coptic art was under Arab domination and eventually faded out.

The Copts inhabited the Nile valley and represented a civilisation that flourished over the period spanning from the fourth to the twelfth century. They are known for their textile, a large number of which have survived due to exceptional climate conditions.

The Arab conquest did put an end to the production of Coptic weaves, but in fact the weavers were considered masters of their crafts and renowned for the quality of their textiles.

The term "Coptic" is commonly used to describe a large number of textiles from Egyptian finds, dating from the late Roman period into Islamic times.

Coptic textiles usually comprise of whole garments such as tunics, or parts of garments such as tunic ornaments or sections of cloaks, fragments of or whole hangings, cushion covers and other household decorations.

With these textiles which were not necessarily the garments of the dead, being added to the wrappings of the body, there thus was an increase in the number of the samples preserved.

Nearly all the Coptic fabrics known today were found in tombs where the dead lay dressed in their finest clothes. The exceptional good state of preservation of material which elsewhere was perishable is due to the Egyptian climate which is very warm and dry, and the sand soils in which the tombs were dug, always a long way from the damp cultivated fields.

For this reason Egyptian fabrics offer us very full and precious information about weaving techniques and designs in Egypt.

The ancient ritual of mummification which for several thousands of years had been considered indispensable for the survival of the body and its soul was gradually abandoned during the third century A.D. Instead people were buried according to their rank and function, the humblest in simple graves and the more important figures in masonry tombs. The bodies were rarely placed in coffins but laid on wooden planks or directly on earth. They were wrapped in shrouds held in place by narrow bandages, thus imitating the previous mummies.

There were sometimes several of these shrouds, completely white or with woven decoration each covering a different part of the body. Often pieces of wall hangings or shawls were used, for the ribbons have left a lattice of marks all around the surface of the cloth.

The dead person was buried in clothes whose number and splendour was in proportion to his fortune. Some had as many as four tunics. But however opulent the garments, the procedure was the same for all, after being dressed in even the most richly embroidered cloths the body was wrapped in one or two shrouds of white cloth, a layer of palm fibres and finally, to hold it all together, one last shroud. All the material covering the body were held together by multi-coloured braid making geometrical patterns.

Death for the believer was not the end, but the preparation for a new birth. This may help us to understand why the Christians wished to represent themselves in their finest clothes at the moment of the resurrection of the body.

Most of the fabrics passed down to us were only fragments of clothing. They are rarely complete due to decomposition of the body. For this reason, archaeologists and collectors have usually cut out the part of woven decoration to separate them from the damaged and stained linen cloths. Many Coptic fabrics have thus been taken out

of context and represented as pictures in museums and private collections.

It is also common to find that most of the garments were well worn before burial and it is very normal to find that tunic ornaments often pre-date the garment to which they were attached. They were probably removed when the garment was badly worn and fastened to a new one.

Most of the material came from burial grounds where it survived partly as a result of embalming, in the case where their ancient Egyptian tradition lived on, but chiefly as a result of the climate and natural preservation of the sand.

Egyptian textile technology is better documented than most. The climate, Geography and burial customs of Egypt have favoured the preservation of textiles. Fragments have been found which could have been woven as early as the fourth millennium B.C. Burials that luckily had been placed well above local water tables and far enough away from the Nile to have remained unaffected by the river's annual flooding. At least 20,000 textiles, a few whole, but the majority fragments are estimated to exist in public and private collections.

In Coptic design, a taste for decorated fabrics can be traced back to the Pharonic era which witnessed lavish

tunics bearing woven and embroidered scenes with Egyptian motifs.

By the middle of the third century A.D., Christianity had been established throughout Egypt. In spite of the cruel persecutions by the Romans and then by the Arabs, the early Christians or Copts developed their own individual art style in the provincial and monastic centres away from the influence of the great cities of the Nile delta.

The Copts rejected the illusionism of the Hellenistic Art and adopted a different iconography, preferring to use intricate subjects and ornaments in their designs. This type of decoration was especially suited to textile design. The variety and often colourful appearance of Coptic textiles have made them attractive to collectors. The majority of these fabrics are embellished with motifs worked in dyed yarns.

These motifs are of a number of types, often distinctly different in appearance with designs varying from Hellenistic to Roman and then Christian, though the techniques used may be similar in some. The main designs consist of human or animal figures. Other designs are formal in appearance with floral motifs and geometric figures. The patterns of Coptic textiles are purely ornamental or representational sometimes only including an

animal or plant, or humans as the main focus of interest. There are very few straight Christian things, very often in Coptic art, a Christian context is supplied to a figure only by the presence of a cross.

USE OF FABRICS

Unfortunately, many of the fabrics have survived only as fragments which make it difficult to situate them in their original context. But the fabric pieces that have survived in their original form provide sufficient information to establish their use, the most common being clothing. The garments worn were tunics, a great number of which have survived with their rich ornamentation.

According to Pfister, the garments were mostly woven on looms wide enough to take the whole length of the garment which was woven in one piece with a slit for the neck.**Fig.1** (Seagroatt p3)

Four examples of the decoration of tunics; the clavi, descending from the shoulders in the front and back. Squares or orbiculi on the shoulders, which were sometimes repeated in the lower part of the tunic where they can be lodged between two angles formed by the clavi at right angles. On the most decorated examples, the collar is bordered by a large rectangular front that is a pretext for very elaborate and developed scenes.**Fig. 2**

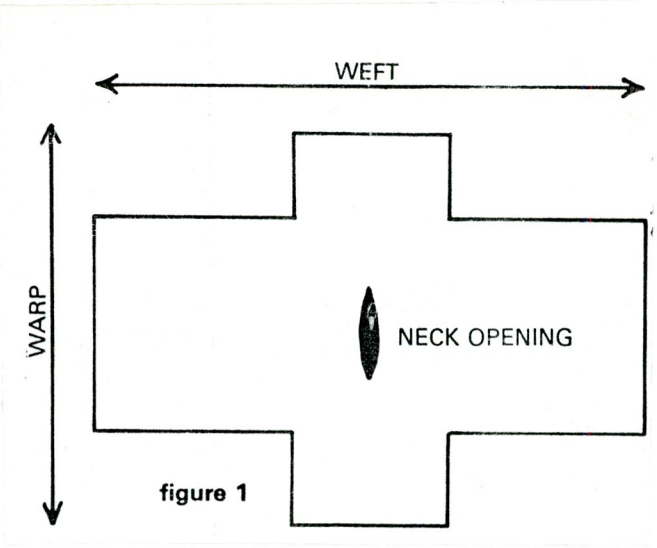


figure 1

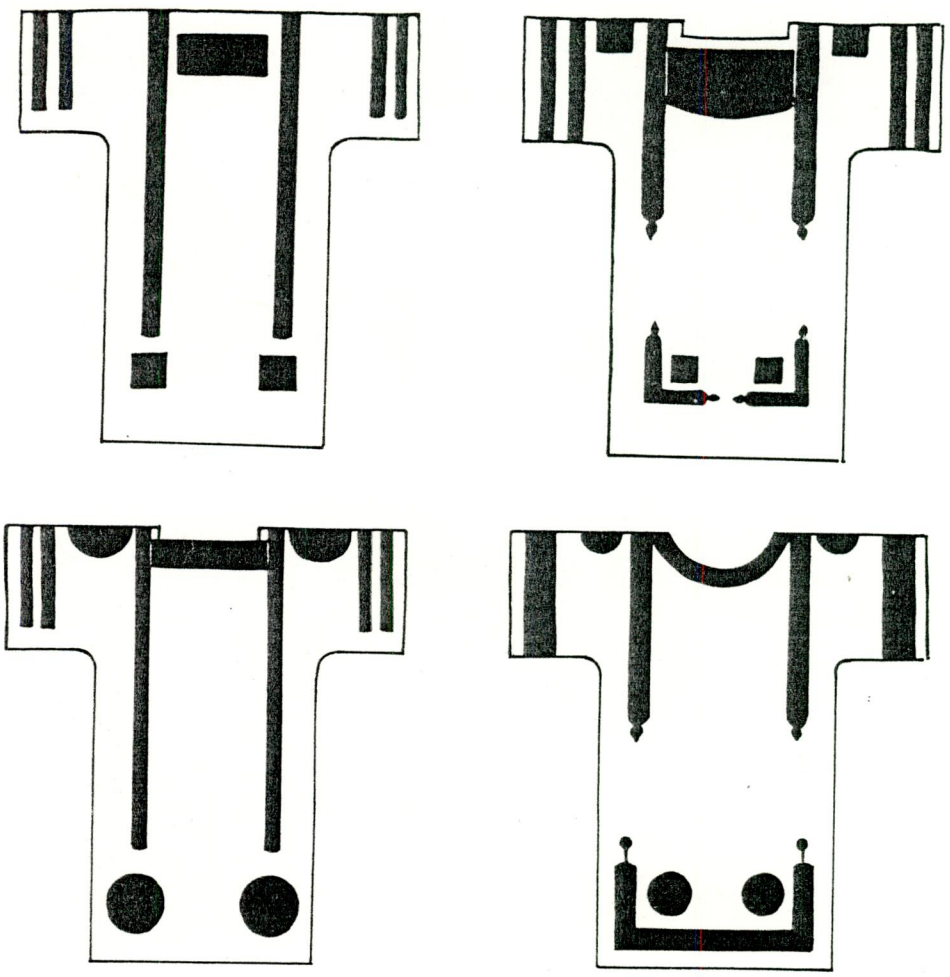


FIG. 2

CHAPTER TWO.

TECHNIQUES

AND

TECHNOLOGY

NMI

PART ONE.

FIBRES AND YARNS.

The raw materials used in the production of patterned Coptic textiles were wool, linen and occasionally silk and cotton. Flax was the principal fibre used for the warp and wool for the weft. The warp was usually of unbleached linen varying in thickness from coarse to very fine, sometimes it may have been bleached white; threads of this kind were used in the weft only when the pattern needed the white colour, although dying the warp became somewhat commoner towards the end of the period.

Egypt was known as the "land of linen". The use of flax was an ancient tradition. In ancient Egypt large scale productions date back at least to the beginning of the historical period (c.3100 B.C.). Linen was woven there at least 6000 years ago. There were centres for linen production operated by the state using slave labour. The flax were harvested at different stages of growth depending on what it was intended for. Different grades of cloth were made. The higher one placed on the social scale, the finer the weave in ones mummy wrapping. The green stems had soft fibres yielding the fine threads needed for the cloth which would cover mummies or the statues of gods, the coarser fibred, yellow stems served to make thicker warmer cloths and the tough fibres of very ripe stems were used for rope and matting. These different grades of threads can be seen in Coptic fabrics.

Sometimes, over 500 threads to the inch were used in the higher class mummy wrappings and 300 yards were used to wrap the body. The flax was a symbol of divine light and purity, and was the only fibre worn by priests. Egypt exported many yards of their linen for sails. The flax retted in the Nile was reputed to be much softer than other kinds and did not wear out from abrasion as quickly if made from Egyptian linen.

The linen yarns varied considerably from a fine set linen at 24 ends to the centimetre. The coarsest piece illustrated has a setting of five ends to the centimetre over the tapestry, beating down to sixteen threads to the centimetre. The plain weave background is set to nine ends to the centimetre, the weft beaten down is set at eight ends to the centimetre. **Fig 3**

Some of their finest settings can be found in their earliest pieces **Fig 4** illustrates this, which is dated from the fourth to the sixth century. This is set at 24 ends to the centimetre, over the plain weave ground, the weft is beaten down to 13 ends to the centimetre. The tapestry motif is set at twelve ends to the centimetre and the weft is beaten down at 38 ends to the centimetre.

For the warp, local wool was used, firmly spun and twisted, and then dyed in a variety of shades to make up the

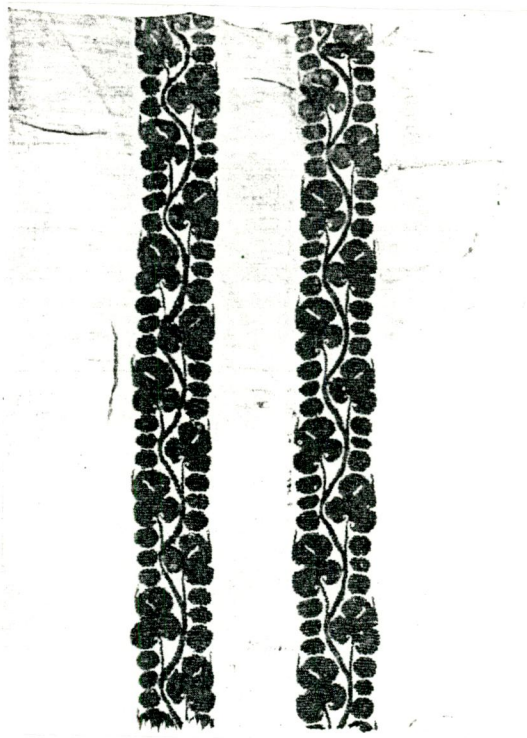


FIG. 3.

