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Silk in Ancient Nubia: One Road, Many Sources

By

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Silk in ancient Africa? Most of us think of ancient Africans as members of a tribe, living by subsistence farming or herding, in villages of grass houses. But Nubia, the ancient Kush, located along the Nile in southern Egypt and the northern part of the Sudan, (Fig.1) was inhabited by an African people who, by 1800 BC, had developed their own high civilization.¹ The Kushites were suppliers of ivory, ebony, gold, ostrich feathers, animal skins, and slaves to ancient Egypt and elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. In exchange they received a wide variety of manufactured goods.

By the fourth century AD the center of Kushite power had moved from much farther south to the northern part of Nubia.² Although the Kushites at that time were illiterate, the economy of their kingdom was based largely on trade with Byzantine Egypt. Animal products, ebony, gold, and slaves were sent north, and in exchange, luxury manufactured goods were traded into Nubia. Among the bronzes, glass vessels, carpets, and wine imported into Nubia, we also find silk.

Late Classical Period: 300-500 AD.

The earliest silk specimens found so far in Nubia are dated between 300-500 AD. Two examples come from Qustul (Fig. 1), a royal cemetery whose barbaric splendor stunned the archaeological world when it was discovered in 1931.³ The many-chambered tombs were constructed like houses, with rooms full of furnishings. The most surprising finding was the large number of human and animal sacrifices, a practice abandoned in Egypt for 3000 years. The wealth and power of the royal family was evident from the amount and quality of jewelry, silver horse trappings, silver and bronze vessels, tools, games, bronze tables, tripods and folding chairs, lamps, leather work, glass, weighing instruments, and textiles.⁴

We have no structural descriptions of the two Qustul silks, only their colors. One was red and yellowish, the other was black and the same yellow color. However, the silk filaments were analyzed and were found to be from a wild moth, producing a silk similar to Tussah silk.⁵

¹ For a general overview of ancient Nubian history see Adams: 1977.

² For more about northern Nubia in the fourth century AD see Kirwan: 2002: 47-73.

³ For the final report see Emery and Kirwan: 1938.

⁴ For a more recent write-up on this site see Kirwan: 1963.

⁵ The analysis of silk fibers is reported in Lucas and Harris: 1962: 149.

Two silk specimens from this same period came from a cemetery just a few miles north of Qustul called Gebel Adda.⁶ (Fig. 1). They were excavated in the 1960s so the data on them are much more complete than on the Qustul fragments. They too are from a wild moth; the silk filaments are somewhat flat, irregular and soft-fibered, quite unlike the regular, strong-fibered filaments produced by the *Bombyx mori*.

One Gebel Adda piece [Gebel Adda # 44/45] was found wrapped around the skull of a burial and is a fringed scarf or shawl, its reconstructed size measuring approximately 142 by 98 centimeters (Pls. 2, 3). It is warp face plain weave, reeled, with irregular stripes in maroon, medium blue and dark blue, and a dark yellow, which is thought to be the natural color of the undyed silk. One stripe has *ikat* patterning in maroon and yellow. The weft is maroon, 10-12 per centimeter. The warp count varies between 34 and 42 per centimeter.

The fact that these four specimens from two different sites are all examples of silk from a wild moth offers some interesting speculations. It is reasonable to assume that these four are not the only silks that were imported into Nubia, but thousands of graves of this late Classical period have been excavated, and these are the only silks reported. It is obvious that silk was an extremely precious luxury item, available only to royalty or to very high officials. Why then was this second-rate silk brought in to Nubia, when it is clear from other imported goods that they could afford the very best? Perhaps silk was so new to them that they were not aware of the difference in quality between this and the silk of the cultivated moth, and this was a cheaper version that was manufactured for and traded to a less sophisticated clientele. There are several examples of this practice of sending second-rate goods to Nubia.

We know from historical sources that silk manufacture using cocoons of the *Bombyx mori* was practiced in Tunisia as early as the tenth century, so the process of silk-making has been known in Africa at least since medieval times.⁷ And the quantities of *Tiraz* silks produced across North Africa indicates that specialist silk weaving was a well-developed industry. But indications that wild silk moths were also used in medieval times and earlier are, so far, lacking.

