

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2008

Representation and self-presentation in late antique Egypt: 'Coptic' textiles in the British Museum

Elisabeth R. O'Connell

British Museum, eoconnell@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

O'Connell, Elisabeth R., "Representation and self-presentation in late antique Egypt: 'Coptic' textiles in the British Museum" (2008). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 236.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/236>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Representation and self-presentation in late antique Egypt:
'Coptic' textiles in the British Museum¹**

Elisabeth R. O'Connell
eoconnell@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

Among late antique textiles in the British Museum Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan (hereafter, AES), nearly half (c. 135) are said to have come from the Upper Egyptian town of Akhmim. If the attribution to the site is correct, the textiles provide the Museum with an excellent opportunity to discuss the transformation of Egypt in Late Antiquity through the lens of death and burial.

The late antique site is well represented in Greek and Coptic literature and by the material culture of the city and its cemeteries.² The modern name Akhmim holds a vestige of the name Min, the Egyptian god to whom the city was dedicated, and whom Greek-speakers equated with Pan. Thus, the city was known as Panopolis in Greek and, later, Shmin in Coptic. The city was the birthplace of numerous "pagan" elites who figure prominently in ancient literature: the alchemist Zosimos (c. 300 CE), fourth-century pagan philosophers (e.g., the Neo-Platonist Horapollon Sr.) and fifth-century pagan poets (e.g., Pamprepus). Fourth-century family archives surviving on papyrus demonstrate the everyday life of, for example, Ammon, a temple priest and his family.³ At the same time, from at least 347 CE, Panopolis was the seat of a bishop, and some of the earliest practitioners of communal monasticism established monasteries in the region.⁴ The *Life of Saint Pachomius* suggests that the abbot founded at least three monasteries at or near Akhmim in the first half of the fourth-century.⁵ Across the river at Shenoute's Monastery, near modern Sohag, the fifth-century abbot wrote scathing attacks on elites whom he accused of being pagans.⁶

Modern scholars have tended to view fourth- and fifth-century Panopolis as a volatile site of pitched battles between pagans and Christians.⁷ And yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that the story is far more complicated. For example, it is no longer possible to argue that several fifth-century Panopolite poets were pagan, and, instead, we gain an impression of Christian authors composing in Classical forms on Classical themes.⁸ Most notable is the fifth-century poet, Nonnus of Panopolis, who composed forty-eight books on the adventures

¹ For periodization, see e.g., R. S. Bagnall, "Periodizing when you don't have to: the concept of Late Antiquity in Egypt," in *Gab es eine Spätantike?*, ed. B. Sirks, 39–49 (Frankfurt am Main, 2003); and Cat. Riggisberg, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* (Riggisberg: Abegg Stiftung, 2004), 14–15.

² S. Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1984–1992), 1:80–96; and Egberts, et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Panopolis: an Egyptian town from Alexander the Great to the Arab conquest* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

³ P. van Minnen, "The letter (and other papers) of Ammon: Panopolis in the fourth-century AD," in Egberts, et al., 177–200.

⁴ K. Worp, "Checklist of bishops in Byzantine Egypt (A.D. 325–c. 750)," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994), 304.

⁵ P. Rousseau, *Pachomius: the making of a community in fourth-century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 63.

⁶ S. Emmel, "From the other side of the Nile: Shenute and Panopolis," in Egberts, et al., 95–114.

⁷ D. Frankfurter, "Things unbefitting Christians: violence and Christianization in fifth-century Panopolis," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000): 273–95.

⁸ A. Cameron, "Pagans and poets in Byzantine Egypt," in *Egypt in the Byzantine world*, ed. R. S. Bagnall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36–38.

of Dionysis. This poem is written in Greek hexameters, the quintessential meter of epic, exemplified above all by the *Iliad*, which Nonnus sought to emulate or even surpass. The same poet Nonnus wrote a *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*. He was a Christian writing poetry inspired by both Hellenistic mythology and the New Testament.⁹

Textiles tell a similarly complex story. One fifth-century CE individual was buried in textiles depicting both “pagan” and Christian themes.¹⁰ The deceased wore a silk tunic (c. 350–450 CE) depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary.¹¹ Around the body, reused as a shroud, was a very fine wall hanging (c. fourth-century CE) depicting an initiate approaching Dionysis and his companions.¹² The presence of both exceptional quality fabrics in the same burial is better evidence of the owner’s elite status than religious affiliation.¹³ Just like the literature exemplified by Nonnus, contemporary textiles problematize modern scholars’ simplistic construction of “pagan” versus Christian in this period and demonstrate that there are more complicated and, in fact, far more interesting stories to be told.