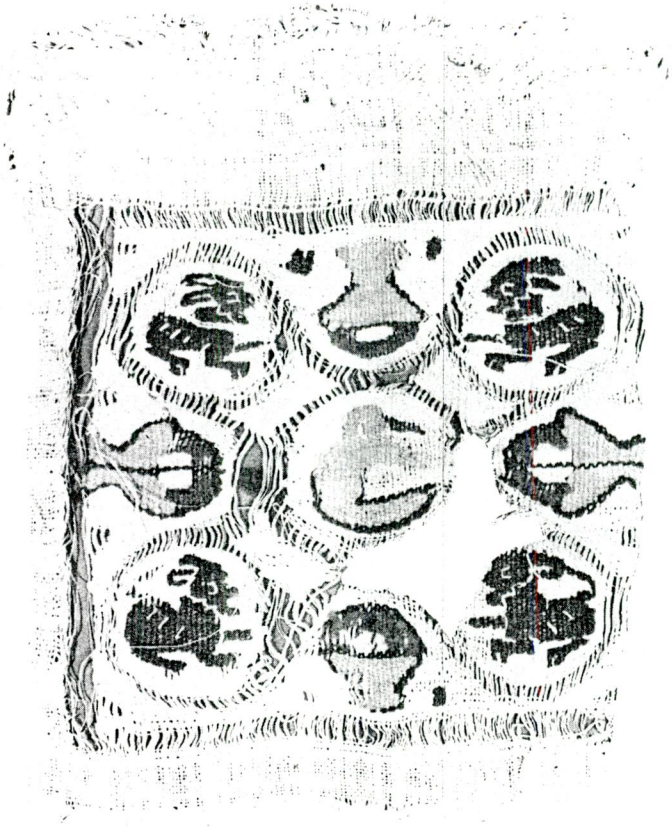


FIG. 4

pattern. It was not until the Hellenistic period that wool became a common fibre in Egypt, although sheep had been raised there for many centuries. The idea of using it along with dying methods probably originated in Syria.

The wool being perishable, little has been discovered in the tombs from the age of pharaohs. But they no doubt used it from the great flock of sheep so often depicted in the tombs. In the Greek period it became a largely used fibre, but it never replaced the flax which long remains Egypt's national fibre.

Herodotus (Histories, 11, 18) says that religious laws forbade wool in tombs and sanctuaries because of it's animal origin but this law must have been abandoned under the Romans and Christians as the tombs of these periods yield thousands of decorated fabrics in flax and wool.

The wool fibre is coarse to touch, partially because of it's brittle with age but also because it was spun from the same sort of wool as are contemporary Middle East fabrics, a harsh wool from the type of sheep sustained in the hot, dry climate.

Cotton originally from Egypt does not seem to have been used much in Egypt. Cotton fabrics have been discovered in Meroe in the Sudan and Karanog in Nubia, these are the

earliest known from the Greco-Roman period, and an inscription from about 350 A.D. tells us that cotton was stored in Nubia perhaps for export to Egypt (Ingrid Bergman 1975, p12-13).

But in spite of all this, cotton fabrics have been found in the monastery of Saint Phoebammon near Thebes 4th century A.D., the cultivation and use of cotton seems only to have reached Egypt after the arrival of the Arabs (Charles Bachatly, 1961, p47-49). No cotton fabrics have been found earlier than that.

Cotton was sometimes used for pile weaves and silk was woven in increasing amounts from the Roman period onwards, although rarely in tapestries.

Silk materials were rare and silk threads were only used in the weft. Insertions entirely composed of silk have been found in priests vestments, but other insertions contain only occasional silk threads.

The discovery of silk in large scale quantities in the Necropolises of Akhmim and Antinopolis presents us with a problem of its origin. The pieces are all in Sassamid style suggesting that they may have been imported already finished. On the other hand, mixed silks can be recognised in the weft of certain Coptic fabrics. Towards the middle of the sixth century there was the introduction of the silkworm which led

to the development of a flourishing industry related to the luxurious Byzantine court life.

Gold thread was used by the Copts to enhance the precious character of certain fabrics. The linen, silk and later cotton threads were wrapped with stripes of beaten gold.

PART TWO DYING

Some of the Coptic fabrics were vivid orange, blue-green and gold polychromes,while others were sombre monochromes with purple or brown designs, or backgrounds. Two major sources on dyes used during that time are Plinys Natural History and Uppsala Papyous, written in Greek in the third century A.D. and found in the Necropolis at Thebes. The papyrus includes 26 recipes for purple as well as the method for dying saffron yellow over indigo or wood to get green, and several ways to combine kormes or madder with wood. Other dyes came from amaranth, pomegranate and lichens. Pliny gives recipes using juices of purpura, shellfish, but the purple colour popular with the masses was most likely made by dying madder over indigo. Pliny reports what was probably mordant dying, that is, the application of alum iron salts or copper salts to the cloth, then dying with madder to give Variegated patterns.

In an article published in 1935 the chemist Roddphe Pfister presented the result of his research on oriental dye stuffs, based on the analysis of fabrics from Egypt and Syria. He also compared traditional dying methods with those mentioned in three ancient collections containing recipes for dying wool. Pfister's analysis was based on chemical tests and were not always reliable. However, he was the first in his field to demonstrate the importance of the study of techniques, and since then his pioneering research workers in several countries used spectrotophonetry and chromatography

which only needed to remove tiny samples on ancient fabrics. Since 1984, for example, the textile section of the French Monuments Historiques research laboratory at Champes-Sur Marne has undertaken a systematic analysis of the fibres and dyes in the Louvre's collection of Coptic fabrics.

Pfister, described the dye stuffs used as being very few in number and very fast. Red was obtained from madder and later, lac; yellow from Persian berries; blue from indigo. From this limited range a great many colours have been obtained ranging from harsh reds to delicate pinks, various shades of purple, mixtures of indigo in various strengths, and yellow to give a wide range of greens and turquoise shades, several shades of one colour being used in a single piece. Many shades of colours were mixed by the superimposition of indigo on madder and sometimes by mixing the coloured fibres in the spinning giving a sparkle to the colour.

The dyes were mainly used on woollen yarns, the linens being nearly always natural or bleached apart from a few examples of pale blue linen stripes or checks. This is because linen was very difficult to dye with natural dye stuffs. Yellow seems to have been the least fast dye, for where it is possible to see where a piece has faded by comparing the back with the front, the yellow fades from the green leaving it looking much more blue.

Wool was dyed before being spun, linen and cotton before being woven. Finished garments were rarely dyed, although white cloths were washed and bleached to finish. While dressing the fibres, spinning and weaving were household tasks, fulling bleaching, scouring and dying were very delicate procedures, carried out in special workshops. Only two such establishments have been found in Egypt, a fulling mill at Tebturis in the tayum, and a dye works at Athribis in the Delta, where tanks still survive bearing traces of red and blue dye.

Washing the threads always came before any other operation. Wool in particular was impregnated with greasy substances and had to be cleaned with detergents such as cinders, natron (a hydrated carbon of sodium found on some lake borders), or potash, alkaline plants like soap wort and asphodel, or fermented urine, which contained ammonia.

After washing came the use of mordants, an important and difficult stage because the final nuances of colour depended on the initial choice of mordants and the way it was applied. Without mordants the dyes would not penetrate to the heart of the fibres. The agent most commonly applied was alum, a double salt of aluminium and potassium, but the salts of iron, chrome and tin were also used. Only the weft was dyed in Coptic fabrics. This was made of wool which unlike linen, dyes very well and I would think for this reason was used on

a large scale in decorative fabrics from the Greco-Roman period on.

The dyes were of animal or vegetable origin. High price foreign dye stuff, like cochineal from Arnienia or Kermes from Asia Minor, were little used in Egypt. The best dyes were probably reserved for the dyers in big towns.

Pliny and Elder mention an Egyptian technique of printing on linen cloth (Natural History, XXXV, 42), although the only examples we have of this date fourth century A.D. and later.First the dyer spread a protective layer of wax or elay on the parch not to be dyed; then he applied a mordant. After this the cloth was plunged into a bath of dye, usually indigo. Some of these fabrics due to ageing are now green; others are red as a result of an appropriate mordant. The dye was sometimes applied with brushes or wood stamps. The most famous example of this technique is the "antinopolis veil in the Louvre.
But the Abegg foundation in Riggisberg near Berne also have a large printed hanging representing Arfemis accompanied by mythological heroes.

Starting with the primary colours (red, blue and yellow), all the other colours would be obtained with their nuances:

-Red; This was the colour most frequently used in

Antiquity because of its great resistance. It was chiefly obtained from the root of madder, a plant first used for dying by the Egyptians. Diluted, it gives varieties of pink. Archil, a lichen found on the rocky coast of the Eastern Mediterranean, was also apparently used. Red was also obtained from the Kermes, an insect found in the Kermes which grows on the mediterranean coast and in the Middle East. The dye was obtained from the eggs. The cochineal, an insect of the same family as the Kermes, had to be imported from Armenia. It was also replaced by lac-dye, a dark red resin produced on the twigs of trees in India by another insect of the same family. The appearance of this dye in Egypt corresponds to the breaking of relationships with Armenia, Byzantium and the North after the Arab invasion in the middle of the seventh century. The presence or absence of this dyestuff thus provides us with a way for dating coptic fabrics in this period. Rodolphe Pfister notes however that "lac-dye", a colouring agent produced by an Indian insect was certainly known in Egypt in the first century A.D.; it is mentioned in the voyage round the Erythrean sea as being brought from India.

-Blue; This was obtained by soaking the leaves of indigo plants imported from India which grows wild in Nabia Kordofan, Sennar and Abyssinia. Blue was also obtained from wood which seems to have been cultivated in the Fayum in the Christian era.

-Purple; This can be anything from a wine-coloured, red-violet through brown-violet to an almost black-violet-blue. Up till now, no genuine purple-a-dyestuff extracted from the shellfish has been found in any Coptic fabrics. However, Pfister claims to have detected it in third century fabrics discovered in Palmyra. Obtaining purple from the shellfish was a complicated and expensive business and dyers made do with substances such as kermes and archil. The most common technique and the one we find constantly in Coptic fabrics consisted of combining madder and indigo.

-Yellow; This was nearly all obtained from plants such as weld, saffron and pomegranate flowers. Weld is the commonest of these in Coptic fabrics. Depending on the mordant used different nuances of yellow and orange could be obtained. Unfortunately, these colours are far less resistant, and easily lose their brilliance and intensity.

Endnote:[1] Franco Brunnello, the art of dying in the history of mankind, Bernard Hickey, Cleveland; Phoenix Dye Works, 1973, p73)

PART THREE - LOOMS AND WEAVING TECHNIQUES.

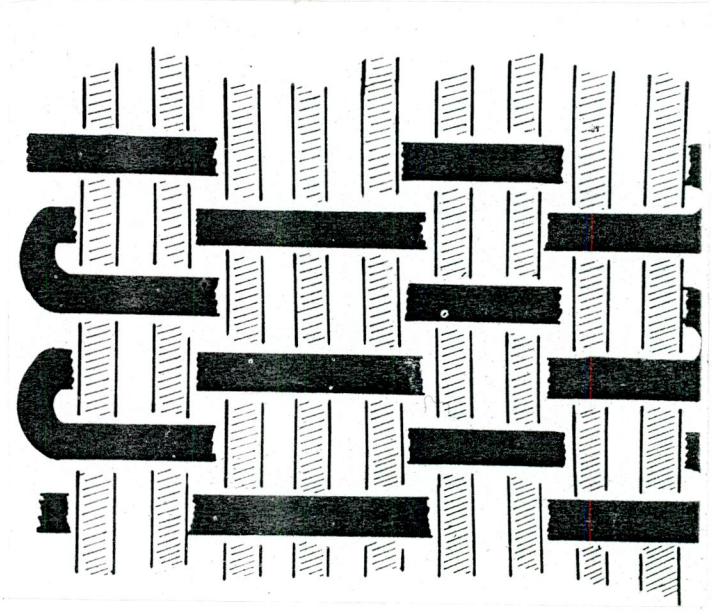
As soon as the thread was ready, warping could begin. The warp was prepared either with pegs on the wall or with posts in the ground, and then mounted on the loom. No loom has yet been discovered, as they were made of wood and so were easily taken to pieces and transported; furthermore, wood was relatively rare in Egypt and would be reused, after ending up in the fire. However weaving techniques have not changed and we have wooden models dating from the Middle Kingdom, painting from the Age of Pharaohs, and evidence of weaving methods in the cloth and tapestries which have been brought to light. In addition, numerous articles connected with weaving were placed in the bulbs, a custom found in other civilizations as well.