Another possibility is that these silks were locally made. The Kushites were excellent weavers in cotton and wool, and if wild moths were available it is not impossible that they could have developed silk weaving in a royal workshop. There are several varieties of wild silk moths to be found in Africa today although none have been reported from Nubia. One occurs in Madagascar, and produces a coarse grey-brown fabric. Two wild varieties are found in Nigeria.⁸ Whether wild silk moths were present in Africa 1700

⁶ Gebel Adda was excavated in the 1960s by Dr. Nicholas Millet as part of the Nubian Monuments Campaign to save archaeological sites to be flooded by the Aswan High Dam. I am indebted to Dr. Millet, Curator Emeritus of the Egyptian Department at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto for his kind permission to publish selected textile specimens from Gebel Adda.

⁷ Spring, C. and J. Hudson: 2002: 8.

⁸ Ibid.

years ago and available to the Kushites is problematical. Unfortunately, we shall never know; the entire area of Lower Nubia is now submerged under Lake Nasser.

Medieval Period: 550-1500 AD.

In 547 AD, Christian missionaries from Constantinople were sent to Nubia. Historical records report that they were met with a "ready reception". We know from archaeology also that the Kushite conversion to Christianity was relatively rapid and total. The old religions seemed worn out and irrelevant. Christianity presented a new ideology, sweeping away the autocratic tyranny of the past. Within two centuries churches had been built in almost every town and village, and four monumental cathedrals erected in the cities of Qasr Ibrim, Gebel Adda, Faras, and Dongola.

The earliest silks of the Christian period are associated with the new elites: the leaders of the Church. In many cases they were buried in their ecclesiastical garments within or adjoining the cathedrals. From Qasr Ibrim (Fig. 1) a row of several rock-cut tombs contained the graves of bishops; however, they had been ransacked, and only a few specimens were retrieved. One was a cap or hat; [QI.T/115, BM EA 72265] in derelict condition now, but originally a fine and treasured item. It is constructed of four triangular pieces making up the high, domed crown, each of which is separated by decorative piping. Below the crown the brim is made of the same fabric as the piping, and was originally edged with fur. The hat is completely lined with plain-weave linen. An interlining backed a thin layer of cotton batting which was placed between the outer fabric and the interlining. A loop or tassel was attached at the top of the crown. This type of hat with its fur edging and triangular panels was known as a *sharbus* in the Middle Ages. Its use was restricted to high officials.

The outer fabric of the crown is made of salmon, white and green striped silk of a type known as *mulham* in Arabic—a silk warp and a coarser cotton weft. The brim and piping utilizes a strip of tapestry weave in colored silk. The most visible feature to be seen today is a fine bird, perhaps a dove or a game bird. The silk of the brim has been identified by Hero Granger-Taylor⁹ as a type of lampas weave originating in Sicily.

In 1964 the undisturbed tomb of Bishop Timotheos was found at Qasr Ibrim within the cathedral itself.¹⁰ He was buried, not in his ecclesiastical vestments, but in his everyday garments—perhaps his traveling clothes. Found with the body were two scrolls from the Patriarch of the Coptic Church, appointing him to be enthroned as Bishop of Ibrim with the date of his consecration: 1372. Although we shall never know what his religious vestments looked like, his everyday clothes are interesting in themselves and included some silk. He was interred in cotton trousers, a linen tunic, and a dark blue wool hooded cloak. A turquoise blue silk tabby facing 6 centimeters wide was sewn along the hem of the cloak and inside the hood. Sewn to the back of his cloak was a fine, tapestry-woven panel 27 by 101 centimeters in size. Although now discolored, the tapestry was originally in white, yellow, black and pale blue in scroll and triangular patterns. His linen

⁹ For an extended description and discussion of the hat see Granger-Taylor, pp 44-49.

¹⁰ Plumley, 1964: 3-4.

handkerchief is complete—82 by 71 centimeters. It has a wide, white silk stripe at the selvedge, and a decorative band of blue and white silk wefts.¹¹

In addition to the silk from the bishops' burials, some specimens of silk have been found in the refuse of the town. One of the most striking is a long, narrow strip, 3 centimeters wide [QI.82T/330]. It has a linear repeating pattern of yellow confronted roosters with exuberant tail feathers in a weft-face compound twill.¹² The nearest parallel I have been able to find is a photograph of a similar piece [#8582.1860] in the Victoria and Albert Museum whose attribution is given as Saracen.

Tiraz fabrics, those with inscriptions in Arabic embroidered or woven in, occur at Qasr Ibrim, even though Islam did not come to Ibrim until centuries later. In 652, after Muslim Egypt twice had invaded Nubia and failed to conquer, the Nubians and the Egyptians concluded a treaty.¹³ It stated that the Nubians could live in peace as Christians if they sent 360 slaves a year to Egypt. In return, they would receive grain, wine, horses, and 100 pieces of linen in addition to specified luxury stuffs for the king. The treaty remained in force for more than 500 years, so it's possible the *Tiraz* fragments are part of Egypt's treaty obligations to the Nubians. One specimen, in yellow silk with red inscriptions [QI.64T/41] is very similar to a piece in the Royal Ontario Museum¹⁴.

