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Indian Trade Cloth in Egypt: The Newberry Collection

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The Department of Eastern Art in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, holds what is undoubtedly one of the largest single collections of block-printed textiles produced in India, but exported to Egypt as part of the medieval Islamic Indian Ocean trade. These textiles, all now mere fragments, are of particular interest for two reasons. Firstly, fabrics of this type give us the earliest surviving examples of Indian weaving, although single fibre fragments have been found at the Indus Valley site of Mohenjo-Daro, dating to the second millennium B.C., and we have numerous Vedic references to dress and textiles, as well as pictorial evidence of sumptuous garments from the Ajanta caves (5th-6th century A.D.). Secondly, the presence of the fragments in Egypt is evidence of trade links which have an ancient origin.¹

THE COLLECTION

The textiles in the Ashmolean Museum were all acquired by the Egyptologist P.E. Newberry (1869-1949), for his own private collection. He was the first Brunner Professor of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool, and afterwards he held the Chair of Ancient Egyptian History and Archaeology in Cairo from 1929 to 1933. Apparently he had a particular interest in historical textiles. His collection came to the Ashmolean in 1946. Apart from the fragments under consideration here, there is an equally big collection of Islamic embroidered textiles, and the museum's Department of Antiquities holds textiles which are Late Antique or Coptic.² Newberry had worked with Sir Flanders Petrie and Howard Carter and had first-hand excavation experience, but his large private collection was almost certainly acquired exclusively from dealers during his years in Cairo.

The extent of Newberry's interest must have been considerable. While most collections of Indo-Egyptian textile fragments can be numbered in tens rather than hundreds, the Ashmolean's

¹Both of these points have been made repeatedly; see Pfister 1936 and 1938, Irwin and Hall 1971, Gittinger 1982, Nabholz-Kartaschoff 1986, Bérinstain 1989.

²A smaller part of the Newberry textile collection is at the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester. All of it is of more recent, eastern Mediterranean origin.

holdings are vast by comparison: there is a total of 1225 block-printed fragments. The size is matched by quality and variation of design; virtually any pattern known in this kind of textile is well represented, and there are pieces which are probably unique.³ However, the collection is not widely known, and until very recently (May 1990) it could not be used as research material, as the fragments had not been properly accessioned into the Department's holdings, hence had no number or other means of identification which made them available as a reference. Furthermore, the fragments were stuck onto cardboard sheets with glue and were stacked into boxes, quite at random and ordered by size alone.⁴

As this situation is now being corrected, I want to take the opportunity to introduce the collection to a wider audience and alert scholars to its existence and potential as a research source. My task is to prepare a detailed, comprehensive catalogue of the entire collection.⁵ Its completion should ideally provide a standard guide and an art historical tool for further research in Indian and Near Eastern design. As I am embarking on this undertaking, it seems reasonable to focus attention on the current state of scholarship regarding the material, and to cast tentative glances at what future research might bring.

FUSTAT TEXTILES: A NEW DEFINITION

Textiles of this type are usually referred to as 'Fustat' fabrics, after the site of al-Fustāṭ (Old Cairo), where they first came to light early in this century. However, similar fragments have been found elsewhere since then, e.g. possibly at Qasr Ibrim, at Gebel Adda, and most prominently reported as part of recent excavations at the Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979; 1982). Furthermore, much of the textile material associated with Fustat is not Indian, but Coptic or Islamic Egyptian, or from elsewhere in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern realm. This diversity has

³Other important collections are in the Benaki Museum, Athens, the Islamic Museum, Cairo, and the Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. Pfister surveyed these and some additional collections, including his own, and published a stylistic analysis (Pfister 1938). The also quite sizable collection at the Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel, has been discussed by Alfred Bühler (1972). I have written a catalogue of the fragments in the Kelsey Museum, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (Barnes in press).

⁴This is not to say that Newberry had been careless with his collection. Numerous pencil notes and references to publications on the cardboard sheets show his active involvement with the material.