Several types of looms are known to have existed in Egypt. The oldest the horizontal or low-wrap loom which goes back to the Neolithic period, it was the sole look until the end of the middle kingdom (c.1570 BC) but was used only sporadically after that. The vertical or high warp loom, was introduced at the middle of the New kingdom, when Egypt was acquiring an Empire in the Orient, and its adoption coincides with the appearance of decorated clothes showing on oriental influence in their techniques of manufacture. It is very likely that the majority of Coptic textiles were woven on the vertical looms, which would be easier to manipulate than the horizontal ones, the cloth being woven from the bottom to the top.

These are horizontal looms with needles that is, vertical cords with loops to receive the warp threads suspended from a harness and worked by pedals, thus freeing the weavers hands from having to lift the warp threads all the time. On these relatively elaborate looms, simple decorated fabrics were woven.

Gallons, for sewing onto garments, and belts were often woven on so called "card" or "fable" looms. The warp threads, in dyed wool, went through the holes pierced in little tablets made of bone, wood, leather or card. To make a piece of braid a certain number of tablets from ten to a hundred had to be associated. Each turn of the plates created a gap into which the unbleached linen weft thread was fed. This kept in place the intertwined warp threads forming the pattern, while remaining invisible.

Tapestry weave; the true plain weave is a 50 - 50 weave in which there are an equal number of threads to a given measurement in both warp and weft. In a 50 - 50 plain weave a tapestry weave is not possible in the same thickness weft thread as the warp thread, for the seating does not allow the weft threads to be beaten down closely over the warp threads. The warp threads are therefore drawn together in twos and threes, each group of thread working as one thread.DIAG 1.



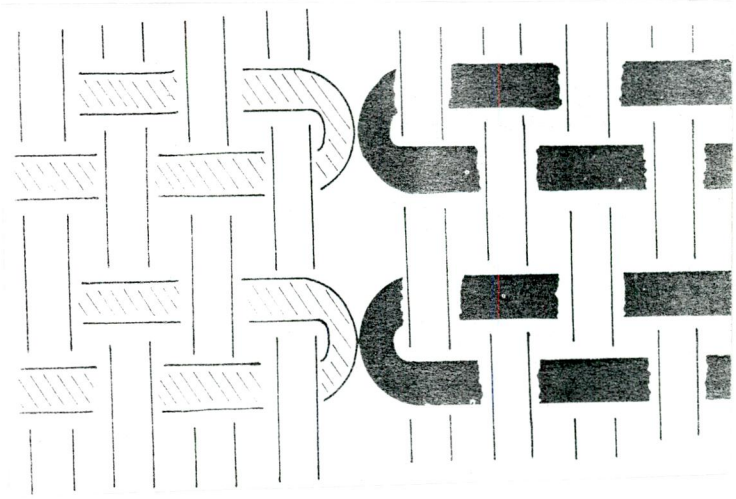
DIAG. 1

Plain and Soumak type looping; These two basic weaves occur in all the textiles, the background in a plain weave which is usually either slightly weft or warp faced, whichever has more threads than a given measurement than the other. Sometimes thick multiple threads are used as a kind of decoration ,to achieve a self-coloured stripe. **DIAG 2.**

Tapestry weaving leaving slit: The greatest variation in the techniques however, is found in the tapestry - woven motifs. The tapestry is a plain weave in which the warp threads are set wide enough apart to allow the weft to be beaten down closely enough to cover it. Most of Coptic textiles are tapestries woven motifs and contain most of the tapestry techniques mentioned. The simplest pattern in tapestry weaving is made by taking the weft threads across the warp, leaving a slit where they meet. **DIAG 3.**

Tapestry weave with a curved shape; this is the basis of all pattern design in tapestry. True curves cannot be woven as patterns can only be built up in a series of steps consisting of small slits. **DIAG 4.**

Tapestry weave, dovetailed joints; where a straight line of any length is wanted, a dovetail construction is used so as to avoid long slits. Several rows of each colour are woven round a single warp thread in alternating blocks, so that when the weft is packed down a serrated line is produced. **DIAG 5.**



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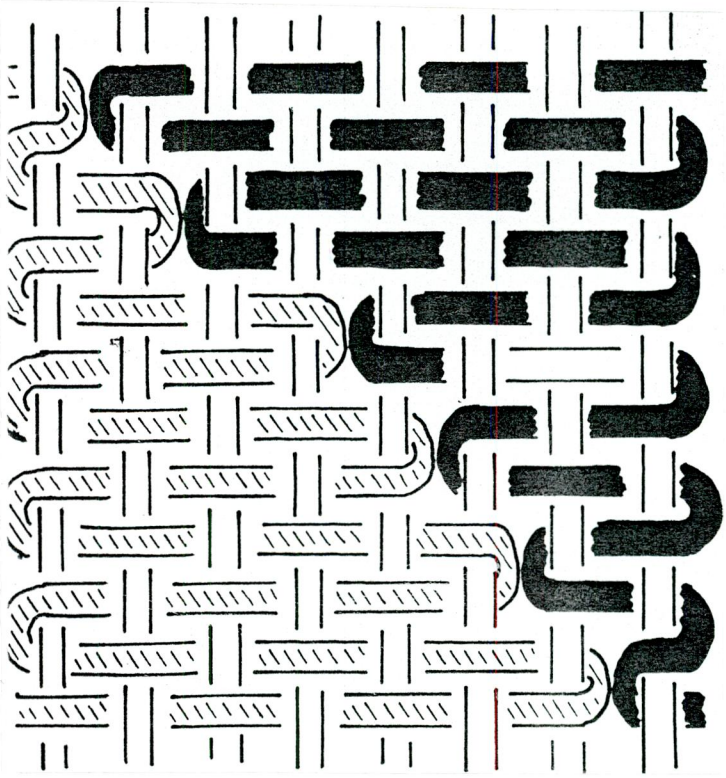
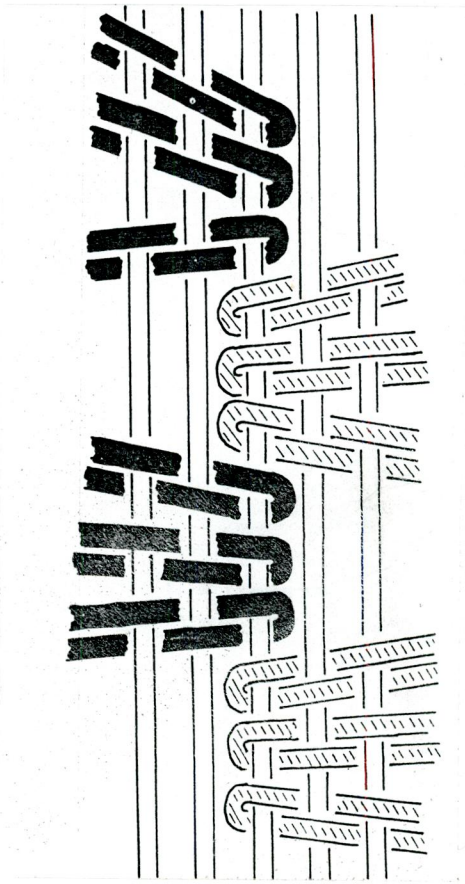


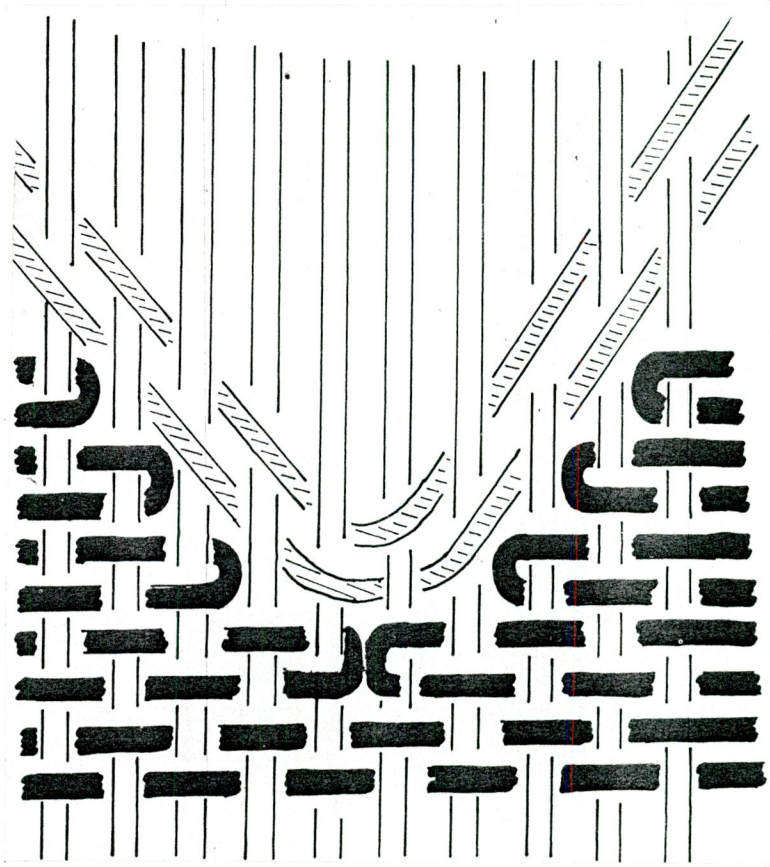
DIAG 4



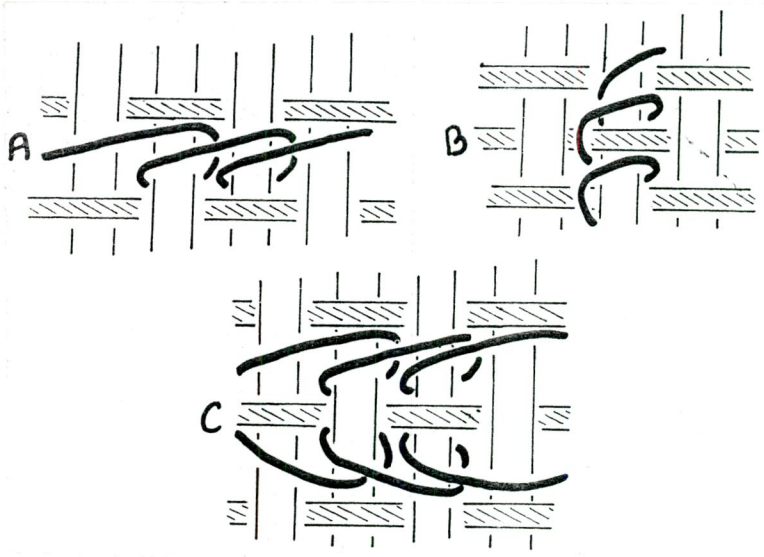
DIAG. 5

Tapestry weave, outlining a shape; Built up shapes are often outlined in another colour. This is done by building up a shape in the normal way and then weaving two or more lines right round the shape, or inside it in a contrasting colour. The rest of the shape is then woven, being beaten down with a forked device. **DIAG 6.**

Soumak weave: Another technique used for outlining shapes and for decoration is the Soumak weave, which is also an embroidery stitch. Here, used while the weaving is being built up, an extra weft thread, more often in linen, circles a warp thread, emerging to float over the surface before circling the next warp thread. The most usual Soumak is under two and over four warp threads, but in Coptic textiles it is used with greater freedom, circling a single warp thread and floating over any number of threads. Thicker lines are achieved by using two lines of Soumak, the second going the opposite way.**DIAG 7.**



DIAG. 6



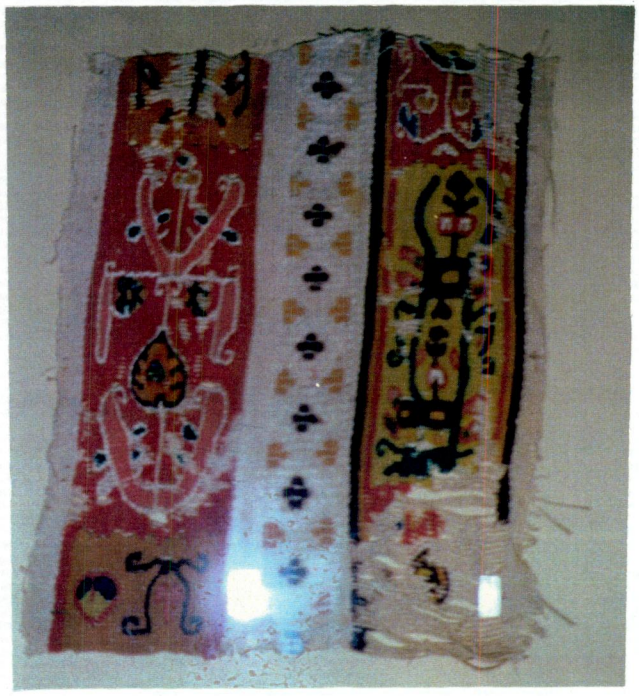
DIAG. 7

CHAPTER THREE.