The following paper will review the modern history of the cemeteries of Akhmim (I), consider the attribution of textiles in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan (AES) collection said to have come from the site (II), and compare a selection of textiles in the AES collection to objects for which an Akhmim findspot is decisive (III). In conclusion, the paper will address cultural and personal identity, arguing for conservatism in burial practice in late antique Egypt (IV).

I. History of the site

When modern excavators identified the cemeteries of Akhmim, the site was remarkably un plundered.¹⁴ By March 1883, the Director of the Antiquities Service, Gaston Maspero, had already identified Akhmim graves as a source of “fine mummy cloths.”¹⁵ During a six-month season in 1885/1886, he directed the excavation of thousands of burials in the late antique and early Islamic cemeteries.¹⁶ Once the Antiquities Service demonstrated an interest in the area, clandestine digging accelerated and material made its way onto the antiquities market and into international collections.¹⁷ Contemporary letters describe the process whereby collectors set out to make their purchases on site visits. On 19 January 1886 Charles Edwin Wilbour recorded a typical experience at Akhmim.

⁹ Cameron, 36.

¹⁰ D. Willers (ed.), *Begegnung von Heidentum und Christentum im spätantiken Ägypten*, Riggisberger Berichte 1 (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 1993).

¹¹ Cat. Riggisberg, no. 62.

¹² Cat. Riggisberg, no. 1.

¹³ For luxury textiles bearing pagan themes used in European church reliquaries, see S. Marzinzik’s contribution to this volume.

¹⁴ K. Kuhlmann, *Materialien zur Archäologie und Geschichte des Raumes von Achmim*, Sonderschrift, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo 11 (Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1983), 2.

¹⁵ J. Capart (ed.), *Travels in Egypt: letters of Charles Edwin Wilbour* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1936), 244. The “fine mummy cloths” are clearly the colorful linen and wool textiles, which became popular only in the late Roman period. The cemetery from which these textiles derive is clearly distinguished from the (rock-cut) tombs located on the desert escarpment above.

¹⁶ G. Maspero, “Rapport à l’Institut Égyptien sur les fouilles et travaux exécutés en Égypte pendant l’hiver de 1885–1886,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Égyptien* 7 (1886), 210–212; and Kuhlmann, 54.

¹⁷ For claims that Maspero engaged in the antiquities trade himself, see E. A. W. Budge, *By Nile and Tigris: a narrative of journeys in Egypt and Mesopotamia on behalf of the British Museum between the years 1886 and 1913*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1920), 1:135.

Last evening I went with Mahmood Ledeed to his brother, Sheikh Aly's house Aly showed me near a hundred mummies; he had three rooms full. Then Mahmood took a five bushel bag of mummy embroidered cloth¹⁸ and two boys conducted it on a small donkey's back to our boat, by which it and its proprietor get a ride to Luxor. Mahmood tells me today that my friend Abdul Mégeed has a papyrus; that nobody I know in Luxor or across the river is sick, and that there are a dozen Khawaga [i.e., foreigners] in Cook's Hotel, and three American ladies and Mr. Chester at the Karnak Hotel.¹⁹

This extract gives a vivid impression of the bustling antiquities market in the 1880s and names several of the key players (e.g., Chester, below). In addition to their interactions with high status Egyptians, collectors like Wilbour dealt with French consular agent M. Frénay.²⁰ Archaeologists (e.g., Flinders Petrie) and scholars (e.g., Urbain Bouriant) considered Frénay a looter; Wilbour and others, notably British Museum Keeper E. A. W. Budge (below), bought antiquities from him at Akhmim.²¹ Western visitors had many opportunities to purchase "Akhmim textiles," whether at the site itself, in Luxor (c. 200 km south), as suggested in the passage above, or Cairo (c. 450 km north).²²

It was in Cairo that Alcasian collector, dealer, archaeologist, and, later, museum director, Robert Forrer first became acquainted with textiles said to come from Akhmim.²³ In 1891, Forrer published two books on Akhmim textiles in which he sought to distinguish between local productions and imports.²⁴ But, his attribution of an Akhmim findspot depends on information provided by Cairo dealers.²⁵ Only later, in 1894, Forrer travelled to Akhmim and directed excavations.²⁶ Forrer's letters from Egypt, published in 1895, provide the best contemporary description of the site and the carnage wreaked by official and unofficial excavators before his arrival.

