

## COPTIC DRESS IN EGYPT: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF MEDIEVAL CLOTH

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"Daily life" is a catchword in historiography for many of the things that historians traditionally have not considered, or have not been able to study due to gaps in historical records<sup>1</sup>. In archives and archaeology, the record of daily life activities is often very slim, even for times and places where both archives and archaeology are relatively rich. Egypt is one such place.

"Daily life" also implies a potential focus on the poor as well as the wealthy, on the oppressed as well as the empowered. The methodology for creating this focus remains difficult, even for ancient Egypt. For example, the tremendous preponderance of cultic material--from pyramids to shawabtis--in the remains of Egyptian antiquity, requires a great infusion of speculation in order to fill out the gaps in our knowledge of the quotidian. The records that remain, inscriptions and monuments, were not necessarily created to document what we would like to know about ancient daily life. Scientific excavations of ancient settlements, for example, such as the townsite of Deir el-Medineh once inhabited by the workers who created the tombs at nearby Thebes, is a relatively recent development in Egyptology.

The situation is somewhat different for Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt, which I will refer to as "early medieval." Everyday documents abound, in the form of papyri, which can begin to round out an image of life in those periods. The Geniza documents, magisterially analysed by Goitein<sup>2</sup>, are the source of much of what we can know about the life of the Egyptian Jewish community. Excavations at Fustat have given us a glimpse of the early Islamic city, where the rich and poor evidently lived side by side. Coptic Egypt has yielded innumerable tombs containing ordinary, everyday textiles and fragments, primarily from clothing. By merging these materials and other approaches to the early medieval period in Egypt, it will eventually be possible to develop a clearer understanding of daily life in those times.

In Coptic textile studies, development of an "everyday life" approach has been hampered by certain limitations on the corpus of medieval textiles available for study. The most significant limitations have to do with how these textiles are found, and by

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that a historian can at least speculate on the relationships between daily life and larger historical events has gained more currency over the years, particularly as untapped archives are discovered and read with more and more attention to the issue. The flood of popular histories, particularly in France, on the *vie quotidienne* at various moments in the past, is one indication of how the concept has taken hold in the imagination. There are also syntheses which have brought together a wide range of different categories of information, from material culture to literary style, in order to offer a fuller picture of daily life in any given time and place. An important example of this is Fernand Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th century* (3 vols., London: Collins, 1981-1984).

<sup>2</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza* (5 vols). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967- .



whom. There are an estimated 150,000 so-called "Coptic" textiles in the world's museums<sup>3</sup>, although it is not clear how one arrives at such an estimate. Virtually all of these textiles were unearthed unscientifically, usually by antiquities dealers, and illegally. Excavation reports for sites that have produced large numbers of textiles are very rare.

Because the vast majority of these textiles have been filtered through the art market, only the most attractive have tended to survive in collections. Many of them are considered works of art, and are studied as such. "Daily life" hardly figures in the art historical approach to these materials, which entails organizing the corpus into type categories ordered into a relative sequence of stylistic development, using the very few securely dated specimens to anchor the analytic sequence to a historical chronology. That approach is possible due to the decorative nature of the majority of preserved textiles, and their study has proceeded largely by the comparison of undated, unprovenanced specimens with a growing corpus of published examples. Many of the resulting conclusions are indeed very tenuous.

Coptic textiles in most collections present a very rich iconography, somewhat derived from classical traditions, which has also attracted the attention of art historians. Very little of their work, however, has made any headway in our understanding of the contemporaneous meanings of Coptic textile images and other decorations. These methodological tendencies have undermined any potential "daily life" approach. As an indication of the enormous gaps in our knowledge, there seems to be no reliable way to differentiate between most types of male and female garments among the corpus of Coptic textiles. If clothing has any intrinsic semiological content at all, it is gender, and yet that very basic issue has eluded us.