SYMBOLISM,

ICONOGRAPHY

AND ORNAMENT



NMI

Coptic designers created a distinctive textile style with a number of variants, most of them quickly recognizable. Coptic textiles are not easily confused with other archaeological textiles found in other parts of the world. How such a variety of styles may have evolved is worthy of consideration even though positive conclusions cannot be reached for all of them.

The motifs decorating Egyptian textiles do not derive from the well established corpus of Egyptian ornament. Largely missing from Coptic textiles are the characteristic Egyptian lotus and papyrus motifs, for example designs based upon feathers and perhaps most conspicuous by their absence, the many attractive symbols derived from Egyptian writing that were frequently used to decorate a wide range of objects during the Dynastic period.

The reason for this abandonment of Egyptian decorative motifs and drawing conventions are not quickly obvious and we must turn to the social and historical background underlying the periods from which the Coptic textile style, with it's several branches evolved.

The character of Egyptian textiles had remained essentially unchanged for many centuries. As closely as can be determined by the meagre evidence available, marked changes in Egyptian weaving may have occurred only after the conquest

of Egypt by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.

A major part of the interest roused by Coptic textiles derives from the subject matter found in the decoration. Some of the more elaborate ornaments contained groups of figures that can be identified as participants in familiar myths and legends. The significance of these is sometimes not at all obvious and the actual meaning of a motif may have depended upon the views, beliefs and superstition of the weaver.

The motifs that ornament Coptic textiles are varied in themselves, but can be divided into two main groups:

Textiles with motifs drawn from subjects that are animate or inanimate,and

Textiles with symmetrical geometric motifs constructed from straight or curved lines.

In the symmetrical geometric, non-representational group, the most striking are squares and roundels and bands enclosing elaborate geometric interlaces woven labyrinths as it were. The motifs are worked in monochrome, generally purple or dark blue on a ground of undyed yarn.

In the first group the textiles would fall into two sub-groups:

(a) Monochrome and,
(b) Polychrome.

The motifs themselves are based on vegetation, vines, leaves, flowers and fruit, trees, vases, baskets, birds, fish, beasts,both real and mythical, and human and super-human beings. The human beings are represented as warriors, dancers, hunters, horsemen, chariots and some of them have attributes that identify them with particular legendary persons. Among the non-human beings are centaurs, mermaids, satyrs, and winged figures usually Erotes, as well as richly dressed human shaped figures that can be identified as gods and goddesses of the ancient classical pantheon. Though most of them are small in scale, a strong sense of vitality is conveyed in the active poses,often with greatly emplished eyes that add to the impression of liveliness.

All of these subjects real and unreal portray,I think, varying degrees of finesse, some are crude to the point of being barely recognisable. Nearly all conveying the impression being protagonists in an ongoing story. Fruit and floral figured motifs as well as trees and plants fill spaces not occupied by figures. Also incorporated with some figures are symmetrical geometric motifs.

Although dating Coptic textiles is not wholly accurate, there is a progression in style that proceeds from Greek through to the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian to Islamic. During the Roman period (to 400 A.D.), designs were Hellenistic and pagan with reproduction of classical motifs in

realistic fashion. Greek gods and goddesses, Nilotic scenes, vines, scrolls, animals and human figures, often very realistic portraits.

The more typical Coptic style is evident from the seventh century onwards and shows the symbolism of Christianity (often derived from Hellenistic Designs), the ankh (cross), the vase, the trees of life, the fish (symbolising Christ), the hare, the lion (meaning power and Satan). Faces with great goggling eyes were also woven. Textiles from this period show rather coarse texture and disproportionate figures.

Some authors say there was a degeneration in weaving techniques, while others call it a new method of adopting techniques to design by distorting the angle of the weft, using embroidery and outlining, and employing vivid colours to emphasise abstraction. This crude style was retained after the Muslim conquest by the Christian weavers many of whom worked in monasteries. It continued well into the Fatimid period (Wilson, 1979, p112).

There were numerous changes in the style of Coptic fabrics from the fourth to the early twelfth century. It appears likely that nearly total disappearance of Egyptian design motifs from major art forms and their placement with others, largely Classical in nature was caused by nearly three

centuries of Greek rule. From the fourth to the fifth century there was a strong naturalist tendency with round and heavy shapes. Silhouettes and faces show a tendency towards stylisation of features, the eyes are enlarged and marked by heavy circles. Relief was created by colour gradation and was still widely used. Large hangings of Dionysian subjects have these characteristics sometimes accompanied by deformation of the body. During the following period from the sixth to the seventh century, the illusion effect tends to be eliminated and replaced by flat tints and an increasing use of the "flying shuttle" making it possible to compensate for the lack of relief by outlining the interior details of an object. The seventh century seems to be the turning point during which use of relief methods died out.

The entirely Coptic style was flat tints and use of the "flying shuttle" combined with a tendency towards dislocation of the body and the large, stylized, fixed eyes found in the following periods, the eight to the twelfth century. The vegetal motifs also tend to be simplified.

In the Islamic period there was a progressive departure from realistic forms accompanied by intricacy of geometric patterns, which reflect the tendencies of Islamic art where pure decoration plays an important role.

It would be beyond the scope of this work to undertake an

in depth analysis of the iconographical and symbolic basis of Coptic Art. However, I feel that it is necessary to discuss to some extent the influences within Egypt which led to "Coptic textiles", the varying in their iconography, symbolic meaning and ornament due to the upheavals within the country, political, cultural and religious. Within the Coptic textiles there are traces of and influences of Pharonic, Greco-Roman, Oriental and Christianity.

Certain facts stand out and need to be considered when looking at Coptic decorative motifs. There is a predominance of motifs which derived from classical antiquity over those with obvious Christian connotations and this supports the assumption that paganism did not end in the first century after the birth of Christ."Some pagan cults still had active supporters as late as the fifth century. After the Arab conquest, Coptic textiles ornamented with figures derived from Greek mythology continued to be woven. By this time the motifs may have been completely decorative, but their long life, nearly a thousand years in Egypt, was most certainly extended by their connection with living beliefs for five hundred years, a circumstance not commonly taken into account by early textile historians"(Carroll, 1986, p.65).

According to Carroll

"A second point to be kept in mind when studying Coptic motifs is that the dualism found in both pagan and

Christian beliefs. It rose as an attempt to solve what was seen as on going conflicts between good and evil forces. The conflicts themselves were various-between order and disorder, civilization and Barbarism, man's spiritual nature and his undeveloped, "natural" nature. In myths and in art derived from myths, these conflicts were symbolised by battles between men and animals or between men and real or mythical beasts-dragons, centaurs, lions, boars, often of unusual size and attributes. Victory over evil or disorder could be symbolised by a man riding a horse or guiding a chariot. Also common are pairs of similar or identical human figures. These two could be expressions of duality or spiritual conflict."

By the time Coptic art came into existence, Egypt had already been invaded by Greeks and Romans and there thus was a fusion of themes from different periods which resulted in different styles being adopted. In the Roman period, the so called "Nilotic" subjects were extremely fashionable-designs are covered with putti, crocodiles, fishing boats, birds, fish, waves etc.

The iconographical antecendants of the "Nilotic" representations are illustrated by the famous scenes of hunting and fishing, so frequently reproduced on carved or painted walls of tombs from the ancient empire.**PLATE NO. 1** (Rutschowscaya, 1990, p81)

PLATE NO. 1

"The treatment of subjects in mass, with flat application of colour, was resumed by the Copts, after the Greco-Roman interlude when they used the effects of perspective and modelling. Identical treatment was used on the orbiculi in the "Nilometer" (Louvre). In the medallion edged with red waves, the subjects stand out against a background of unbleached linen. The upper half comprises two seated gods. On the left the goddess Euthenia, who replaces the Egyptian goddess Isis, is surmounted by a black bird and holds a veil filled with flowers and fruits of the earth. On the right the god Nile , who appears in the Pharonic Egypt under the name Hapi. In the lower half the aputto* seated in a boat catches a bird; another equipped with scissors and a hammer, is busy climbing the column of the nilometer*, on the flooded banks of the Nile. These types of nilometers* appear from the period of the later Roman empire and consist of a graduated column in the centre of a well, reached by a series of stairs" (Rutschowscaya 1990, p.78)

The motif of a leafy tree full of birds, animals or people (Louvre, Museum of Decorative Arts) recalls the theme of birds in clumps of papyrus or trees with birds from Beni Hassa (Middle Egypt, Mid empire). **PLATE NO.**16

CATALOGUE 10

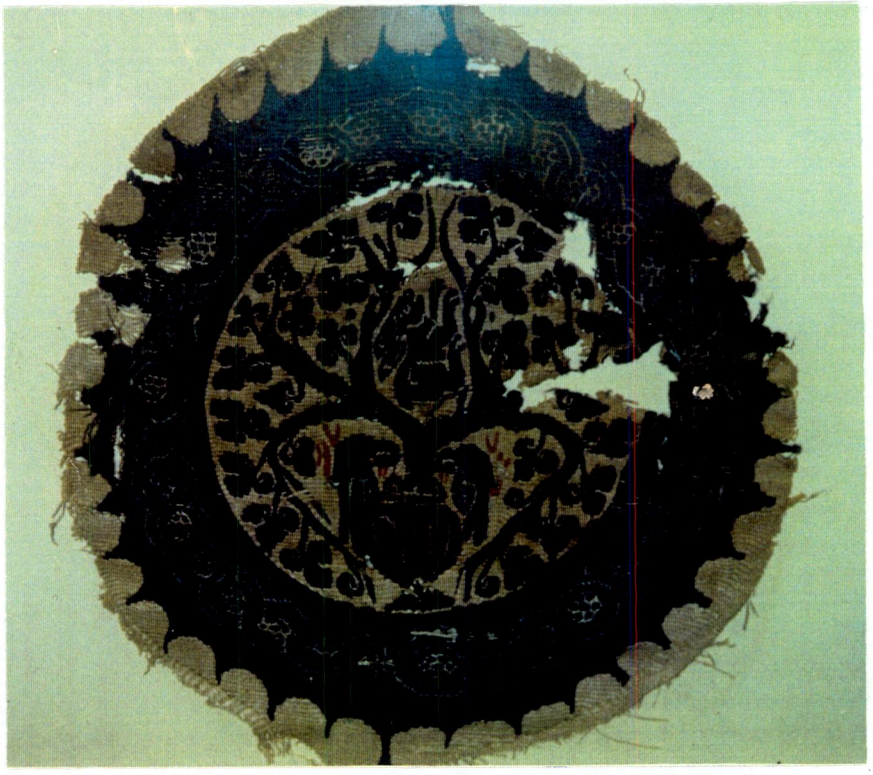


PLATE NO. 16

NMI

Greece and Rome were initiators of a style and iconography in Egypt that completely renewed millenary traditions. Subjects taken from the collections of Classical mythology were superior to any other throughout this period (Greco-Roman period) which began with the founding of Alexandria in 332 B.C.

The Coptic textile weavers transform the motifs and forms of other periods and give them a distinctive look of their own.

