Clothing and Textiles of Ottoman Egypt: Examples from Art and Archaeology

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INTRODUCTION

How many of us, all keenly interested in textiles, have not looked at paintings of a bygone age and thought: how was that garment put together? What sort of stitches were used for the seams? Or when leafing through a book with pictures of exotic places which of us has not wondered: what sort of fabric was that? Was the artist depicting a woven-in or an applied decoration?

The answers to these questions for one part of the world have been found at the archaeological site of Qasr Ibrim. It is located in Egyptian Nubia some 30 miles north of the Sudanese border, and is the only site now being excavated in the area which was flooded by the Aswan High Dam. This is because Qasr Ibrim is situated on a high bluff overlooking the Nile, and though the waters of Lake Nasser have risen all around it, the site itself is mostly unflooded.

Qasr Ibrim was a great fortress-city, dominating the area for many miles along the Nile both upstream and downstream. This strategic location must have attracted settlers from very early times; we know that Qasr Ibrim was continuously occupied for at least 3000 years, and was finally abandoned in 1811 AD. This long history contains many episodes, the last of which came with the conquest of Egypt by the Ottoman Turks in 1517. The date of their arrival at Qasr Ibrim is less certain, but according to local tradition, a military post was established at Qasr Ibrim and was garrisoned with soldiers from Bosnia. The Bosnian troops inevitably intermarried with the local population, and they built their town above the remains of earlier houses.

Since Qasr Ibrim is a townsite, the archaeological deposits are all refuse, and the recovered objects are mostly fragmentary. The textiles were used for their original purpose, then often were recycled into something smaller, and finally were used as scrubbing rags before being discarded. They are truly textiles of daily life. Though the fabric is in relatively good condition because of the extreme dryness of the site, the fragmentary condition of the items makes their original purpose difficult to ascertain.

It is the reconstruction of these textiles, and through them, the interpretation of the lives of the people who used and wore these clothes, which make our task so challenging and absorbing. Fortunately, we have help from early European travelers, who have left us their pictures and descriptions of the people of Egypt and Nubia.

MEN'S CLOTHING

A drawing of Qasr Ibrim by Thomas Legh was made a 1812, just one year after the final abandonment of the site. It is wonderful to have a view so soon after the inhabitants departed, but the sketch is not very clear about the details of the clothing the people are wearing. The missing details are provided by Edward Lane in The Manners and
Customs of the Modern Egyptians. Though his book was written 25 years after the last textiles from Ibrim were discarded, Lane tells us that "the fashion of their dress remains almost the same during the lapse of the centuries". He describes a man in one of his engravings as wearing "a long and full shirt or gown of blue linen or cotton...open from the neck nearly to the waist, and having wide sleeves." Our most complete adult garment (Fig. 1; 82T/265) answers that description very well. Made of blue cotton, in addition to the wide sleeves and neck opening, which still has one of its string ties attached, we can see that it has side gores, which add to the fullness of the skirt. The whole is heavily mended. Other examples of neck opening treatments include one with small circles buttonholed in white and red silk (86T/013), and another with a small pattern of drawnwork (86T/016).

A variety of garment neck openings and edge styles has been recovered at Qasr Ibrim which I have not found in the literature. One example (82T/525) with a saw tooth edge has been fashioned by cleverly folding a strip of fabric and seaming it between the outer edge and the inner facing. Two other pieces (82T/382) and (82T/238) have small loops which would have fit around small ball buttons. Another example has a Mandarin-style collar--buttons and loops still attached (82T/197).

David Roberts in his great work Sketches in Egypt and Nubia was primarily concerned with recording the ancient architectural monuments, but each of his paintings includes a small group of people admiring the scene. Seen wrapped around their waists are full scarves or sashes. A similar scarf (80T/29) from Ibrim is of silk, with the selvedge border quite different from the end border. A style not shown in the painting is a narrow red cotton belt (82T/261), with the edges neatly hemmed.