In the Egyptian collections of the University Museum in Philadelphia is a group of about 500 textiles with an unusual provenance that may give us the confidence to go somewhat beyond the traditional art historical approach. The collection was purchased all at once in 1895, by Sir William Flinders Petrie while in Egypt during his Ballas-Naqada campaign. In correspondence to the Museum, Petrie called these textiles Coptic, noting that they were from Illahun (an archaeological site located between the Nile and the Fayyum basin) and that they dated to about A.D. 600<sup>4</sup>. As a collection, these textiles are

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah Thompson Coptic Textiles in the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1971, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> letter to Sarah Yorke Stevenson, 12 Oct. 1895; University Museum Archives, Egyptian Curatorial File 1/5. The Museum was one of Petrie's backers during many of his excavations, and expected to receive artifacts appropriate for exhibition. This was a normal procedure for collecting at the time. Petrie would also purchase things for various museums, and his letter explains that the textiles were purchased with what amounted to spare change from the purchase of a sculpture for the University Museum. He also stressed the study potential of this textile collection, although the Museum had not asked for one. It was definitely not excavated by Petrie, and his assignment of A.D. 600 to the whole was speculative.

By far, the most difficult task facing the student of Coptic garments is that of seriation and the assignment of reasonably approximate dates. The approach I have taken has been essentially to reject most of the identifiable assumptions present in the literature (and there are many), and to start over. Comparisons with textiles bearing dates in Arabic script (tiraz) are useful. Some of the Coptic textiles that can dated this way also have applied ornaments that can be seriated by changes in technical features and style. The intersection of the sequence of ornaments with any secure dates for the textiles that incorporate them is probably the best route for actual dating.

Using this methodology, I believe that particularly the woolen garments in the University Museum come the eighth and ninth centuries. The linen garments seem earlier,



unusual in the relatively large number of entire garments represented. With one exception, none have been published<sup>5</sup>.

The University Museum collection has a comparatively unusual emphasis on examples of plain garments, or garments with a minimum of ornamentation. There are no images from classical mythology, no putti, no nilotic nature scenes. If these textiles are contemporaneous with those in the art collections (and the point is not easily verified), then their plainness alone speaks to their being everyday cloth.

If we accept Petrie's own brief description of the collection, then there is little reason to suspect that the University Museum's textiles are anything other than a part of the native production of the medieval Fayyum, if not of medieval Egypt generally. Again, because of the nature of museum collecting, it has been impossible to propose regional or sociological types within the Egyptian material.

On the whole, the University Museum textiles exhibit many of the technical features that characterize Coptic weaving. Among these features are: S-spun yarn, countertwined heading cords, the use of twining to weave the ends of additional heading cords into previously woven warp (in order to create the typical shaped garments, whose sleeves are part of the web of the entire piece), warp-ends plied into thick rope-like finishes (often to match the heading cords), expansive loom-widths, and the construction of garments without cutting fabric.

One of the more interesting features of the University Museum collections is the large number of entirely woolen specimens. We usually associate Egyptian weaving with the use of linen, and with colored wools used only to define areas of ornamentation, but it seems that most of the collection is of woolen garments with the use of linen to delineate decorative patterns. This much emphasis on wool in these garments may be due to a regional tradition of the medieval Fayyum, or it may reflect a general shift from linen to wool garments after the Arab conquest of Egypt in A.D. 641<sup>6</sup>.

The use of wool made possible a richer use of color in Coptic garments. After seeing the University Museum collection, one can imagine a street scene in the Fayyum filled with color. Many of the shirts represented are dyed in bright red, green, and indigo blue. A group of burnouses, or semicircular cloaks, includes several golden yellow examples and one specimen of a dusky rose color. Children's garments seem to be the brightest. There is not a great deal of inwoven decoration, except for some weft-wise stripes. Many of these solid color garments have added ornamentation in the form of simple woven tapes at the hem, cuffs and neckline, in contrasting color (fig. 1).