In the Coptic period, the god Dionysus and his thiase* are one of the preferred iconographical sources for all mediums. The cult of Dionysus spread and he replaced Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead, resurrection and "master of the wine".**PLATE NO.**10

There is one particular example which dates from the fourth century and illustrates Dionysus life cycle. One scene highlights the birth of Dionysus and Semele, lying down surrounded by mid-wives while the child is being bathed. This iconography of the nativity and the bathing of the infant have been compared, and quite justifiably, to the birth of Jesus.

CAT. 5

PLATE NO. 10 NMI

Certain motifs that were of pagan origin could be used in Christian if they had an equally clear meaning and thus could be used in a new sense. The vine which mythologically accompanies Bacchus, for instance, also appears frequently in the Bible and was soon able to acquire a Christian meaning. Motifs appear in Coptic culture in spite of the fact that they have resisted assimilation into Christianity, for instance, water gods and water beasts. They were linked with the ancient traditions of river gods and had often appeared in the Nile scenes.The cross had been depicted worn around the neck as a symbol of sweet song, now the Christians adopted it as a means of spreading the word of God.

"Side by side with Classical and ancient Egyptian motifs, there was a considerable fusion of classical ideas with Jewish beliefs. This particular sycretism played an important role in Coptic development, for Alexandria had been the meeting place of the two cultures"(Kybalova 1967 p.37).

Old testament parables from the late Hellenistic period spread into Christian art. Gradually the iconography became more stable at first, only old testament scenes were depicted- the sacrafice of Issac, **PLATE 2**, Daniel in the lions' den. By the third century, new testament scenes were added, the multiplication of the loaves and fish, the Epiphany. After Constantine, more new testament scenes were introduced when Christianity was made the state religion. For a very long

PLATE NO. 2

time the popular fate remained closely related to pagan Egyptian religion, whose surviving elements had been incorporated into Christianity and given quite remarkable new meanings. Thus, even in the fifth century Egyptian gods were not forgotten. So far as art was concerned, purely Christian symbols gained ground very slowly.

The ankh or crux ansata-the sign of life held by sculptured figure of Pharaohs and Gods, became the cross, and provided the copts with the theory that the pagan gods had foretold the coming of Christianity.

Similarly, the Classical motifs of the dove was adopted by Christians, becoming a symbol of freedom, of redemption or peace and during the fifth and sixth century, the apostolic sign.

Coptic art has repeated examples of two doves flanking the sides of a vase which was a direct borrowing from classical mural painting. A similar subject, geese, popular during the late classical period and ancient Egypt, became the Christian symbol of death. There was also the transformation of pagan gods into Christian saints. Saint George, who in the oldest paintings is seen fighting a crocodile, is a direct development from Horus struggling with Set symbolising good against evil.

There are also other themes of the saints on horseback, the tree of life, warriors and dancers, hares, vines, fighting animals. Along with these representational and symbolic motifs went a large number of purely ornamental themes such as the swastika, the zig-zag lines and the Greek key pattern. All of these were simple ornamental designs which more than often were connected with the patterns of the weaving.

The possible symbolism and iconography underlines certain motifs in the National Museum and these will be mentioned in the catalogue, much of which is entirely speculative.

CATALOGUE .

NM1

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND
A FULL COLOURED, ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

The individual textiles in the "Coptic Textile" collection in the National Museum of Ireland, have never before been documented except for a brief mention in **"Textile Collections of the World, United Kingdom and Ireland Vol. 2."**[1]

There is a substantial group of Coptic fabrics with a total of 64 in the collection, most of which are in outstanding condition. They are exhibited on hinged panels. All of the textiles are from Akhmim on the Nile (formerly Panopalis) and date from the third century to the twelfth century, the majority were found in 1888. They vary in design from Hellenistic to Christian to Geometric. Most of the motifs are in wool of which there are excellent examples from the 6th to the 10th century. Unfortunately the majority of motifs have been taken out of context, being cut out to separate them from the damaged and stained linen cloths. There are some silk fragments which date from the ninth to the twelfth century and are thus of Islamic origin. There are no true Coptic textiles with Christian themes from the Old and New Testaments, only ones which were adapted from Hellenistic Art. Geometric Designs are prominent in the collection.

The collection came to Ireland from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The facilities for research at the present time are minimal due to renovations in the textile galaries and there is currently no curator for the textile collection.

The textiles in the collections offer us detailed and invaluable information about the techniques involved and the rhetorical evolution of motifs in a country that experienced cultural, religious and political upheavals. This is possible due to the fine state of preservation of the textiles.

footnote:[1] Lubell, 1976, p16

LATE HELLENISTIC TEXTILES

In the third century and first half of the fourth century, Egyptian textiles made use of motifs which derived from classical art combined also with those of ancient Egypt. At the time only a very limited number of pagan symbols had been transmitted into Christian ones, the two worlds were encountering one another for the first time; without realising the consequences. The fabrics reproduced classical 'illusionism' by using fine hatching, thus making possible the transition from light to dark shades. This was gradually replaced by one-dimensional cut-up shapes woven in smooth, monochromatic areas with a little hatching at the point of contact. These tend to be separate like silhouettes, and were subdivided by dark outlines of embroidery. The classical rules of proportion were distorted, the figures becoming smaller and the body more thick set, with a disproportionately large head, and accentuated eyes outlined in dark colour. The figure shown as a flat shape, was given a silhouette which became more and more rich and complex, and stressed by a slanting weft. Various deviations from traditional tapestry techniques led to a stress on particular details, although the general appearance was not changed.

The dark, neutral background used in fabrics at this time played no part in the composition of the ornament. Any

distortion which took place remained within the frame-work of realistic depiction of people, animals or plants. This is true also of the comparatively bright colour scheme in which things are given their true shades.

CATALOGUE 1

PLATE NO.3
RECTANGULAR PANEL WITH BIRD.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools; red, green, blue and yellow. The border is in four sections, two sections of stylised lotus flowers in a variety of colours and two sections of geometric patterns of diamonds, again in a variety of colours. The colours have tonal grading from dark red to light and light green to dark on a ground of yellow. The border surrounds a square motif of a bird in cream and greys on a ground of red.

Material and construction: Woven in plain and tapestry curved weave.

Dimensions:22 cm X 21 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:420

Provenance: Akhmim

Related examples: London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Acc.No.Y1352 (284-1891), (Lubell, 1976, p108)

PLATE NO.4

CAT. 1

PLATE NO. 3

NMI

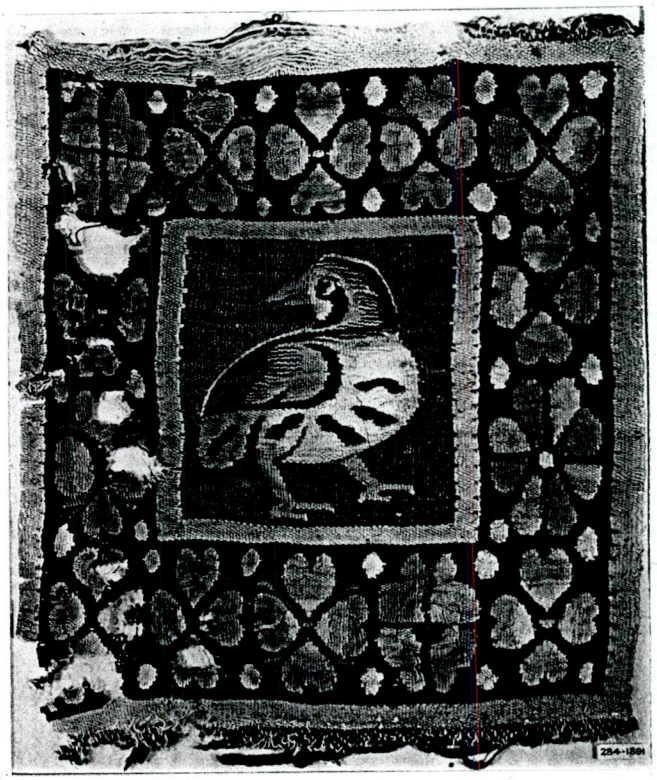


PLATE NO. 4

V&A

CAT. 2

PLATE NO.5
ROUNDAL WITH MAN'S HEAD.

Colour and Design: Fragment from linen tunics with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools. It is rectangular in shape with a border of stylised leaves in green, pink and orange, on a ground of brown. There then is a square inset decorated with vine stems, surrounding the head of the man. The man's head is detailed in colouring and features.

Material and Construction: Tapestry woven in wools with detailed hatching on the face and the use of subtle and pictorial colours.

Dimensions:14 cm X 30 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:416

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Moscow, Pushkin Museum, Acc.No. 5822 (Rutschowscya, 1990, p67)

Paris, Collection Beraod (Volbach, 1969, p34)

Plate No.6

Comment: The border on the example in the Pushkin Museum has a very similar border to this one. The idea of the vine stems around the head is evident in the example in Collection Berard.

CAT. 2

PLATE NO. 5

NMI

PLATE NO. 6

THE DECLINE OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIF

In the fourth and the fifth centuries considerable change took place both in technology and in artistic conception. "Illusionism" was finally replaced by the flat, decorative style. Bright colours were ousted by various shades of deep purple, forming dark silhouettes against the white background. The modelling which had been achieved by hatching gave way to patches of plain colour separated from one another by outlining, and subdivided first by embroidered and then woven lines. The figures lost their classical proportions and became more complex silhouettes, forming an indivisible compositional unit with the background.

Where Classical mythology survived the Copts selected elements from it to which they could attach new meaning. Such motifs which could not be divorced from their pagan significance, survived only for a brief period before they were replaced by Christian iconography.

CAT. 3

PLATE NO.7
RECTANGULAR PANEL WITH HUMANS AND ANIMALS.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic. The ground is in white wool ornamented in black and red. The border consists of stylised foliage enclosed in circles and repeated. There is a square inset in which there are four scrolls, each containing an animal or human (warrior). The top left circle surrounds a lion, the top right a warrior pulling something from the lion's mouth. The bottom left circle contains another warrior with his right arm raised. The bottom right circle contains a hound with a streamer around its neck. They seem to be in battle.

Material and Construction: Tapestry woven with coloured wools of black and red.

Dimension:18 cm X 19 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:429

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: London, Victoria and Albert Museum Acc.No.52611 (243-1887)
PLATE NO.8

Comment: Battles between men and animals are thought to signify the struggle between good and evil in human nature. The nudity of the warriors signifies that the battle is one of spirit, a fight with the beastal side of their nature, symbolised here by the lions. The raised arm of one of the warriors suggests protection from the evil. "The streamer worn by the hounds reflects Persian influence and are

CAT. 3

PLATE NO. 7 NMI

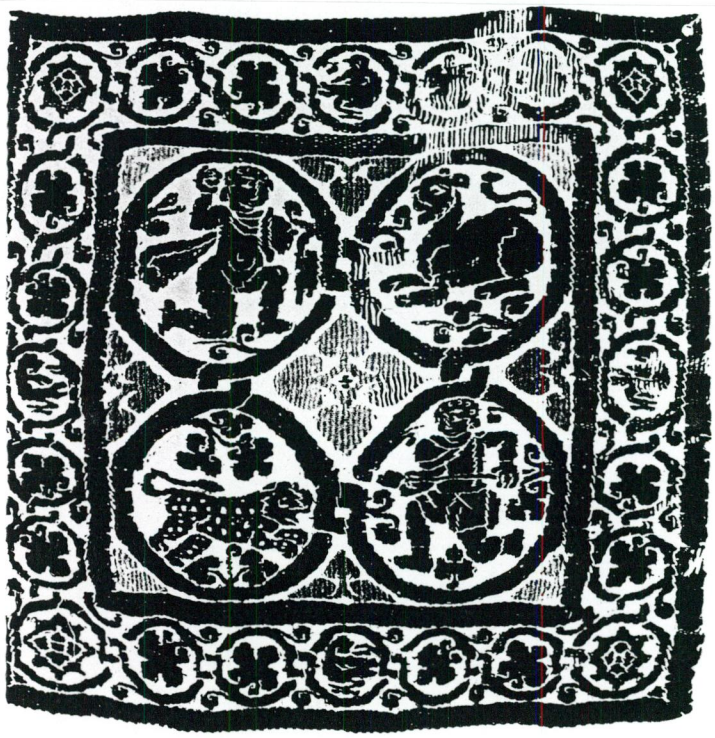


PLATE NO. 8 V & A.

thought to indicate that the weavers possessed supernatural or other special attributes" (Carroll, 1988, p181). A new development appears in the design, instead of forming unified silhouettes, the individual parts of the animal bodies begin to be separated from one another by a woven white or embroidered line so that the body itself becomes a confused pattern with a rhythm of its own. This is the first indication of what is to become a typical feature in Coptic art.