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, one notices black holes in the hills, other black points can be identified as corpses of opened and unwrapped mummies, which have carelessly been put down, decomposing very slowly ... often a complete corpse with skin and hair; a cadaver without a head.²⁷

There is no archaeological documentation of the site. Nevertheless, Maspero and Forrer's descriptions have allowed scholars to locate the cemeteries from which late antique textiles derived and reconstruct the disposition of the burials.²⁸ Like Maspero before him, Forrer

¹⁸ See note 15.

¹⁹ Capart (ed.), 349.

²⁰ E.g., Capart (ed.), 600; and Budge, 1:135. For Frénay's presence at Akhmim 1885/1886, see Maspero, 216.

²¹ S. McNally and I. D. Schunk, *Excavations in Akhmim, Egypt: continuity and change in city life from late antiquity to the present*, British Archaeological Reports 590 (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1993), 2.

²² For Budge's report of Akhmim material stored in dealers' houses at Luxor, see e.g., Budge, 1:87.

²³ R. Forrer, *Die Gräber- und Textilfunde von Achmim-Panopolis* (Strassburg, 1891), 10. For Forrer, see B. Schnitzler, *Robert Forrer, 1866–1947: archéologue, écrivain et antiquaire* (Strasbourg: Société savante d'Alsace, 1999).

²⁴ Forrer, *Gräber- und Textilfunde* and *Romanische und Byzantinische seider-textilien aus dem Gräberfelde von Achmim-Panopolis* (Strassburg, 1891).

²⁵ C. Fluck, "Akhmim as a source of textiles," in *Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt 1: Akhmim and Sohag*, ed. G. Gabra and H. Takla (Cairo: AUC Press, 2008), 211–24.

²⁶ R. Forrer, *Mein Besuch in el-Achmim: Reisebriefe aus Aegypten* (Strassburg, 1895).

²⁷ Forrer, *Mein Besuch*, 31; partial English translation, in Fluck, 211–24.

²⁸ Maspero, 210; Forrer *Mein Besuch*, 30; and Kuhlmann, 52, 62–63, figs. 14 and 17.

vividly described the unwrapping of late antique mummy bundles.²⁹ Photographs and drawings from Albert Gayet's 1896–1910 excavation at the late antique cemetery at

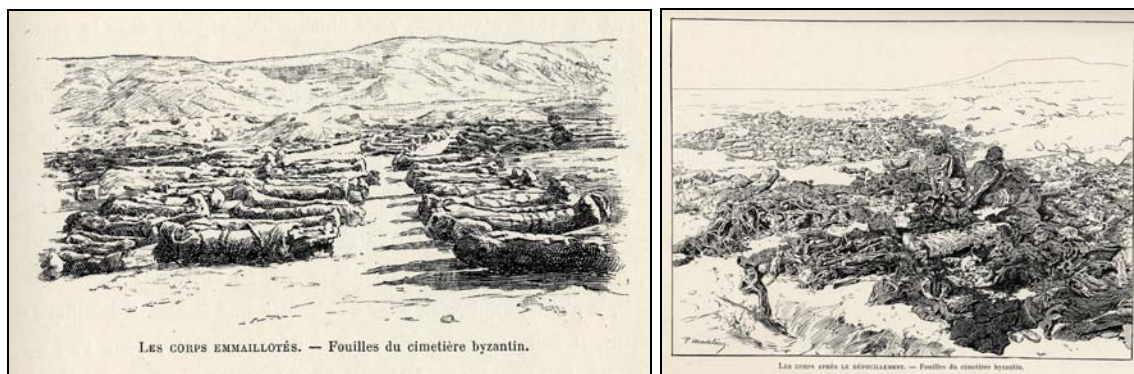


Figure 1a (left) and 1b (right). A. Gayet, *Antinoë et les sépultures de Thaïs et Sérapion* (Paris: Société française d'éditions d'art, 1902), 35 and 37.

Antinoopolis, near modern Sheikh Ibada, supplement Maspero and Forrer's descriptions of Akhmim by giving a visual impression of the sheer numbers of mummy bundles unearthed and the scale of the discarded dead (Fig. 1).³⁰ With such images from Antinoopolis in mind, we can better imagine the procedure by which Akhmim material was dispersed. In the post-excavation process, garments and other textiles, which had been part of mummy bundles, were cut into many pieces in order to increase the number of units for sale for the growing market.³¹ In this manner, textiles made their way onto the antiquities market and into international collections, including the British Museum.³²

II. British Museum acquisitions

The majority of AES textiles said to come from Akhmim were acquired through Rev. Greville John Chester and British Museum Keeper E. A. W. Budge. A handful of unprovenanced textiles given by others also merit inclusion in the corpus. Criteria for attributing AES textiles to Akhmim include the assigned provenance, the acquisition date, and comparison with same or similar objects. First, scholars tend to trust a reported findspot unless there are reasons to doubt it. As already outlined above, there is reason to proceed with caution. Akhmim became well known as a source of late antique and early Islamic textiles and the toponym Akhmim may have been given to objects, especially textiles, which did not come from the site. Thus it is necessary to scrutinize each attribution according to other criteria. Second, although not to be used as a sole standard, it is often helpful to

²⁹ Maspero, 210–212; and Forrer, *Mein Besuch*, 44–48.