⁵The cataloguing and extensive conservation work on the collection is being funded by the J. Paul Getty Trust.

recently been confirmed by Louise Mackie's report on textiles found in 1980 at Fustāt-C (Mackie 1989). Hers is the first analytical account of textile finds from the site of Fustat itself: at the time of the earlier discovery of similar textile fragments, cloths were not considered to be of interest. No attempt had ever been made to record the archaeological context.

Subsequent looting brought more fragments to light, again - of course - lacking any archaeological reference and chronology.⁶ Thus 'Fustat' fragments entered museums and came into the hands of private collectors without any firm information on actual origin or date. It seems crucial at this point to define precisely the material under discussion. I propose that the generic term 'Fustat' is abandoned altogether, unless one speaks about the specific material excavated at Fustāt itself during the recent period of expeditions (Scanlon 1986; Kubiak and Scanlon 1989).⁷

Previously I have used the term 'Indian block-printed trade cloth' instead, while writing about the Indo-Egyptian textiles in the Kelsey Museum at the University of Michigan (Barnes in press). The term is slightly cumbersome to use, but has in its favour that it puts the focus on the place of origin, and by implication already allows for a wide discussion of Indian Ocean trade. This will be crucial for an adequate understanding of manufacture and distribution, as textiles similar to the ones discussed here were traded to other parts of the Indian Ocean realm; their presence in eastern Indonesia, for example, is well documented (Guy 1987; 1989). An exclusive focus on the Indian origin of some of the Egyptian fragments may, on the other hand, have to be revised eventually, as other production centres could be of importance.

The designs of the Newberry textiles have usually been stamped, either by using a reserve, or by applying a mordant which has brought out the colour when the textile is immersed in the dye bath. Occasionally some details are drawn in by hand. Blue and red dominate the colour scheme, as is characteristic of all of these trade cloths. When similar textile fragments from the Kelsey Museum were analysed by Mary

⁶'Looting' is perhaps too strong a word to use, as the site of Fustat has been used as a waste disposal area for hundreds of years, and casual finds have been the common occurrence.

⁷Kubiak and Scanlon aptly describe the trying circumstances of the expedition, in particular the race against time as Fustāt-C was investigated, while Cairo's rubbish dump and waste disposal was closing in on the site (1989:1-3).

Ballard and Agnes Timar-Balazsy at the Smithsonian Institution, the source of blue was identified as indigo fera tinctoria. Red was found to be either morindone from one of the three types of morinda that grow in India and elsewhere in South and South-East Asia (Morinda citrifolia L., Morinda tinctoria Roxb., Morinda umbellata L.), or alizarin and purpurin, sometimes in combination. Alizarin occurs in Rubia tinctoria L., in Oldenlandia umbellata L., or in Heydyotis umbellata L., while purpurin appears in Rubia cordifolia L.

The fragments are generally modest in appearance, and most cannot claim fame as good examples of outstanding craftsmanship. Yet they do appeal through their often vivid colours and quality of design concept. A brief excursion into the history of research on the material can show their unusual importance to scholars who are interested in transmissions of designs and technical knowledge, whether as art historians or in related fields.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

In research published in the 1930's, the art historian and textile scholar R. Pfister isolated certain cotton fabrics, all with block-printed designs, from the large amount of textiles surviving from Late Antique and Islamic sites in Egypt, and showed that their designs were closely related to Indian decorative arts (Pfister 1936; 1938). In particular, he based his discussion on a comparison of the textile patterns with datable architectural ornaments of North-West India. He specifically used examples from the province of Gujerat, a traditional centre of textile production and nowadays still an area for manufacturing block-printed cotton fabrics. Pfister showed the presence of the more complex textile motifs in other material, such as stucco or stone, by the 15th century. Certain stylized plant ornaments he traced to the 14th century at the latest.

Although his dating of the fragments, based on stylistic comparisons, was tentatively accepted by textile scholars, certain ambiguities had to be taken into account, for the very reason that Pfister dealt with examples from different media. The printed textiles would hardly have been produced with innovative designs, but are more likely to use familiar motifs. Therefore, Pfister's attempt of establishing a chronology is not entirely successful.