CAT. 4

PLATE NO.9
SQUARE PANEL WITH A NEROID ON A SEAHORSE ?

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools. A border of rich red, ornamented with nude and dogs or goats (?) in white, also are fish-like traceries. The centre motif is outlined by alternating green and red blocks of colour, surrounded by white lines. The centre motif is a Neriod on a seahorse (?), ornamented on a ground of green, with fish, vegetation and dogs or goats (?).

Material and Construction: Tapestry woven curved fabric

Dimensions:24 cm X 24 cm

Date: Sixth to eight century

Accession No.:508-93

Provenance: Akhmim

Comment:A very unusual design with no relevant examples. One of the most interesting in the collection, but I have no ideas on the symbolism. It dates from the sixth to the eight century, however, I would have placed it earlier in the period.

CAT. 14

PLATE NO. 9

NMI

CAT. 5

PLATE NO.10
DIONOSUS-THE GOD OF WINE.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools. There is a ground of white ornamented with black and red wools. The border is of hares enclosed in a simple cable. Dionosus is pouring the wine into a dog's(?) mouth. His body is still very classical in style with a dark silhouette against the white background, not separated by embroidered or woven lines.

Material and Construction: Tapestry woven with curved shapes and outlining shapes.

Dimensions:11 cm X 16 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:439

Provenance: Akhmim

Comments: Dionosus was one of the preferred iconographical sources for all mediums.He was the god of the dead, resurrection and master of the vine.

CAT. 505

PLATE NO. 10

NMI

CAT. 6

PLATE NO.11
BORDER WITH WARRIORS

Colour and Design: Fragments from linen tunics with tapestry woven ornaments in wools. There is a ground of white wool ornamented with black, green, orange and brown. The panel has arcade borders and crenellated ends. Vine scrolls enclose vegetation and warriors. The first encloses vine tendrils with a bird perched on a branch. The second warrior is in battle with his right arm raised up. Facing him is another warrior, both with shields.

Materials and Construction: Plain and tapestry weave with curved and outlining shapes.

Dimension:10 cm X 26 cm

Date:fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:450

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Moyen, Museum Nationale Du Moyen (Lorquin, 1992, p83, no.33)

Comments: The raised hand is an ancient gesture of blessing or protection. This is an early fabric as the figures are silhouettes, the individual parts of the bodies haven't begun to be separated from one another by woven or embroidered lines.

CAT. 6

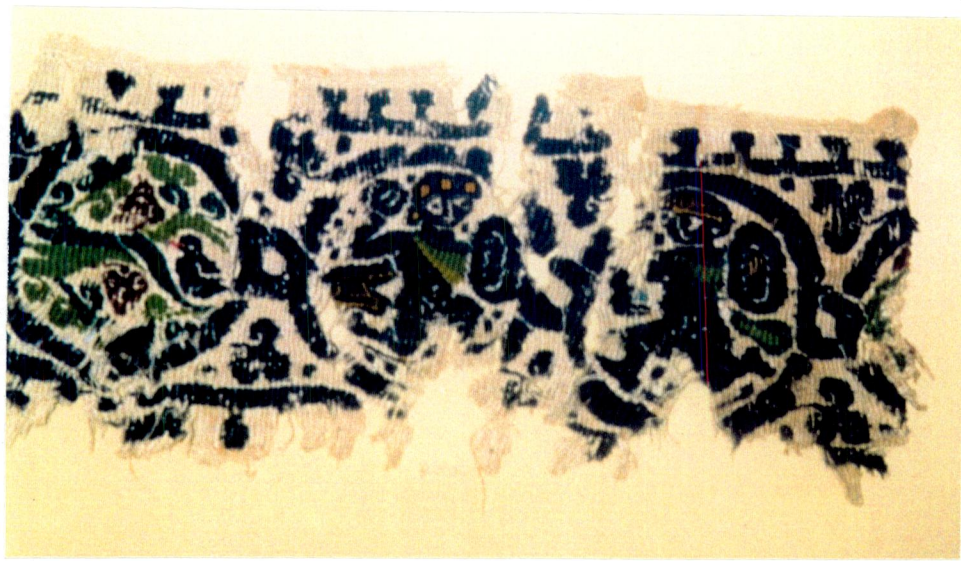


PLATE NO. 11

NMI

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS.

Within Christian art there were numerous classical motifs which were rapidly transformed into flat extractions, ornamental patterns and simplistic patterns. Christian art adopted its own symbolism to these motifs. In their adopted motifs, animal bodies in particular, with their complex silhouettes and clearly defined sections were now split up into separate entities by a woven white line or by embroidery. As a result of slanting the weft threads in relation to the warp, technique and pattern became one.

The examples of Christian art in these plates illustrate the early stages of Christianity, with symbolism which would probably have derived from Hellenistic art and adopted Christian meanings. There are no true Coptic style textiles, with scenes from the old and new testaments.

CAT. 7

PLATE NO.12
RECTANGULAR PANEL WITH DANCERS.

Colour and Design:A fragment from a linen tunic ornamented with tapestry woven coloured wools. The motif is rectangular from a brown wooled tunic. It is woven with a brown ground and ornamented with a small amount of orange. The border is decorated with stylised acanthus leaves. In the centre piece of the rectangle, there are four orange circles in each corner with five dancers surrounded by a simple cable pattern. Also with the dancers is a vase.

Material and construction: Tapestry weaving with curved shapes
and coloured wools.

Dimension:18 cm X 17 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:457

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: London, Victoria and Albert Museum (Volbach, 1967, p92)

PLATE NO.13

Comment: The symbolic meaning of dancers is purely speculative but, a Gnostic text, "Acts of John" tells how the disciples under the direction of Jesus, danced with him the night before his arrest**[2]**. The purpose of this dance was to make the individual one with Christ. It is probable that the representation of the dancers refer to such beliefs (Carroll, 1988, p24). It is possible that the figure in the centre is Jesus, he seems to have a crown on his head and,

CAT. 7

PLATE NO. 12 NMI

PLATE NO. 13 V & A.

the other four, disciples? If this is symbolising Christianity then the nudity represents spiritual purity.

The example in the Victorian Albert Museum has an identical bordering with a horseman in the centre, they may be a pair, but this example dates from the sixth to the seventh century.

Footnote:
[2] Pagaels, 1981, 89 (Carroll, 1988, p24)

CAT. 8

PLATE NO.14
VASES WITH VINE TENDRILS FORMING A CROSS.

Colour and Design: This fragment is from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in purple wool on a white coloured background. The design is organised in a square with notched arch-like designs as the border. In the centre is a yellow cross surrounded by vases and tendrils, again making the shape of a cross.

Material and construction: Tapestry woven with curve shapes and coloured wools.

Dimensions:14cm X 15cm

Date: Fourth to fifth century

Accession No.:418

Provenance: Akhmim on the Nile

Comment: The theme of vines and tendrils are oriental in origin and unknown in classical antiquity. It was adopted into Christian symbolism, often in the shape of four vases forming a cross, which symbolises the Four Rivers of Paradise or the Four Evangelists.If birds appear between each arm of the cross, this symbolises the crucifixion.

The individual parts of the vase do not form one compact unit (like preceding periods), but the silhouette design is filled in by embroidered detail. This feature becomes more prevalent in later periods.

CAT. 8

PLATE NO. 14

NMI

CAT. 9

PLATE NO.15
ROUNDEL WITH VASES AND VINE TENDRILS.

Colour and Design:A fragment from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools and undyed linens. A circular motif with a ground of purple and a centre piece of mustard, both with a pattern of red. The border consists of blocks of red and mustard, outlined by the purple. The design is of four vases in the shape of a cross, with the vine tendrils growing from them. The centre of two vases are heart shaped and diamond in the other two. Between each vase there is foliage.

Material Construction: Tapestry with curved shapes and outlining shapes in coloured wools with use of the "flying shuttle".

Dimensions:21cm X 19 cm

Date:sixth to eight century

Accession No.:414

Comment: The heart shapes are of "typical domestic craft" (Kybalova, 1967, p8). There are also Christian connotations**[3]**.

Footnote:**[3]** Refer to page no. for more information on Christian symbolism.

CAT. 9

PLATE NO. 15

NMI

CAT. 10

PLATE NO.16
VASE WITH TREE OF LIFE.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic ornamented with tapestry woven coloured wools and undyed linens. The motif is circular with a centre circle of a tanned ground, some of which is ornamented in purple with a few traces of colour; blue, red and brown which highlight the subjects. The outer circle has a main ground of purple ornamented with tan.

The inner piece of the motif is of the Tree of Life. From the vase, the tree of life is growing, with two birds flanked either side and drinking from it. In the cleft above the vase is a hare or rabbit? The outer circle is ornamented with a geometric cable pattern worked in tan.

Material and Construction: Tapestry weave with curved shapes and outlining shapes with the use of the "flying shuttle" for extra weft in places.

Dimensions:35cm X 25.5 cm

Date:sixth to eight century.

Accession no.:419

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Vienna, Museum fur angewandte Kust (Volbach, 1969, p43), Prague, Museum of Decorative Arts Acc.no.1214 (Rutschowscya, 1990, p91), Brooklyn Museum (Thompson, 191, p15) Acc.No.42.438.1, Prague, Arts and Crafts Museum Acc.no. 1214 (Kybolova, 1967, p88)

PLATE NUMBER 17.