A further *Tiraz* example has brightly colored silk bands on a linen ground.¹⁵ Many examples of this type are in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum and in the Victoria and Albert Museum. A similar specimen (Pl. 1) from Qasr Ibrim, [QI.84T/365] at first glance gives the impression of silk bands on linen, just as the previous ones do. However, closer inspection reveals that what appears to be silk is actually dyed flax. Could this be another example of second-rate goods being palmed off in Nubia?

Moving upstream to Gebel Adda, the silk textiles are again from graves of high church officials. One burial, found inside a vaulted tomb, was covered with a quilt [Gebel Adda #107]. It was cotton with tie-dye circles, and had a silk center panel. It is warp face with cotton weft, arranged in units of stripes. The quilt was stuffed with raw cotton. Another piece, found wrapped around a burial, has a ground of warp-face stripes interrupted at intervals by decorative bands [Gebel Adda #102]. The bands are more closely beaten than the ground weave, and are rendered in finer silk—their weft count is 84 per centimeter.

A magnificent silk and flax pall [Gebel Adda #35/139] has a preserved length of 246 centimeters. The two fibers are used in both warp and weft, creating a check pattern, which is interrupted at intervals by groups of stripes. At one end the warps were wrapped before being dyed, to leave a background of white flax and natural silk for the tablet-weave border. A now detached fragment is a wide red stripe, solidly warp face, with an

¹¹ The burial clothing is discussed in detail in Crowfoot, 1977.

¹² See description and illustration in Adams, 1996: 168-169, Pl. 45c.

¹³ For the terms of the treaty and discussion see Adams, 1977: 451-453.

¹⁴ See description and photograph in Golombek and Gervers, 1977: 188, no. 23.

¹⁵ For a description and photograph see Adams, 1996: 168-169, Pl. 45e.

inscription in Arabic. It is not clear whether this piece occurred at the edge of the fabric, or in the middle.

Just over the border into Sudan lies the cathedral of Faras (Fig. 1). When excavated in the 1960s, it was found to be completely filled with wind-blown sand, which protected 169 spectacular wall paintings. Many of them are perfectly preserved, and represent the finest mural art of Christian Africa. From the representations of bishops, royalty and high officials, and religious subjects we can get an idea of the magnificent vestments and garments, many of which were probably silk, which were available in the 13th century.¹⁶

One more cathedral, Dongola (Fig. 1), is located near the very heart of Nubia. It has been excavated by a Polish expedition for many years. Recently, a vaulted chamber was discovered, the tomb of Bishop Georgios and many other church officials.¹⁷ Although the outer wrappings appear to be plain linen or cotton, it is likely that, under the outer shrouds, the dignitaries were buried in their religious vestments. What a treasure-trove this could be, but what a challenge for the excavators and conservators!

The medieval Christian kingdom of Alwa (Fig. 1) was located even farther south along the Nile—across the river from modern-day Khartoum. Excavations have been carried out there since 1981, and even though the area has rainfall, four fragments of silk have been published. They are reported as being of cultivated silk; two specimens have tapestry woven patterns, but are too small to describe. The other two pieces are tabby weave.¹⁸

Ottoman Period: 1565-1812 AD.

The Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517, and occupied Nubia about 50 years later.¹⁹ Islam was finally accepted by the Nubians at that time, and they have remained Muslim to this day. Although historical records are somewhat hazy, and at times contradictory, it seems that a garrison of at least 70 men was established at Qasr Ibrim in 1565.²⁰ Local tradition holds that the soldiers were from Bosnia, then a part of the Ottoman Empire.

The garrison was supplied from Cairo; they received rations of wheat and barley, and their pay was in gold and silver coins.²¹ The officers, at least, enjoyed a high living standard which included many luxury imported items: Chinese porcelains, brick tea, pile carpets, Turkish tiles, skilled metal work, mirrors, Indian cottons, and silk.

Although there are no magnificent wall paintings to show us the clothing of the Nubians during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, there are many paintings made by travelers to Egypt and other parts of the Ottoman empire. Almost, without exception, men and

¹⁶ For a complete catalogue of all the Faras Cathedral wall paintings see Michalowski and Gerster, 1967.

¹⁷ See photo in Jakobielski and Scholz, Pl. XXI, 3.