There are many examples of headwear from Qasr Ibrim. Lane writes "The headdress consists, first, of a small, close-fitting, cotton cap, [80T/124], which is often changed; next a 'tarboosh', which is a red cloth cap, also fitting close to the head." C.B.Klunzinger writes in Upper Egypt: Its People and Products that "The tarbush or fez is usually bought only once in a lifetime, or descends by inheritance from generation to generation, till no trace of its original colour remains." He might almost have been describing a cap or fez found at Qasr Ibrim (80T/76), with its derelict condition and faded crown, although the red remaining along its lower edge attests to its original brightness. Klunzinger continues, "The turban, which may be regarded as the symbol of Islam, consists of a piece of gauzy material of immense length wound round and round the fez a great many times." The color of our cap around the edge was only preserved by yards of fine cloth wrapped around it, thus shielding it from the sun.

The men in one of Roberts' paintings shown wearing drawers could have been an illustration of Lane's earlier description of the garment. He wrote, "... a pair of full drawers of linen or cotton, tied round the body by a running string or band..." Our most complete set of drawers (80T/278) consists of one leg, part of the waistband, and a wide gusset in the crotch area. It has a plain leg opening with no fastening. There are three other examples of leg openings, which, in the painting, are concealed by the billowy pants: they are: a simple slit (82T/39), a closing with string ties (82T/540), and a cloth ball button which would have fit into a now missing button hole or loop (82T/294). Dotted narrow strips of cloth (82T/172, 183, 164) or lengths of sprang cord (82T/116,141,158) could have served as drawstrings.
Lane makes a distinction between the clothing of the upper and lower classes; silk was favored by the rich. At Qasr Ibrim we find many examples of silk fabrics; most of them are so small that we can only guess their original form. Many of our fragments are fabrics termed *qotny* and *alaga* "Hend", used for kaftans, a coat-like garment having long sleeves. They include a relatively large seamed piece with black and white stripes (82T/54), brightly colored damask fragments in crimson, yellow, and purple (82T/723, 724, 866), a heavily textured piece (80T/72), and the largest silk yet found, a magnificent ikat (Fig. 2; 78T/100) Technically superb, its colors are black, blue, red, yellow, two greens, and white. It is thought to have served as a funeral pall.

In contrast to the wealthy inhabitants, clothing of the poorer people was very plain indeed, with patches upon patches (84T/266).

**WOMEN'S DRESS**

Although we have been discussing the dress of men, some examples actually may have been worn by women. Using Lane as our guide, we can say that certain fabrics probably did belong to women. Among them is a fragment of green wool decorated with silver thread embroidery (Fig. 3; 82T/507). Lane shows us that the original garment may have been a woman's short jacket. It is embroidered with patterns on the front, on the shoulders, along the sleeve openings and across the back. The same lady is wearing a turban of "...printed or painted muslin, or one of crape, wound tightly round..." A number of resist-dyed cotton fragments have been recovered which could have been worn as part of the turban. One such example (Fig. 4; 82T/609) has a pattern in red and brown on cream-colored cotton.

One textile type which occurs in great profusion and variation is the blue and white check (82T/258, 82T/84). It was not until we found Lane's illustration that we realized that these are fragments of the *milaya.* He describes it as "...a covering, a kind of plaid...composed of two pieces of cotton, woven in small chequers of blue and white, or cross stripes, with a mixture of red at each end."

Certain garment fragments made of very fine white cotton or linen, are unsuitable as outer garments. They have beautifully made hemstitched edges (84T/137), and seams joined with decorative stitchery in silk thread (84T/112). It seems possible that these were women's undergarments.

Faceveils illustrated by Lane and Roberts are all long. We were surprised to find one which is definitely short (82T/636). It is a square of red silk, edged in brown wool, just big enough to cover the face. A hemmed slit for the eyes is cut into the upper third of the square. It was my husband who found a very similar veil illustrated in *The Bedouin* by Shirley Kay. Perhaps our face veil was left by a long-ago bedouin visitor who discovered she didn't need her veil at Qasr Ibrim!

Class distinctions were present among women as well as men--so far we have probably been looking at clothing of wealthier women. Poorer women wore a dark brown woollen garment called by Lane the *hulaeeeya.* Fragments of this fabric are found in great quantities, many of which have brightly colored bands of decoration embroidered or woven in. Lines of X's, triangles, and diamond shapes occur in red, white, blue, green, and orange. Another design motif (Fig. 5) is found which is unfailingly composed of the same two elements. The first figure may be described as basically a rust-colored square with white edges at the top and bottom, and a white-outlined diamond shape inside it, with
variations. The second element is a green square with rust-colored lines in a vertical zigzag pattern. Both are always executed in tapestry-weave—almost the only example of this technique from the Ottoman period at Qasr Ibrim. These designs are so unusual and distinctive it would be interesting to know their derivation.