CAT. 10

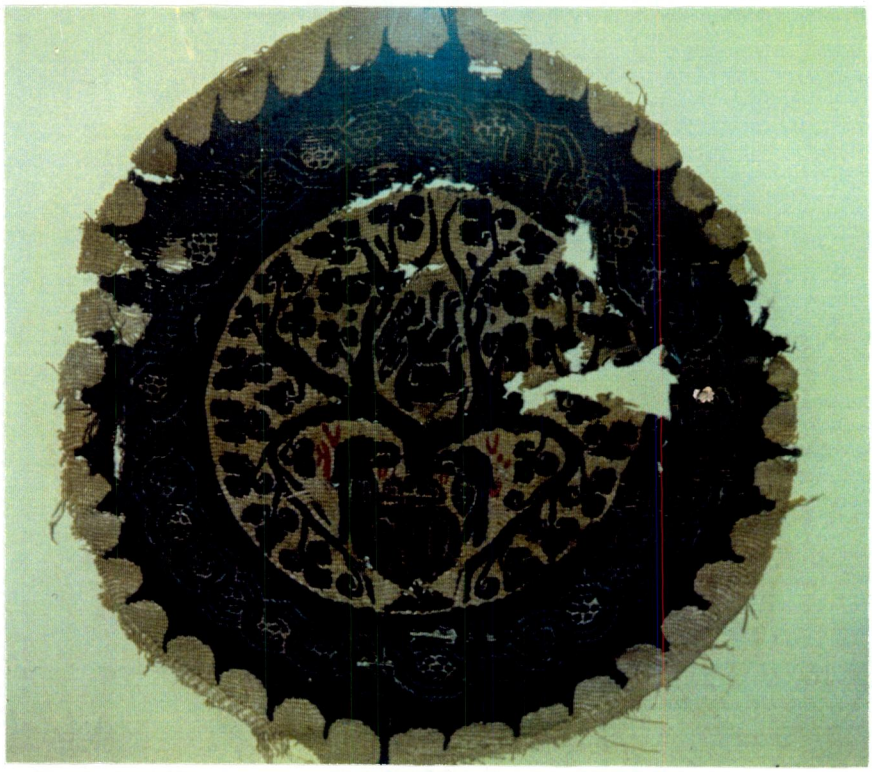


PLATE NO. 16 NMI

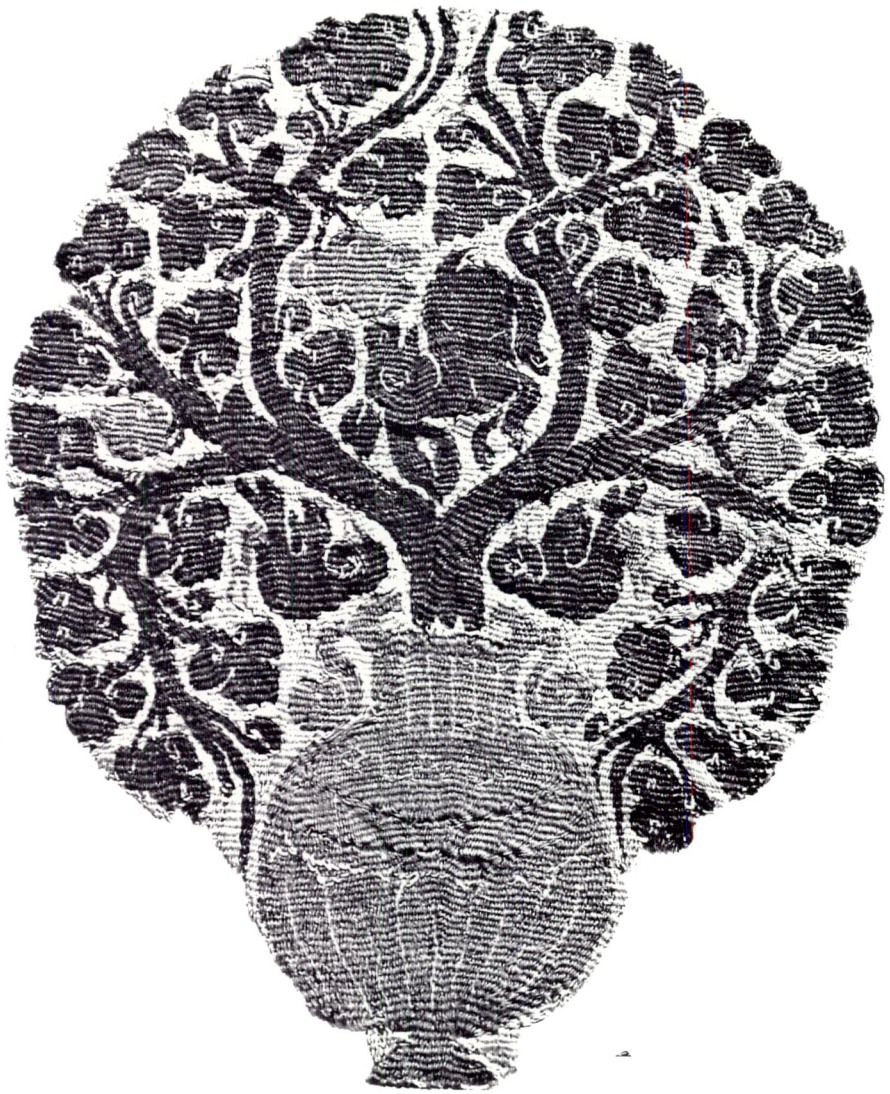


PLATE NO. 17 VIENNA

Comment: The bird flanking either side of the vase and drinking from it symbolises the eucharist. The hare may symbolise power or Satan. The geometric pattern was often used along with Christian symbols to disguise the motif during a time when Christians were persecuted.

CAT. 11

PLATE NO.18
AMPHORA WITH VINE TENDRILS.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic ornamented with tapestry woven coloured wools and undyed linens. The design is long and narrow woven in green wools on an oatmeal coloured ground of linen. A green stripe goes up either side of the vases. It consists of a sequence of amphora* and bowls with vine branches flowing from them.

Material and Construction: Tapestry weave with curved and outlining shapes also used is the "flying shuttle" with extra weft in places.

Dimensions:3cm X 34cm

Date: Sixth to eight century

Accession No.:447

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Paris, Louvre Acc.No.E17368 (Rutschowscya, 1990, p102), **PLATE NO.19.** Prague, Arts and Craft Museum Acc.No. 1216 (Kybalova, 1967, p82) **PLATE NO.20**

Comment: The vine trendils are again symbolising Christianity**[4]**.

Footnote:**[4]** For details of symbolism refer to page , Related Examples and Comments.

CAT. 11

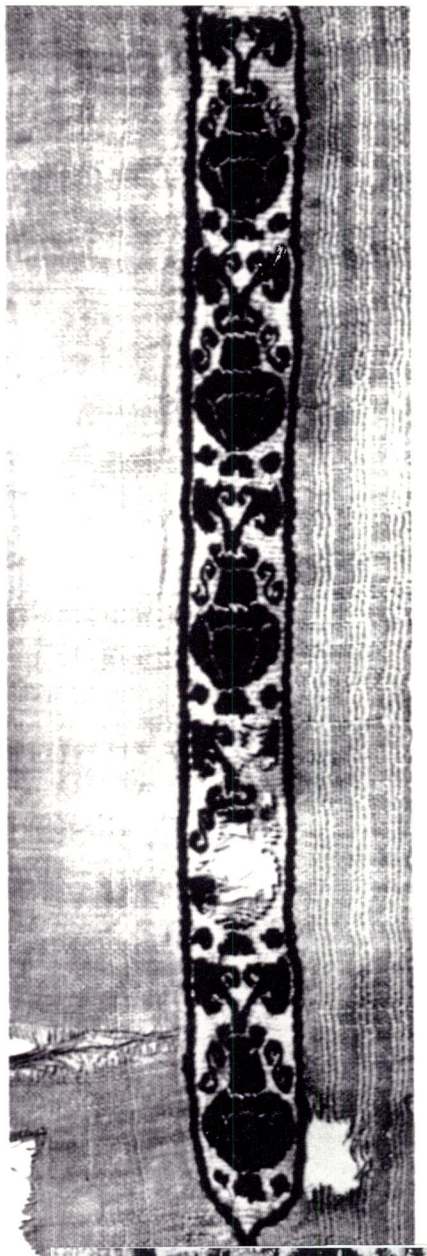


PLATE NO. 18

PLATE NO. 20 NMI

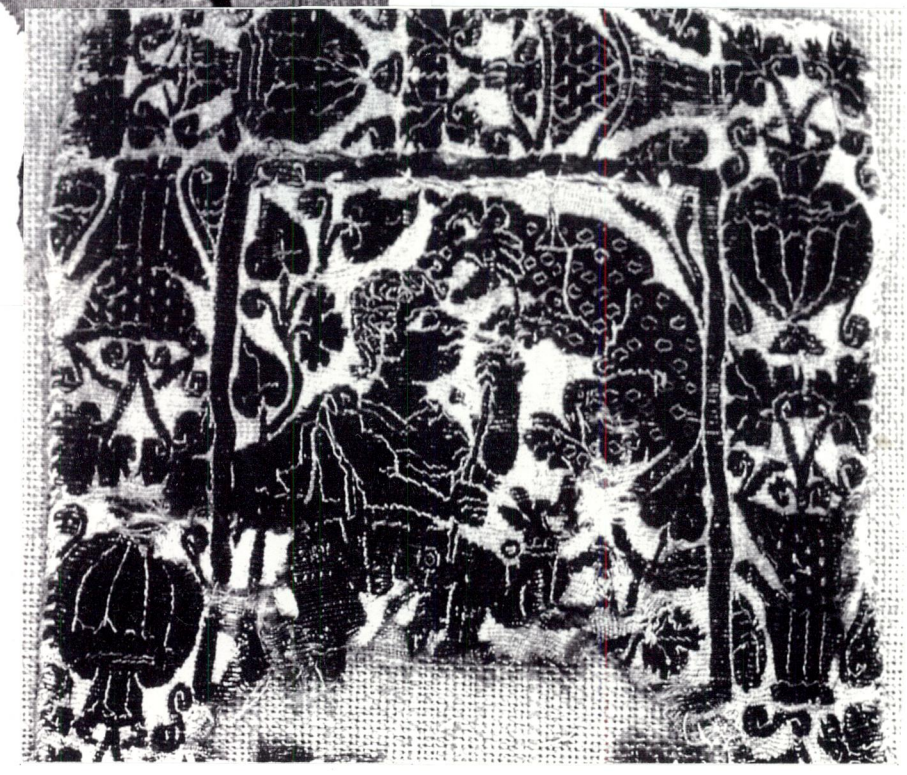


PLATE NO. 19

CAT. 12

PLATE NO.21
RECTANGULAR PANEL WITH FLOWERS, ANIMALS AND BIRDS.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen tunic ornamented with tapestry woven coloured wools. There is a woven ground of white wool which is ornamented with purple and certain areas are occupied by red, greens, pinks, yellows and oranges. The panel is edged with a familiar border, the notches or arches. The border consists of animals, lions, dogs or hares enclosed in circles made up of entwined vine shoots with leaves. Then there is a square centrepiece with a circle inset and four doves, one in each corner. The circle inset consists of four vases in the shape of a cross with vine tendrils growing from them. Also are four lotus-like flowers enclosed in scrolls.

Material and Construction: Tapestry with curved and outlining shapes in coloured wools.

Dimensions:24cm X 28 cm

Date: Fourth to sixth century

Accession No.:389

Provenance: Akhmim

Comment: The panel has that very common border of the fourth to the fifth century. The lion and the dog or hare may symbolise evil here. The doves in each corner represent the Holy Ghost and also because of the dove in the story of Noah, deliverance from danger. The cross made from the four vases represents the Eucharist**[5]**. The four doves between each arm of the cross may represent the crucifixion. The

CAT. 12

PLATE NO. 21

NML

flower symbolising the Garden of Eden.

Footnote:[5] Refer to page for more information on Christian symbolism.

FLOWER MOTIFS.

Floral motifs were common during the fourth and fifth centuries. They were often arranged in bands and like the other motifs varied in style, changing from realism to simplified, geometric forms of vine shoots, flowers and leaves. There also occurred changes in colour which led to white outline drawing constructed with a dark ground.

In the late Coptic period, the weaves returned to bright colours, not taking into account the natural colours of the objects. They interpreted everything in terms of ornament. Most of the floral motifs in the collection are simple and bright in colour with geometric forms.

CAT. 13

PLATE NO.22
FLORAL MOTIF IN GEOMETRIC FORM.

Colour and Design:A fragment for a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools and undyed linens. The design is arranged in a panel. At the edge there are black and turquoise triangles followed by a fine white line, then there is a ground of pink with circles and flowers in green,white and yellow. This is then followed by another white line. A large geometric design comes next, this is a leafy shaped design which is repeated up the centre of the panel with what looks like trees in them, with stems and buds. A pattern is arranged round these leaves of pink blocks of colour with white dots. Between each leaf there is a cross-like shape.

Material and Construction: Woven with wools and undyed linens. In tapestry weaves with curved shapes and outlining shapes.

Dimension:10 cm X 66cm

Date: Sixth to eight century

Accession No.:451-88

Provenance: Akhmim

CAT. 13

PLATE NO. 22 NMI

CAT. 14

PLATE NO.23
DECORATIVE PANEL WITH WOOL ON LINEN.

Colour and Design: Fragment of a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in wools and undyed linens. The designs consists of four vine leaves in a cruciform design, centred in a diamond shape, with a small cross in the centre. Purple and white are the only other colours used.

Material and Construction: Tapestry woven with curved shapes and stitched in areas, for example in the veins of the leaves.

Dimensions:23 cm X 24 cm

Date: Fourth to fifth century

Accession No.:424

Related examples: Paris, Collection Berard (Volbach, 1969, p36) **PLATE NO.24**

CAT. 14

with tapestry-
wool. From
polis.) Coptic,
to 6th. cent-

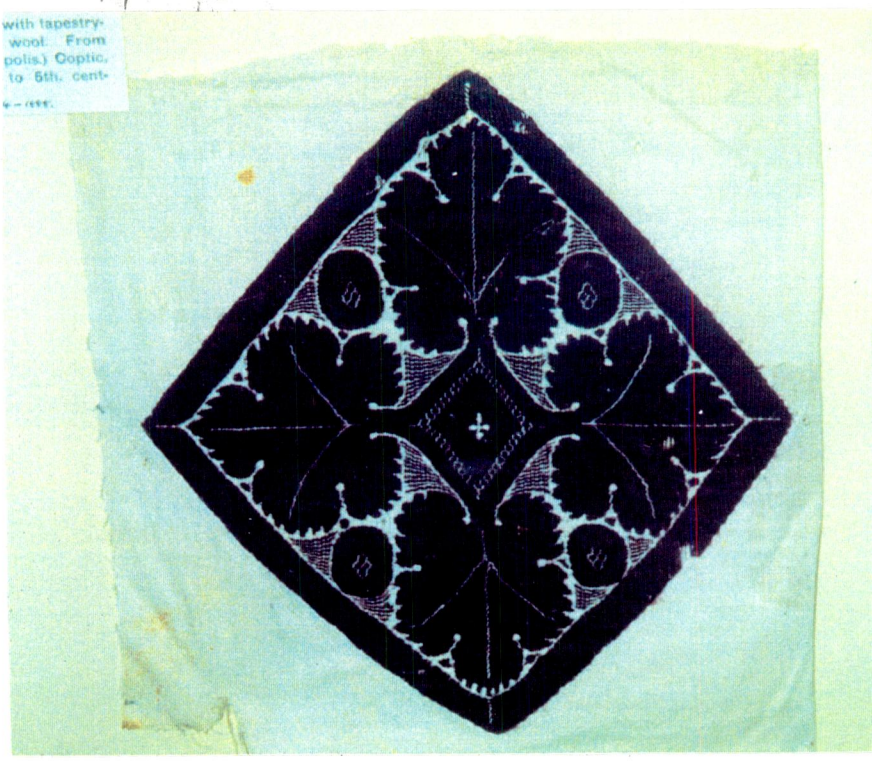


PLATE NO. 23

NMI

PLATE NO. 24

PARIS

CAT. 15

PLATE NO.25
PANEL OF LEAVES.