There are linen shirts in the University Museum, and these fit the typical pattern of Coptic garments and fragments that are emphasized in other collections. The linen is undyed, and is decorated with bands and square or round "patches" of purplish or brown

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perhaps as much so as the fifth century, but they are not as amenable to the same methodology, since they mostly do not have any applied ornaments.

<sup>5</sup> The collection has not been entirely ignored. All pieces that were accessible at the time were examined by Louisa Bellinger in the 1940's, and the catalogue cards for these textiles are systematically filled with her descriptive notes.

<sup>6</sup> The point needs further study, but it rests on assumptions concerning the "nomadic" life of the Arab tribes, and their alleged preference for pastoral over agricultural products.



wool weft-faced tapestry. Inside the color areas are patterned tracteries of linen yarns, in eccentric weft-wrapping technique. The designs can be pictorial, but the University Museum pieces are almost all geometrical.

The differences between the linen and the wool garments in this collection suggest that it represents a period of far-reaching changes in dress style. Certainly the dyers' profession must have been booming, but it is likely that the overall economy (of the Fayyum? of Egypt?) also experienced an expansion, that could support the increased use of rich dyes.

The adoption of the woven tapes as decoration on the shirts suggests growth in the number of professions required to make an individual garment. The band-loomed tapes, plainweave wool with supplementary weft-patterning in linen, require a different technology than what was used in earlier Coptic textiles, most of which were apparently entirely woven on vertical two-beam looms<sup>7</sup>. Most of the garments are not shaped by cutting of fabric, and they are "assembled" simply by sewing up the sides. Often, a "tuck" is taken across the width of a shirt, but on the whole, there seems to have been no need for professional tailors when these were made<sup>8</sup>. The one possible piece of evidence to the contrary is the use of braids or cords applied in the vicinity of the necklines of wool garments, edging the neck and reinforcing underarm areas (fig. 2). These are warp-faced and perhaps card woven, with their wefts passing in a spiral fashion through the braid and the supporting fabric, essentially binding the braid to the garment<sup>9</sup>. These braids are typically in a bright red wool, strongly contrasting with the rest of the garment.

If tailors had a negligible role in medieval Egyptian daily life, certainly needlework did not. The University Museum has a fair number of meticulously repaired fragments, where parts of the textile have been carefully rewoven with matched wool

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<sup>7</sup> The question of the types of loom in currency in medieval Egypt has not been sufficiently examined. For example, some writers have suggested that the warp-weighted loom predominated, without indicating when it might have been abandoned, as it certainly was. The chapter on weaving technology in Diane Lee Carroll, Looms and Textiles of the Copts (San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1988, is particularly confusing to read. The shirts were typically woven in one piece, to shape. Their ornaments, at different times, are occasionally applied afterward, implying the use of a small frame loom in instances of tapestry ornaments (and not necessarily the reuse of fragments of tapestry shirts) and of a band loom for the tapes. The tapes also require the use of a simple drawloom mechanism, whose operation can be inferred by comparison with aspects of a band-loom described by A. Klein, "Tablet Weaving by the Jews of San'a (Yemen)," in The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment, ed. by Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, The Hague: Mouton, 1979, pp 426-445. The single-operator Yemeni drawloom technology is easily adaptable to non-cardwoven band-looms. Finally, a small number of the University Museum textiles are woven in a 2/1 twill, and the implications of this will require an expanded view of the capabilities of medieval weavers.

<sup>8</sup> There are exceptions to this generalization, even within the University Museum collection. Some children's garments are cut and pieced together from plain, often solidly dyed cloth, and at least one adult-sized shirt was sewn in the same fashion. These appear to represent transitional forms in costume history, as described by Veronika Gervers, "Medieval Garments in the Mediterranean World." In: Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: essays in memory of Professor E.M. Carus-Wilson, ed. N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> The technique is widely known in ethnographic textiles of the Near East and North Africa, and was discussed by Frieda Sorber in her presentation of Moroccan passementerie at the Symposium.



thread. This feature seems to have been used exclusively to repair wool, sometimes to reinforce, sometimes to replace major gaps in the fabric. The result is a fabric of a changed texture, with a remarkably regular distribution of tiny, seed-like stitches. Therefore, it may be that the repairers were professionals. Occasionally, similar textiles are published as decorative embroideries, which they cannot be.