³⁰ F. Calament, *La révélation d'Antinoë par Albert Gayet: histoire, archéologie, muséographie*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2005).

³¹ T. Thomas, "Coptic and Byzantine textiles found in Egypt: corpora, collections, and scholarly perspectives," in *Egypt in the Byzantine world*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, 21–46 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Cat. Worms, *Die sogenannten koptischen Textilien im Museum Andreasstift der Stadt Worms: Bestandskatalog* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2002), 30. For an illustrative example of fragments of an unprovenanced single tunic now in ten different collections in Germany, Switzerland, Russia and the USA, see Cat. Riggisberg, no. 58.

³² For collection-based discussions of Akhmim finds, see e.g., Cat. Worms, 11–12; Cat. Lyon, *Lyon, Musée historique des tissus: soieries sassanides, coptes et byzantines: Ve–XIe siècles* (Paris: Ministère de la culture et de la communication, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1986), 80–81, and 128; Cat. Würzburg, *Die koptischen Stoffe im Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974), 3–4; Cat. Budapest, *Coptic antiquities II* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1993), 13 and 91; M. Martiniani-Reber, "Tissus façonnés d'Akhmim (Egypte): collection du Musée d'art et d'histoire, Genève," *Genava* 37 (1989): 19–28; and R. Cortopassi, "Tissus de la cité égyptienne d'Akhmim au Musée de l'Homme," *Revue du Louvre* 51.3 (2003): 29–37.

consider acquisition date. The great majority of textiles circulating in 1885/1886 will have derived from Akhmim, with bursts in following years (e.g., after Forrer's 1894 expedition).³³ Third, comparison with same or similar objects provides the most secure basis for attribution (section III, below).

In 1886, Rev. Greville John Chester (1830–92) sold eighty-five Coptic textiles said to be from Akhmim, and, in subsequent years, a handful of others (e.g., EA 20717 in 1889).³⁴ Chester facilitated the purchase of antiquities for numerous UK institutions; the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) acquired the largest portion of his textiles said to have come from Akhmim.³⁵ In general, Chester seems to have taken care to provide information to institutions concerning object findspots, when available.³⁶ Although he is best known as an antiquities collector, Chester visited Egypt annually, recording monuments before they were removed or destroyed and, back in Britain, he was instrumental in establishing archaeology as a discipline at Oxford.³⁷ Chester had access to the same resources as Wilbour and Budge, but whether or not his attribution of an Akhmim findspot can be trusted depends on whether he acquired material at the site itself in 1885/1886 or if it was reported to him by a seller at, for example, Luxor, where he can be placed in January 1886.³⁸ While it is crucial to maintain a healthy degree of scepticism and interrogate each attribution of provenance, many can be substantiated.

E. A. Wallis Budge (1857–1934), later Keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities (1894–1924), acquired c. thirty-five Akhmim textiles, most of which were registered between 1887 and 1891.³⁹ According to Budge's memoir, Chester introduced him to several Cairo dealers on 2 December 1886 and, a few days later, Budge arrived at Akhmim via the Thomas Cook passenger steamer, *Prince Abbas*.

... Mr. J. M. Cook stopped there for some hours to enable us to inspect the mass of Graeco-Roman and Coptic antiquities and manuscripts which had been found there a short time before we visited the town. The dealers welcomed us warmly, and whilst many of the passengers went off to see the old Christian cemetery and the Graeco-Roman tombs in the hills, the Sardar [i.e., army commander], and Captain John Grenfell Maxwell and myself examined antiquities.⁴⁰

Thus, by his own account, Budge can be placed at Akhmim in December 1886 and, later in the same passage, he states that he bought "some things." In other anecdotes, Budge confirms that he also purchased from Frénay at Akhmim and relied upon agents such as

³³ Fluck, 211–24.

³⁴ W. R. Dawson et al., *Who was who in Egyptology*, 3rd ed. (London: EES, 1997), 96–97; G. J. Chester, *Obituary notices of the late Rev. Greville John Chester* (London: W. G. L. Speyer, 1892); and G. Seidmann, "Greville John Chester," *Wolfson College Record, Oxford University* 2005/2006: 85–87.