For all textiles of any quality Pfister argued for an exclusively Indian origin, specifically for production in Gujerat and, for the Egyptian trade of lesser importance, on the Coromandel coast (Pfister 1938:90-1). He only accepted the possibility of a Near Eastern or Middle Eastern origin for textiles of inferior quality. Over this issue he vigorously disagreed with Carl Lamm, who had published a book on cotton in Egypt (Lamm 1937; Pfister 1938:91-2). Lamm agreed with Pfister's argument of an Indian origin for many of the

fragments, but was also more willing to accept an additional Near Eastern place of production, possibly involving Gujarati craftsmen working in Egypt.⁸ Subsequent writers have tended to take Pfister's view, possibly because his presentation is more coherent and consistently developed than Lamm's argument. There is no doubt that the Indo-Egyptian textiles were traded as part of the medieval Indian Ocean commerce, but neither Pfister nor Lamm have presented a finite study.

Yet more than fifty years later, Pfister's work still is used as the primary source for any further art historical investigation of the textiles. Alfred Bühler has discussed the technical aspects of block-printing, as well as the possible geographic areas of development (Bühler 1972). John Irwin and Margaret Hall, and most recently Mattiebelle Gittinger and Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff, have written about the Indo-Egyptian textiles in a general context of Indian fabric traditions, but an updated study which looks exclusively at the Indian block-printed material is very much needed (Irwin and Hall 1971; Gittinger 1982; Nabholz-Kartaschoff 1986).

QUSEIR AL-QADIM AND FUSTĀT-C

A current investigation must take into account recent historical and archaeological research. Presently available references are the excavation reports about the Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim, from expeditions carried out by a University of Chicago team (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979; 1982). The finds include textile fragments of the same kind as the Newberry material. We therefore have a definite frame of reference for our collection (Eastwood 1982; *in press*).⁹ The date for Quseir al-Qadim is between A.D.1250 and the end of

⁸Lamm mentions seeing Newberry's collection at his home at Winksworth Hill, Hascombe, and he used it as a basis for his classification, although the fragments he discussed and illustrated nearly all came from Swedish collections (Lamm 1937:168-9). To my knowledge, this is the earliest and only substantial reference to the Newberry collection of block-printed textiles, prior to the present research. Pfister mentions the collection in the preface of his study, but adds that he had not inspected it, 'for reasons beyond his control'.

⁹I am grateful to Gillian Eastwood for allowing me to read her manuscript, as well as giving me the opportunity to inspect the relevant textile fragments again while she was working on her catalogue.

the fourteenth century, when the harbour was once again abandoned.¹⁰

I want to present two examples of comparable designs. The first is a grid pattern of squares partly filled with abstract designs of lines and dots, some of which can be read as a stylized star- or flower-shape (Fig.1). The identical combination of motifs appears both in the Newberry collection and at Quseir al-Qadim.¹¹ A larger version of the design also appears in both collections (Fig.2) and Quseir al-Qadim Acc.No.80/490). It reveals that the abstract design of lines and dots is actually based on a stylized representation of two pairs of animals flanking a tree or column.

The second pattern appears once at Quseir al-Qadim, but there are numerous examples in the Newberry collection (Fig.3 and Quseir al-Qadim Acc.No.78/1). Although the finds from Quseir include both resist-printed fragments dyed with indigo and mordant-applied red textiles, this is the only example that combines both techniques of dyeing. The complexity of the sequence of resist- and mordant-application has already been noted by M. Gittinger (1982:55).

A third fragment from Quseir al-Qadim can only be most tentatively interpreted (Fig.4). Could it be reconstructed as part of a design similar to the Ashmolean fragment 1990.1099 (Fig.5)? The Newberry collection has several fragments with versions of this complex pattern. It is intriguing that it is identical to the Javanese kawung design found on batik textiles, a pattern formerly reserved to court use in central Java (Gittinger 1979:124-5).