Embroidery, however, did exist at the time, and the University Museum holds one of the handful of specimens known to me, particularly of linen embroidery on a wool ground<sup>10</sup> (fig. 3). These embroideries are clearly intended to mimic contemporaneous woven ornaments, and are evidence of another tier of textile production in medieval society. We may assume that embroidered, as opposed to woven garments represent less expensive ways to produce a decorated garment. The stitching is generally irregular, particularly in the small areas of infilling. Otherwise, running stitches are used, and they create a surface effect that is visually identical to the weft-wrapping that is performed by weavers. The embroidered design repertory, although not very large due to the limited number of recognized examples, seems identical to woven designs.

Other than shirts, burnouses and a few oddments of cloth that will not be discussed here, the collection also includes a few other garments that may reflect everyday dress. There are several complete or fragmentary heavy, bag-like hairnets or snoods, made in a sprang technique. These are made of wool, in various textured cable patterns, and plied yarns are brightly dyed in red, green, yellow or purple. Red is the predominant color in all of them.

There are also a number of complete and fragmentary examples of plain, rectangular wrap garments. Some of these have a narrow weft-wise stripe of contrasting color near the ends, but on the whole these textiles seem drab by comparison with the shirts and burnouses. They are, however, very likely to be part of women's dress, as are the hairnets just mentioned.

The University Museum collection, therefore, shows us a range of everyday dress in medieval Egypt. There are gaps in the range of types represented<sup>11</sup>, but it does give us a few tiny windows to view aspects of daily life in the Late Antique and early Islamic period. People seemed to like wearing bright colors, and society required a complicated system of artisans to produce the variety of garments and other textiles. Egypt achieved a kind of renaissance in the Islamic period, and from the collection presented here, we see that the economic effects may have extended into the Fayyum.

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<sup>10</sup> The technique seems almost unrecognized in the literature. A good close-up photograph of a fragment similar to that in the University Museum is published by Nobuko Kajitani in a Japanese-language article on Egyptian textiles in *Senshoku no bi (Textile Art)*, early autumn, 1981, fig. 17 (center of p. 16). That specimen (Metropolitan Museum of Art no. 89.18.63) was evidently described as a tapestry-woven ornament with weft-wrapping (private communication, N. Kajitani).

<sup>11</sup> For example, there are no items obviously intended for wear below the waist: no pants, no socks, no belts, etc. Unprovenanced socks exist in other collections, and belts are frequently mentioned in the medieval literature as required parts of Coptic costume. It is possible that none of these things were appropriate for Coptic burial practices. Were they considered unclean?





Fig. 1

University Museum E 17165: Complete adult's shirt, woven to shape (with an additional tuck across the waist). Weft-faced plain weave with applied ornamental tapes at bottom edge, sleeve cuffs, and neck opening. The body of the garment is all golden-brown wool, with weft stripes of undyed wool. The applied tapes are balanced plain weave of red wool, with supplementary weft patterning in white linen.