³⁵ Cat. London, *Catalogue of textiles from burying-grounds in Egypt: Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Textiles* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920–1922), 1:9 and passim.

³⁶ Cat. Oxford, *Catalogue of the Egyptian Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (Oxford: Parker and Co., 1881).

³⁷ Chester; and Seidmann, 85–87.

³⁸ Capart (ed.), 349.

³⁹ Dawson et al., 71–72. Only one Budge textile attributed to Akhmim entered the collection in later years, EA 29771 in 1897.

⁴⁰ Budge, 1:86.

Chauncey Murch to negotiate deals at the site.⁴¹ Budge is well known among Egyptologists for having given false or misleading attributions to other corpora of material said to have come from Akhmim, and it is essential to question each findspot assigned to Budge acquisitions.⁴²

To summarize, up to 120 registered textiles acquired through Chester and Budge and now in AES are said to have come from Akhmim. On the basis of style, technique, and materials, it is possible to attribute additional objects acquired through sources such as Rev. William MacGregor (1848–1937) in 1886 (below).⁴³

III. Textiles in the Department of AES

Among the incalculable thousands of textiles or fragments thereof *said to be* from Akhmim and now in international collections, specialists have identified several groups for which an Akhmim findspot can be confirmed.⁴⁴ Thus, several AES textiles can be added to already-established corpora of Akhmim textiles.



Figure 2 (left). EA 21802, Cushion or cover, 50cm (h) x 40cm (w).

Figure 3 (cent.). EA 21796, Cushion or cover, detail., 46cm (h) x 42cm (w).

Figure 4 (right). EA 17175 Cushion or cover, 51cm (h) x 29cm (w),

Images--courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

A group of covers and cushions (Figs. 2, 3, 4) share enough similar features of motif, style, and technique that scholars argue that they were not only found in Akhmim, but also produced there.⁴⁵ The objects are tapestry woven squares or *tabulae* framed by long linen pile. The composition of each *tabula* consists of a central medallion connected to four open or closed compartments in the corners. Depictions of human or mythological figures, animals, and fruit baskets typically occupy the central medallion, and combinations of the same three motifs alternate between the corners and the intervening spaces. EA 21802 and EA 21796, said to come from Akhmim, were purchased by Budge and accessioned in 1888.

⁴¹ Dawson et al., 302; M. Smith, “Budge at Akhmim, January 1896,” in *The unbroken reed*, ed. C. Eyre, et al. (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1994), 299.

⁴² E.g., Smith.

⁴³ Dawson et al., 267–68. Cf. Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, *Catalogue of the MacGregor Collection of Egyptian antiquities* (London: J. Davy, 1922).

⁴⁴ I have found C. Fluck’s 2008 discussion (see note 25) especially useful throughout this section, and I am grateful to her for sharing her work with me in advance of its publication. See also, Cat. Worms, 12–14; and Cat. Riggisberg, 454–55.

⁴⁵ Fluck 2008, 211–24; and Cat. Riggisberg, 455 and 463.

The tapestry-woven *tabula* of EA 21802 portrays an equestrian figure surrounded by alternating representations of warriors and animals (Fig. 2).⁴⁶ A second object, EA 21796, depicts warriors and baskets of fruit framing a central, larger-scale basket (Fig. 3).⁴⁷ A third cushion or cover (EA 17172) given in 1886 by the Rev. William MacGregor is not attributed a findspot, but can be included in the group on iconographic, stylistic, and technical grounds. Like EA 21796, the *tabula*'s central motif is also a basket, but the figures in the corner compartments are *erotes* carrying birds, while various animals occupy the spaces in between (Fig. 4). There are dozens of examples of these cushions or covers now in international collections and scholars have dated them to the fourth- to sixth-century.⁴⁸



Figure 5. EA 20440 Detail of silk clavi from tunic, 33cm (h) x 13cm (w).
Image--courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Silk tunic decoration comprises a second group of textiles assigned to Akhmim.⁴⁹ One AES fragment (EA 20440) was acquired from Greville John Chester in 1886 and is said to come from Akhmim. The object is composed of two applied silk bands or *clavi* woven in purple and buff; the design consists of vegetal motifs divided by square compartments containing an eight-pointed ornament with floral devices at the ends (Fig. 5). Numerous international institutions hold comparable shoulder and sleeve *clavi* and, when a findspot is registered, examples are said to be from Akhmim.⁵⁰ A complete tunic with silk decoration now in the

⁴⁶ Cf. Cat. Riggisberg, no. 43; Cat. Lyon, *Les tapisseries coptes du Musée Historique des Tissus*, Lyon (Montpellier: Université de Montpellier, 1993), no. 25; and L. Kybalová, *Coptic textiles* (London: Paul Hamlyn Ltd., 1967), pls. 49 and 54.