¹⁸ See Welsby and Daniels, 1991: pp. 300, 302, 307; and Welsby, 1998: pp. 178, 181.

¹⁹ Alexander, pp 17-19.

²⁰ Hinds, M. and V.Ménange, 1991: p 5.

²¹ Ibid. 8-10.

women of the higher classes are shown wearing voluminous and flowing tunics, cloaks, and kaftans. Books by Edward Lane and others describe garments made of silk, often accompanied by a drawing. So with the help of various literary sources, we can contextualize the silk of this period.

All of the silk fragments from the Ottoman period have been recovered from the refuse deposits of the abandoned houses and streets; they were considered to be trash and had been discarded. It is evident that as silk garments became unserviceable because of wear or disfiguring stains, the usable parts remaining were cut out and made into smaller items. There are no complete garments, but some have enough features to give us a clue about their original appearance. A fringed, silk scarf [QI.80T/29] might have been worn as a sash or belt, similar to a figure in a painting by David Roberts. A fragmentary coat or jacket, large enough only for a small child, is made of pale blue damask [QI.80T/436]. All that is left of another damask piece is the left front opening—probably originally from a kaftan [QI.80T/115].

In order to describe the large number of silk fragments, they have been divided into groups: damasks, stripes, bands, checks, satin, velvet, resist-dyed, decorative selvages, embroidery, and *passementerie*. The number of specimens of each type recovered from Ottoman levels has been entered. In addition to these, there are seventeen silks in a miscellaneous category.

Damasks (16)

Two damask pieces have their edges turned under and one has been edged with a narrow contrasting strip. These were probably decorative appliqués. A type of textured damask (Plate 5) occurs in three different colors: green, blue, and ivory. This type is 16th century Italian, and was used for kaftans.²² Colors of the other damask pieces include scarlet, yellow, ivory, pale blue, medium blue, and green.

Stripes (21)

Some stripes are regular in width, with two alternating colors; others have many colors in regular or irregular widths. Many of these have a cotton weft, and one specimen has alternating bands of cotton and silk wefts, creating a textured pattern. Stripes occur in almost any color imaginable.

Bands (10)

Bands have been produced by alternating warp face and weft face areas. Another example of bands on a magenta silk uses alternating black and white wefts in a picket fence pattern at regular intervals. Two specimens have a cotton warp with alternating silk and cotton weft bands.

Checks (7)

Checks have silk and flax in both systems, and appear to be pink and white. Closer inspection reveals that one fragment with pink silk wefts contains vermilion warps alternating with the white warps.

²² Louise Mackie, personal communication, Northampton, MA. Sept. 2002.

Satin (13)

Satin occurs in quite small pieces, with the offcuts still retaining their original bright colors. Green seems to have been a preferred color, but red and white, and red, white and blue are also found.

Velvet (2)

The two specimens of velvet are both crimson, small, and very worn.

Resist-dyed (4)

Resist-dyed silk includes a polka dot pattern, and a small piece of a much larger overall pattern. Our most spectacular example of the dyer's art is a magnificent *ikat* silk pall (Pl. 4). Its origin is uncertain; *ikats* were widely made in the Middle East and Central Asia.²³

Decorative Selvedges (8)

Silk selvedges are found decorating the edges of linen fabric, and occasionally decorative stripes within the cloth. One selvedge strip had three different patterns woven in.

Embroidery (4)

Silk embroidery is quite rare. However, one specimen has silver thread embroidery on green wool. A drawing in Edward Lane's book shows a woman's jacket with similar embroidery. Illustrations in a book on dress of the Ottoman army shows that this type of embroidery could also have been found on a man's vest.

Passementerie (7)

Several examples of *passementerie* stumped us when they were found. We persisted in thinking of them as vertical, some kind of decorative bauble, or a loop to hang something else from. It was only when I heard Frieda Sorber's paper on Trimmings in Fez, Morocco at the 1992 Symposium of the Textile Society of America that I realized that they were sewn to garments horizontally, and are a button and loop.

By the end of the 18th century, Qasr Ibrim and the rest of Nubia had fallen on hard times. The garrison was left to fend for itself, as the Ottoman government had turned its attention elsewhere. Army pay, which had purchased the silks, Chinese porcelains, carpets and other luxury items of earlier times was discontinued. The Nile, which once was a major trade route into the heart of Africa, was bypassed in favor of camel caravans through the Sahara. The poverty of the area is evident in the silk fabrics used in smaller and smaller pieces, perhaps just a bright appliqué on a child's garment. And now, Lower Nubia lies submerged under the waters of Lake Nasser—its people gone, its past forever lost.