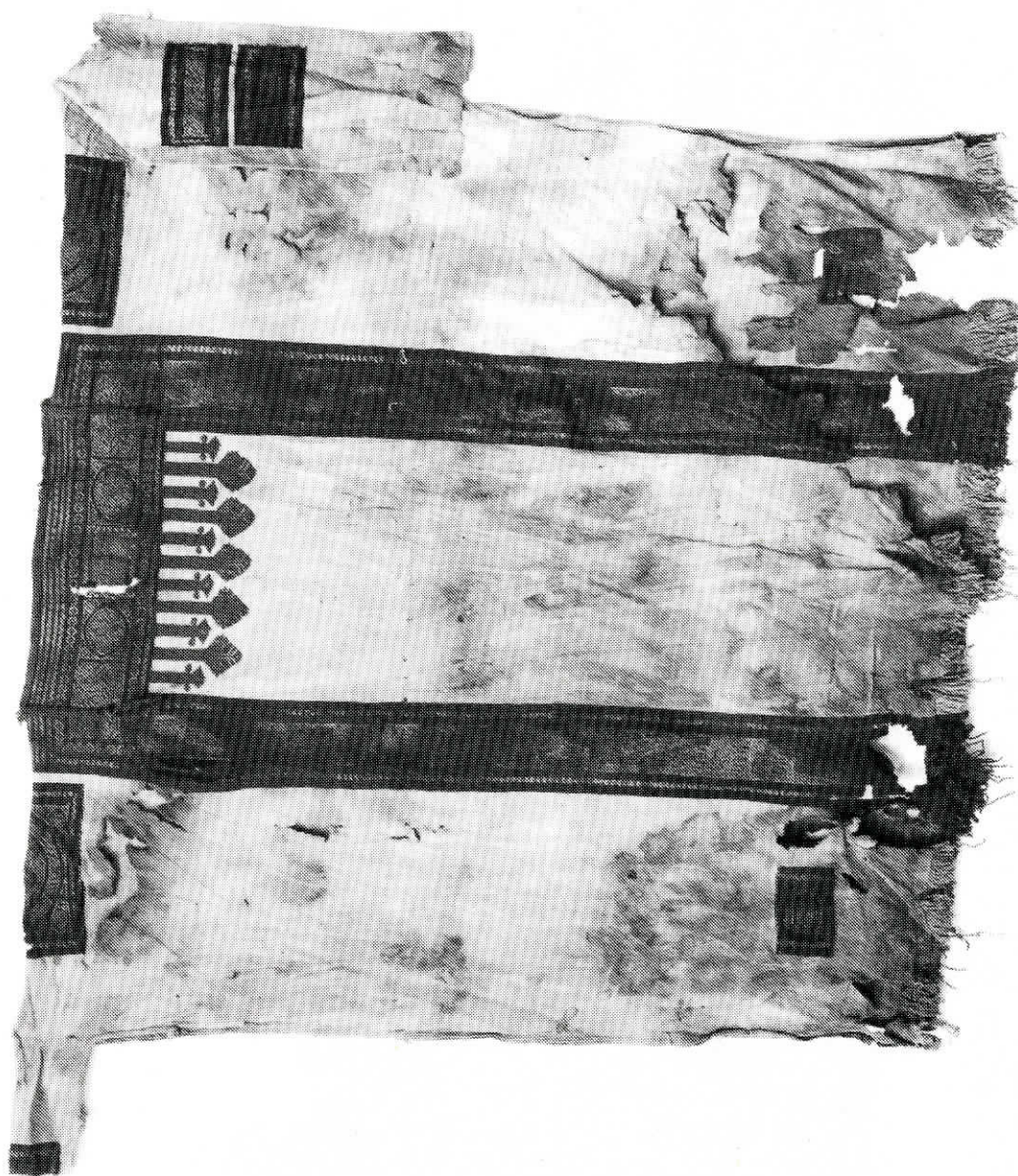


Fig. 2

University Museum E 17216: Complete adult's shirt, woven to shape (with evidence of an additional tuck across the waist). Weft-faced plain weave with inwoven ornamentation (slit tapestry, dovetailed tapestry, and eccentric weft-wrapping, the latter done with white linen thread). Inwoven pile at selvages (bottom of the garment). Cream colored wool over all, with dark brownish purple wool for the ornaments. Bright red wool braid reinforces the neck opening.





Fig. 3

University Museum E 17124: Fragmentary child's shirt, woven to shape (but presently lacking sleeves). Balanced plain weave, white linen warp and weft, with inwoven, weft-faced stripes and square patches in dark purplish wool, embroidered with linen thread.