⁴⁷ Cf. Cat. Würzburg, nos. 17 and 18; Cat. Riggisberg, nos. 41, 42 and 43; Cat. London, nos. 69 and 70; and Kybalová, pl. 53.

⁴⁸ For bibliography and dates, see Cat. Riggisberg, nos. 41 and 42.

⁴⁹ De Moor, et al., "New research on the so-called Akhmim silks," in *Textiles in situ: their find spots in Egypt and neighbouring countries in the first millennium CE*, ed. S. Schrenk. Riggisberger Berichte 13, 85–94 (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2006); and Cat. Lyon, *Musée historique*, 80–97.

⁵⁰ See bibliographies in Cat. Würzburg, no. 53; and Cat. Riggisberg, 15 and 455, and no. 114.

V&A suggests the position of *clavi* on whole garments.⁵¹ Radiocarbon analysis of objects in other collections has yielded seventh- to tenth-century dates.⁵²

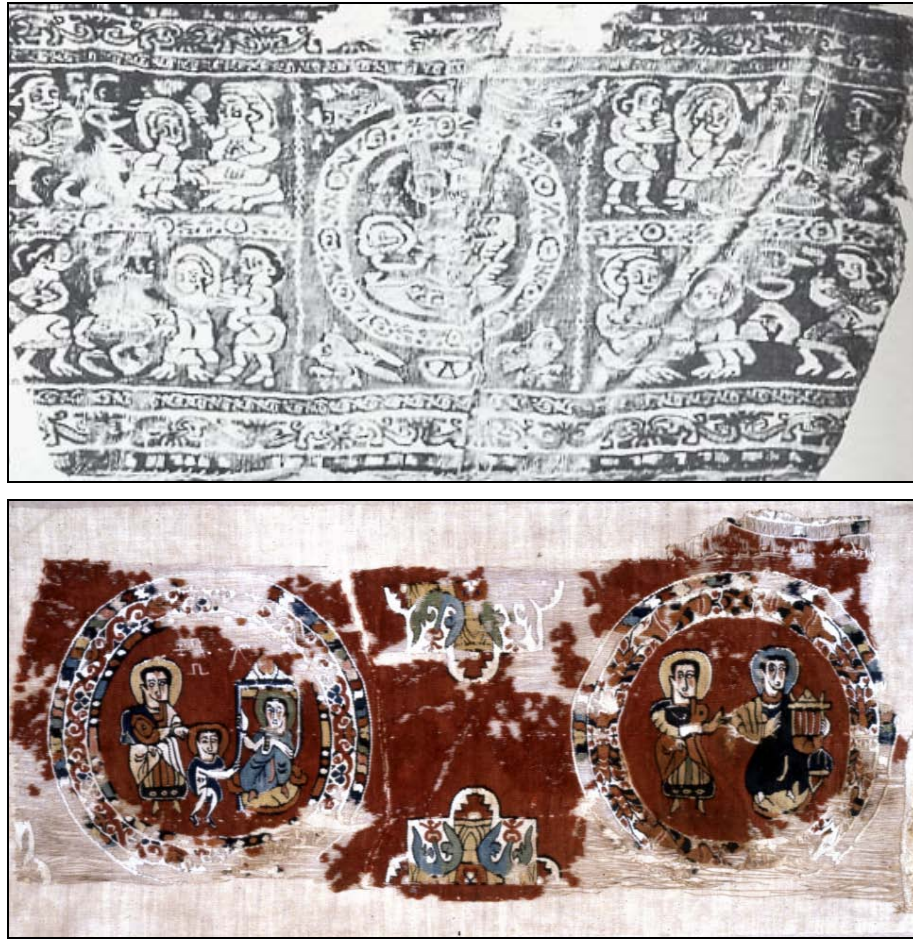


Figure 6 (top). EA 17175 Detail of a tunic sleeve decoration depicting Joseph cycle, 32cm (h) x 26cm (w).