A second report on textile finds comes from Fustāt itself. One particular site, called Fustāt-C, has brought forth the first sizeable group of medieval Islamic textiles. The location was excavated in 1980, but the results were not published until 1989 (Kubiak and Scanlon 1989). Sherds found at the site are supposedly not later than 1100 A.D. and therefore early Fatimid. Numismatic evidence is up to and including the reign of al-Mustansir (1094 A.D.), a time of prime importance in the history of Fustat. The textiles were all found in refuse heaps near the top of the excavated mound and thus seem to date to the end of the eleventh century (Mackie 1989:81).

¹⁰The excavations at Qasr Ibrim could be of some importance to our material, but remain unpublished. A report about resist-dyed textiles from Gebel Adda is to appear in the Archaeological Textiles Newsletter vol.10 (1990).

¹¹For example Quseir al-Qadim, Acc.No.80/171.

The report prepared by Louise Mackie gives evidence of the wide range of textiles available in Egypt, both through local manufacture and international trade. Only one of the approximately 3000 fragments can be compared to our Indian material; it is dyed with indigo, apparently in a resist-dye technique. It has a field of small, eight-petalled rosettes, a band with a single row of the same rosettes, and a border of arches with beaded surrounds, a column or tree between the arches, and a stylized tree inside. The tree design is comparable to 1990.152 in the Newberry collection (Fig.6), although no identical sample is available. If the Fustāt fragment is indeed Indian, it would give credence to Kühnel's 11th-century identification of a fragment in the Textile Museum, which is indeed similar in design (Kühnel and Bellinger 1952).

TRADE BETWEEN EGYPT AND INDIA: EVIDENCE FROM THE YEMEN

With the entire material of textile fragments from Fustāt-C in mind, it will be rewarding to use the contextual evidence from the Fustāt Geniza chamber, as published by Goitein, in particular his volumes dealing with the economic foundations and with daily life (Goitein 1967; 1983). Writing about the 11th and 12th century, Goitein makes numerous references to the trade between India and Egypt. Merchants travelled both ways, and important ports-of-call on the way were in particular on the southern coast of the Arab peninsula. The trading centres of the Yemen continued to thrive in the following centuries, and Indian settlers were living in South Arabian communities; Ibn Battutah remarked, for example, of the people of Zafar that they adopted certain Indian customs, such as chewing betel nut, and that they wore Indian cloth (Gibb 1962:384-7).¹² From the same town come three 14th-century Gujarati tombstones now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, two of them made for the mausoleum of the Rasulid ruler of Zafar (Porter 1988).

Regarding the Yemen, textiles were mentioned as desirable trade items by numerous travellers and historical writers, and the trade with India is prominently noted (Baldry 1982:19-20). However, so far no historical or archaeologiocal textiles from the period under consideration have come to light. While direct evidence is thus lacking, I think one can make a connection to certain Yemeni architectural decorations, most convincingly to the painted domes of the Amiriyyah mosque in

¹²Indian textiles, in particular block-printed fabrics, are still worn by women in the Yemen; see Daum for illustrations (1987:402, 405, 408).

Radā'.¹³ The date of the building is 1502, while certain of the textile-linked designs already appear in the textile fragments from Quseir al-Qadim.

It seems possible that the Indian textiles traded in the Islamic world inspired local artists and artisans working in different material. This would pose a question that takes us back to Pfister's approach. Are the stucco ornaments of Ahmedabad possibly affected by textile designs, rather than the influence working the other way? We should be open to the possibility that the movement of textiles from India had an impact on visual developments in the places where they were distributed. This, however, also opens up the question of origin again. Beyond doubt, much of the apparently Indian fabric does have its origin in Gujarat. But is some of it possibly from Persia, or was it produced in Egypt? A major export article in the medieval trade was dye stuff, in particular indigo, as well as certain red dyes.