²³ Charlotte Jirousek, personal communication, e-mail message, Oct. 2002.

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All illustrations by the author.

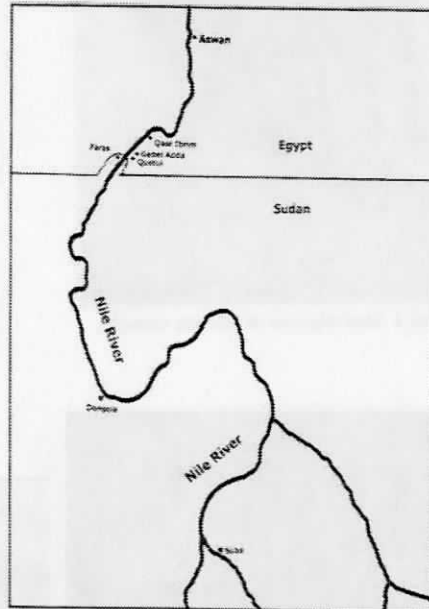


Figure 1. Find spots of silk in ancient Nubia

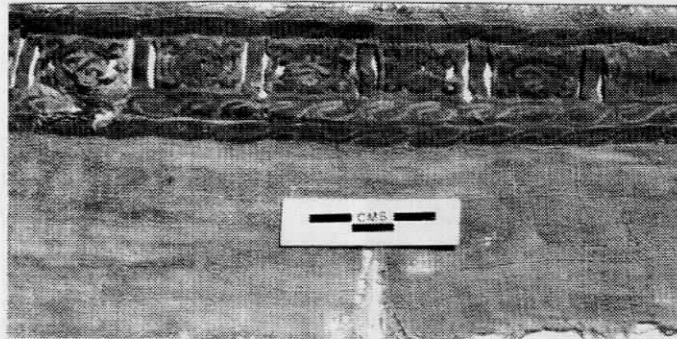


Plate 1. Tiraz tapestry band in flax (imitation silk) Q1.84T/365.

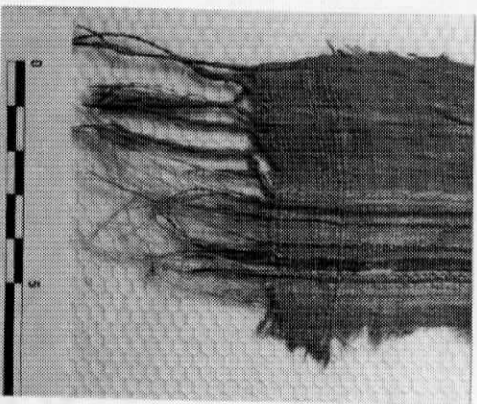


Plate 2. Scarf fragment of wild silk GA44/45.



Plate 3. GA44/45 showing ikat patterning.

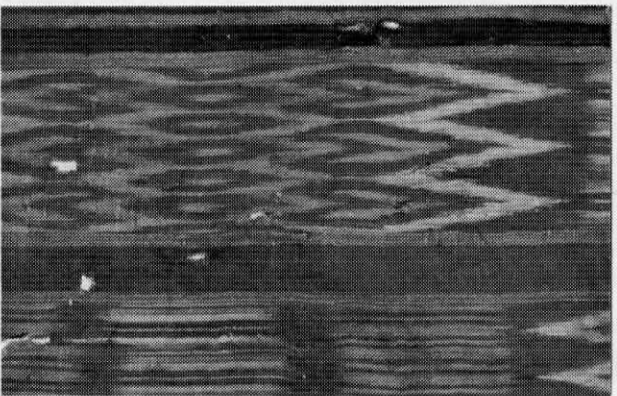


Plate 4. Silk ikat palli. Q1.78T/100.

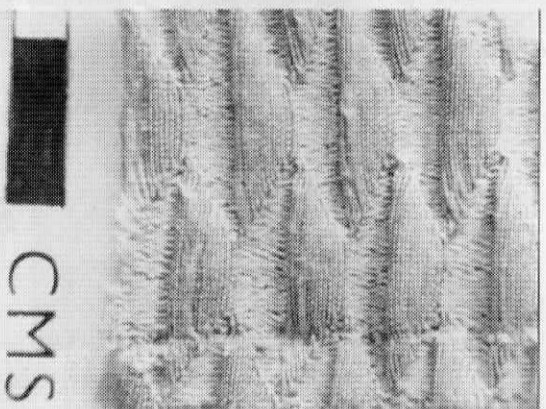


Plate 5. Silk damask. Q1.80T.72b