Figure 7 (bottom). EA 65662 Tunic orbiculi depicting David cycle, 29.5cm (h) x 66cm (w),

Images--courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Tapestry woven *clavi*, roundels (i.e., *orbiculi*), and other tunic decoration illustrating scenes from the Bible constitute a third corpus attributed to Akhmim.⁵³ Tunic elements portraying episodes from the lives of the patriarchs Joseph and David are held by dozens of international collections.⁵⁴ In 1886, Rev. MacGregor gave a linen tunic sleeve with applied tapestry panels (EA 17175). Like other examples of sleeve panels, EA 17175 depicts an abbreviated version of scenes from the early life of Joseph (Genesis 37) commonly represented on *orbiculi*

(Fig. 6).⁵⁵ The original placement of such elements is demonstrated by a complete example now in the V&A.⁵⁶ *Orbiculi* on two AES tunic fragments, EA 65662 and EA 21783, depict

⁵¹ Cat. London, no. 794.

⁵² de Moor, et al., 103; and Cat. Riggisberg, no. 114 (dated 679–884 CE).

⁵³ Cat. Worms, 13.

⁵⁴ For textiles depicting the Joseph cycle, see L. H. Abdel-Malek, *Joseph tapestries and related Coptic textiles* (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1980).

1980. For the David cycle, see e.g., C. Naureth, "Evidence for a David cycle on Coptic textiles," in *Coptic studies: acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies, Warsaw, 20–25 August 1984*, ed. W. Godlewski, 228–97 (Warsaw: PWN, 1990); and T. E. A. Dale, "The power of the anointed: the life of David on two Coptic textiles in the Walters Art Gallery," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 51 (1993): 23–42.

⁵⁵ Abdel-Malek, no. 11.

scenes from the life of David and further work may prove that they are part of the same original tunic. Chester sold EA 21783 in 1886 and it is assigned an Akhmim findspot; Museum records assign EA 65662 an Akhmim findspot, but do not document further acquisition details. EA 65662 represents the presentation of David to Saul on the left-hand side and David playing the lyre on the right-hand side (Fig. 7). Paired equestrians in half *orbiculi* frame a narrative *orbiculi*, perhaps depicting David slaying the lion, on EA 21783 (unillustrated).⁵⁷ The position of the decorative elements is suggested by a complete tunic now in St. Petersburg.⁵⁸ Tunic decoration portraying the Joseph and David cycles dates from the seventh- to tenth-century.⁵⁹

These seven examples suggest that an Akhmim findspot can be confirmed for a selection of AES textiles attributed to the site. Further systematic work is needed both in this endeavour and, also, to identify AES textiles which may be parts of the same object now in other collections.⁶⁰ Little by little it may be possible to identify other textile types representative of Akhmim.⁶¹

IV. Burial practice in late antique Egypt

Analysis of AES textiles is unlikely to result in anything as dramatic as the realization that the Abegg Stiftung silk tunic depicting scenes from the life of Mary belonged to the same burial as the Dionysian hanging. Nevertheless, they provide the opportunity to make two related observations concerning the contents and form of late antique burials.

First, the decorated garments worn in life as well as in death, together with other textiles from burials, suggest a population steeped in the visual world of the late antique Mediterranean. Tunics decorated with *orbiculi*, *tabulae* and shoulder *clavi* (originally signifying Roman citizenship) were ubiquitous status markers throughout the late Roman and Byzantine world. The classical themes depicted on tunic decoration and soft furnishing such as hangings and cloths (wrapped around corpses), cushions and covers (used to support their heads and necks, and pad out the mummiforms), were not *de facto* “pagan,” but a visual vocabulary of status, which Christian iconography only slowly replaced.⁶²

⁵⁶ Cat. London, no. 619.

⁵⁷ For a Lyon fragment depicting the same two scenes and purchased in 1886 from Cairo dealer N. Tano, see Cat. Lyon, *Tapisseries coptes*, no. 60; and Naureth, 291–92. For Tano, see Dawson et al., 410. For interpretation, see Dale, 30.

⁵⁸ Cat. St. Petersburg, *Koptskie tkani iz fondov Ermitazha: katalog vystavki* (St. Petersburg: Avrora, 1978), no. 81.

⁵⁹ A. Paetz gen. Schieck, “Radiocarbon dating on nine late antique and early Islamic tapestry weaves of Dionysian, Joseph and David-cycle design,” in *Methods for dating ancient textiles of the 1st millennium AD from Egypt and neighbouring countries*, ed. A. De Moor and C. Fluck, 167–77 (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo Publishers, 2007), 176–77; and Fluck, 211–24.

⁶⁰ Cf. Cat. Worms, 30. For a BM fragment of an original object in at least six international collections, see Cat. London, *Byzantium: treasures of Byzantine art and culture* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), no. 49.