CHILDREN’S CLOTHING

Where there are men and women we find children also. Evidence of social stratification is seen again in children’s clothing. A beautifully made dress (Fig. 6; 80T/70) with neat hems and seams may be compared with another, made from left-over scraps of linen and cotton with poorly made seams and no hems (80T/519). Another dress, though incomplete, was skillfully made probably by a professional, with its faced neck opening and string loop (80T/19). Stark contrast is provided by a dress with a simple tear for the neck opening and unhemmed sleeves (82T/750).

Accessories for children include a small cap with the alternation of blue and white with red cotton triangles in the crown (84T/52): a child’s sandal, and little string bracelet and necklace with its bright red yarn “bead” (Fig. 7; 82T/326, 82T/863). Toys include a cloth ball (82T/536) and a dom nut shell suspended from a bright strip of silk (82T/605), a simple doll, and a similar one with a dress and a knot of black wool yarn for hair. Making doll clothes must have been a favorite pastime for little girls since we find so many of them (Fig. 8; 82T/18, 19, 20). A miniature cap is so skillfully made it must have been done by an adult for the children (82T/826).

HOUSEHOLD TEXTILES

Middle Eastern homes traditionally have been generously furnished with textiles. Carpet fragments (Fig. 9; 84T/219), although rare, indicate the sort of luxury which surrounded some of the inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim. Cushions and bolsters were covered with blue and white striped fabric (84T/85), or with a fragment of compound weave with gilt leather strips (82T/83).

A guest would have had water from a ewer poured over his hands and then been given a linen towel for drying them. One towel fragment has a border with floating wefts (84T/28); another has a patterned float weave in the main part of the towel as well as in the border (Fig. 10; 80T/66). A third example has a much closer weave and an embroidered border (80T/245).

A fragment of resist-dyed tablecloth (82T/800) was probably imported from India. The two edges with tabs were dyed in that form on the fabric; then the tabs were cut apart and neatly backed with a plain cotton lining. Another cloth (82T/418) was marked off in squares, possibly for a game. A flour sifter made of woven horsehair (82.2.8/56) is so heavily patched with cotton fabric that it must have been rendered almost useless.

Cloth bags took the place of our plastic and paper sacks—they were made in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials. Three are of cotton (82T/104, 122, 49); there is a small knotted bag in several colors of silk (80T/234), and a saddle bag made of woven goat hair has one loop still attached (78T/123). Animal trappings include a rope and halter (84T/120), and heavy cotton straps for securing unwieldy loads on donkeys
or camels (Fig. 11; 80T/279, 280). Fish nets (64.267) harvested the bounty of the Nile.

In sum, our excavations at Qasr Ibrim have shown how art and archaeology may each shed light upon the other, enhancing our interpretation and understanding of daily life in Ottoman Egypt.

1 The Egypt Exploration Society of London has been excavating Qasr Ibrim since 1961 under license granted by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. Reports of the excavations may be found in the Journal of Egyptian Archaeology, beginning with volume 50 (1964).


5 Lane, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 50.

6 Ibid., p. 49.

7 Specimen numbers are those which were assigned in the field. The specimens are now under the care of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization in Cairo, or the Egypt Exploration Society, London.


9 Lane, op. cit. (n. 2), p. 48.


11 Ibid.

12 Roberts, op.cit. (n.8), "View From Under the Portico of the Great Temple of Dendera", facing p. 86.

13 Lane, op.cit. (n. 3), p. 46.

14 Ibid., pp. 46 ff.

16 Lane, op. cit. (n. 3) p. 59.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid. p. 65.
19 Ibid. p. 63.
20 Ibid. p. 62.
21 Roberts, op. cit. (n. 8), "Pyramids of Geezeh From the Nile" facing p. 46.
23 Lane, op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 66-67.
Figure 5

Scale 1:1

Rust color

Green