Colour and Design: Fragment from a linen cloth ornamented in coloured wools. There is a panel of stylised leaves running through the centre of the piece. They are hardly recognisable as leaves coloured in bright orange, yellow and turquoise. One orange leaf with a turquoise centre is followed by one with a yellow centre and this is repeated along the panel. A black line runs along either side of the strip of leaves, followed by green and orange blocks of colour, then by another black line.

Material and Construction: Woven with coloured wool on a ground of undyed linen. The leaves are woven in looped weaving and the stripes in tapestry weaving, the ground in plain weaving.

Dimension:31cm X 8.5 cm

Date:fourth to sixth century

Accession No:441

Provenance: Akhmin

CAT. 15

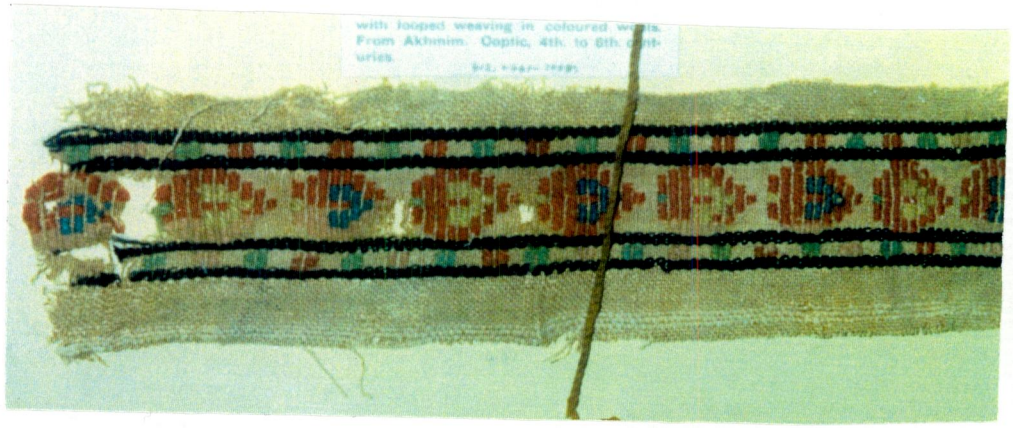


PLATE NO. 25

NM/

CAT. 16

PLATE NO.26
PANEL WITH LEAVES AND LOTUS FLOWERS

Colour and Design: Fragment from linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in coloured wools and undyed linen threads. The design is arranged in two identical panels running parallel with each other. The panel consists of a lotus flower and four green leaves, with an area of yelloow in them. Between the leaves are dots in black which act as fillers in the design. The panel is outlined by a black line. The space between each panel is the width of half the panel.The design is simple in appearance.

Material and Construction: The ground of undyed with wools is woven in plain and tapestry weaving.

Dimension:18cm X 9cm

Date: Sixth to eight century.

Accession No.:403

Provenance: Akhmim

CAT. 16

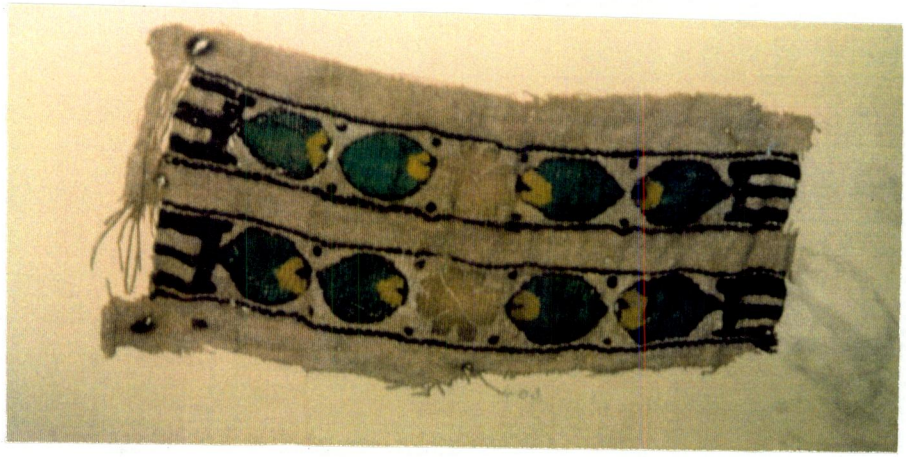


PLATE NO. 26

NMI

CAT. 17

PLATE NO.27
GEOMETRIC DESIGN.

Colour and Design: Fabric from a linen tunic with tapestry woven ornament in purple wool and natural linen. Parallel bands of wreath motifs are woven into a plain linen ground with purple wool.

Material and Construction: Woven in plain and tapestry weave with stitching on top.

Dimensions:18.5 cm X 70 cm

Date: Third to fifth century.

Accession No.:421

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Merseyside, County Museum (Seagroatt, p24)
PLATE NO.28

Comment: There is a very similar one in the Mersyside Museum (also from Akhmim), but this example is more geometric in design.

CAT. 17

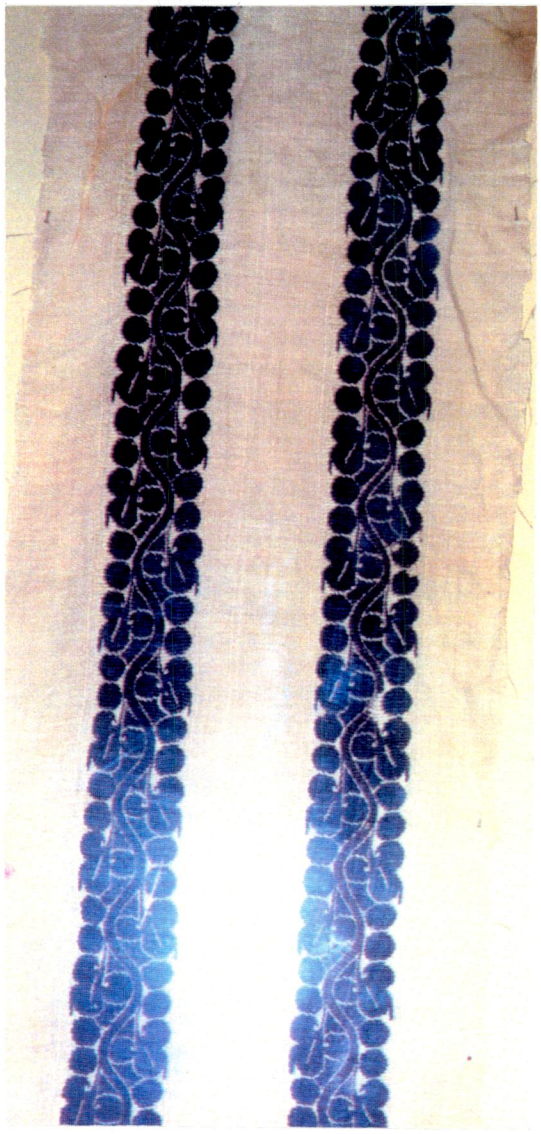


PLATE NO. 27 NMI

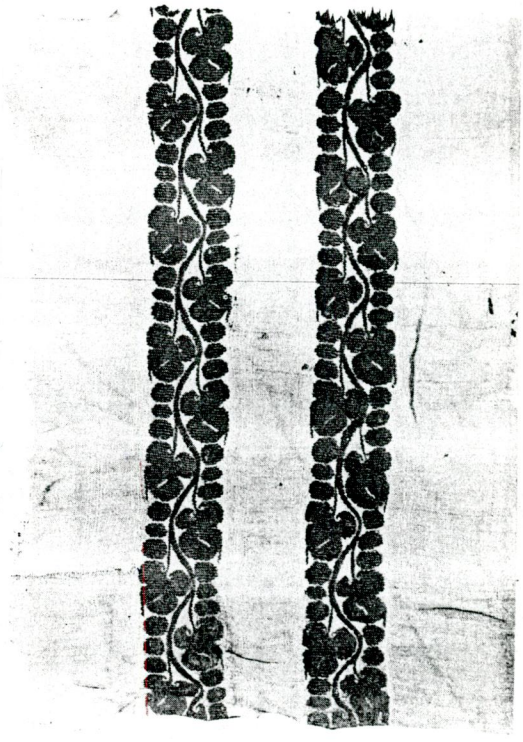


PLATE NO. 28

CAT. 18

PLATE NO.29
REPEAT PATTERN.

Colour and Design:fragment in coloured wools and undyed linens. The ground colour is black with an undyed linen pattern. The design is in repeat with patterned octogons containing goats with fig leaves and small fig leaves fill the spaces between the octagons.

Material and Construction: The design is in a shuttle woven pattern with the wool and undyed linen.

Dimensions:13 cm X 25 cm

Date: Fifth to seventh century

Accession No.:454

Provenance: Akhmim

Related Examples: Brooklyn Museum(Thompson, 1971, p23)
PLATE NO.30

Comment:I would think that the area of dark and light are reversed on its two faces, because where the wool (black) has rotted away, a ground of undyed linen remains.

CAT. 18

PLATE NO. 29 NMI

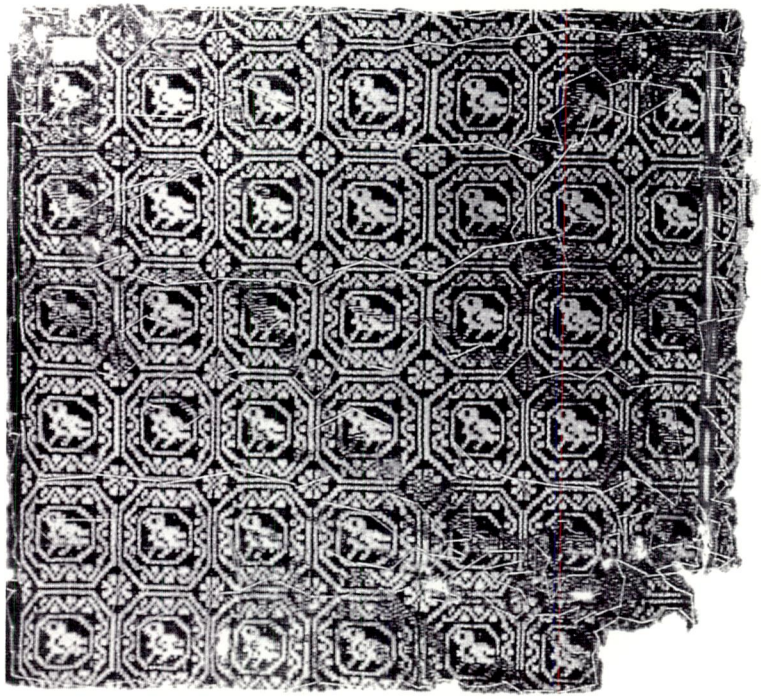


PLATE NO. 30 BROOKLYN MUSEUM

CONCLUSION.

I have no intention of summarising all the external and internal features that produced the rise to Coptic textiles. All there is to be said is that the Copts were astonishing, in that despite their crude equipment, lack of chemical dyes and the persecutions the Christians suffered, they produced amazing, skilful tapestries and woven fabrics. These textiles, even though made from the fourth to the twelfth century have not decreased in their aesthetic beauty or skilful craftsmanship.

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