⁶¹ E.g., EA 21631A, acquired by Budge in 1888 and said to be from Akhmim, is probably part of the same textile as OA 1442 (now in the Department of Prehistory and Europe), Cat. London, no. 536 (now in the V&A) and a fragment now in Cluny acquired from Rousset in 1894. See Cat. Cluny, *Les Tissus coptes au Musée national du Moyen Age, Thermes de Cluny: catalogue des étoffes égyptiennes de lin et de laine de l'Antiquité tardive aux premiers siècles de l'Islam* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992), no. 34. The style and technique can be compared to another fragment now in the V&A acquired in 1888 and said to be from Akhmim (Cat. London, no. 535).

⁶² Cat. Providence, *Beyond the pharaohs* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island School of Design, 1989), 70–72.

But, even as the *contents* of the burials reflected the wider pan-Mediterranean world of late antiquity, the *form* remained typically Egyptian.⁶³ Just as in earlier centuries, when portrait mummies combined the Roman tradition of commemorating the dead with veristic portraiture and the quintessential Egyptian burial practice—mummification—so too late antique burial practice drew on what came before. Late antique mummiform burials are recognizably within the same tradition, but need not be read as “pagan.”⁶⁴ What mummiform burial actually meant to one seventh-century Christian is suggested by Abraham, the Bishop of Hermonthis, in his Greek last will and testament (c. 620 CE), in which instructions for his burial entail “the wrapping of my body” ... “according to the customs of the country.” Contemporary mummiform burials excavated at the monastery he oversaw show us exactly what burial “according to the customs of the country” looked like (Fig. 8).⁶⁵ Whereas Christian *belief* signalled a significant break with traditional worldviews, many aspects of normative *practice* were little changed.

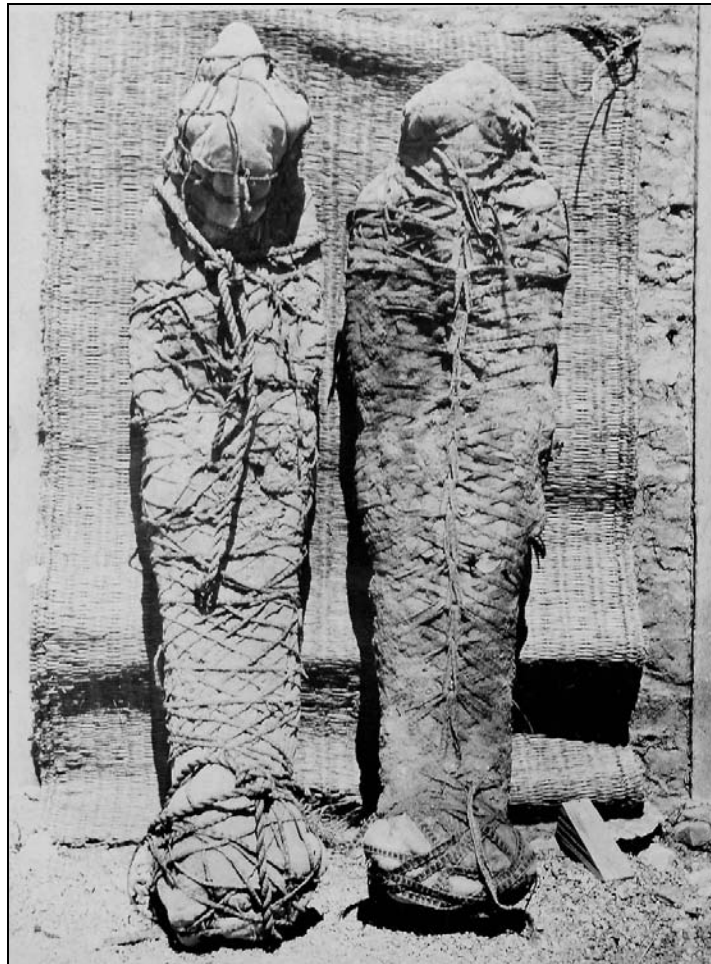


Figure 8. *Deir el-Bahri mummies dating c. 600–800 CE, Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society (EES Carter 69).*

⁶³ U. Horak, “Koptische ‘Mumien’: der koptische Tote in Grabungsberichten, Funden und literarischen Nachrichten,” *Biblos* 44.1 (1995): 39–71.

⁶⁴ M. Krause, “Mummification,” in *Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Attiya, 8 vols., 6:1696–98 (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

⁶⁵ F. G. Kenyon (ed.), *Greek papyri in the British Museum I* (London: British Museum, 1893), no. 77.