One fragment in the Newberry collection is characteristically Gujarati, both in design and quality of dye technique (Fig.7). Prior to printing, the textile has been sewn together from two width, a practice still common in Gujarati block-printed textiles. There is no doubt that the seam preceded the printing. In all Gujarati cotton textiles recorded so far, the spin of the thread follows a z-direction. Here, however, the cotton thread has an s-spin, a direction more commonly found in Near-Eastern and Egyptian textiles. I do not suggest that this in itself is sufficient evidence for an origin outside of Gujarat. But peculiarities of this sort might serve as a reminder that we have been too ready to accept and reiterate the results of previous research, and have sometimes accepted hypothetical positions as though they were proven facts. It only gives well-deserved credit to past scholarship to subject it to a re-examination which might lead to a more refined view, possibly with some new and surprising details.

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¹³Venetia Porter from the British Museum has carried out research on the painted ceilings of the Amiriyyah mosque. We plan to prepare a joint paper, in which we hope to show the influence of textiles on the painted designs.

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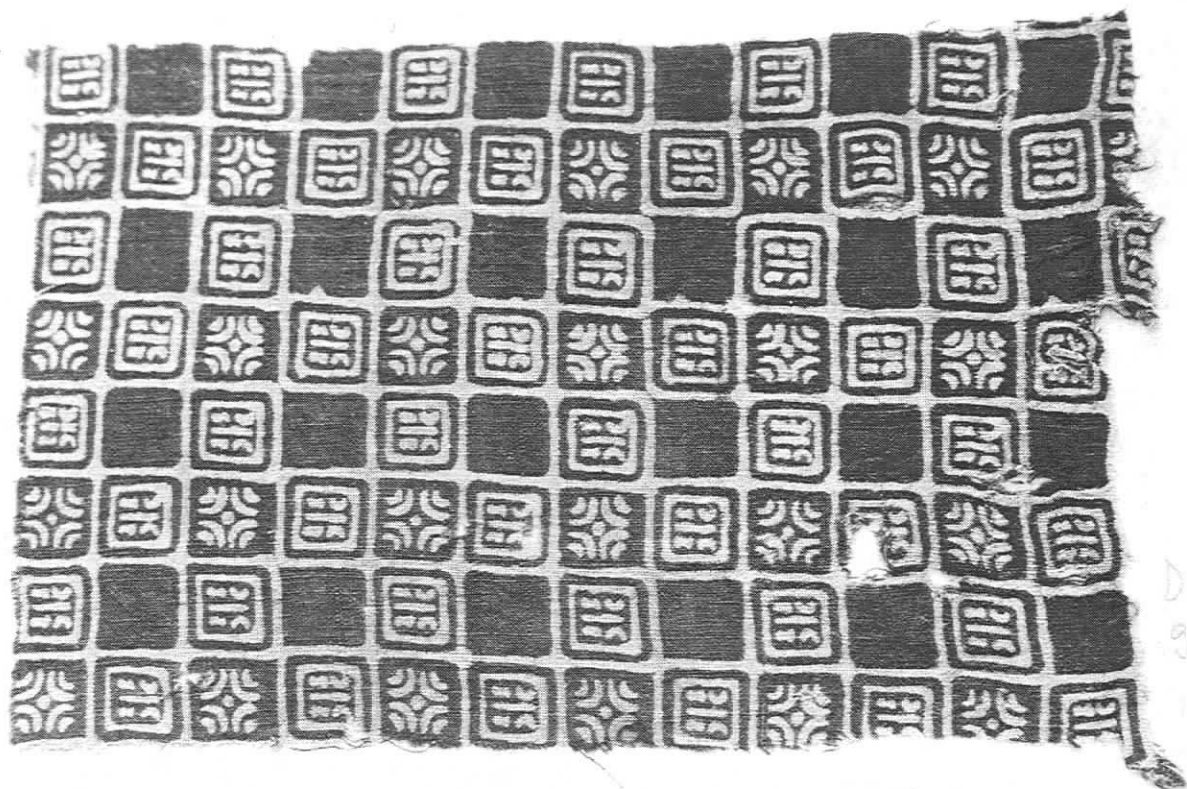


Fig.1: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.145

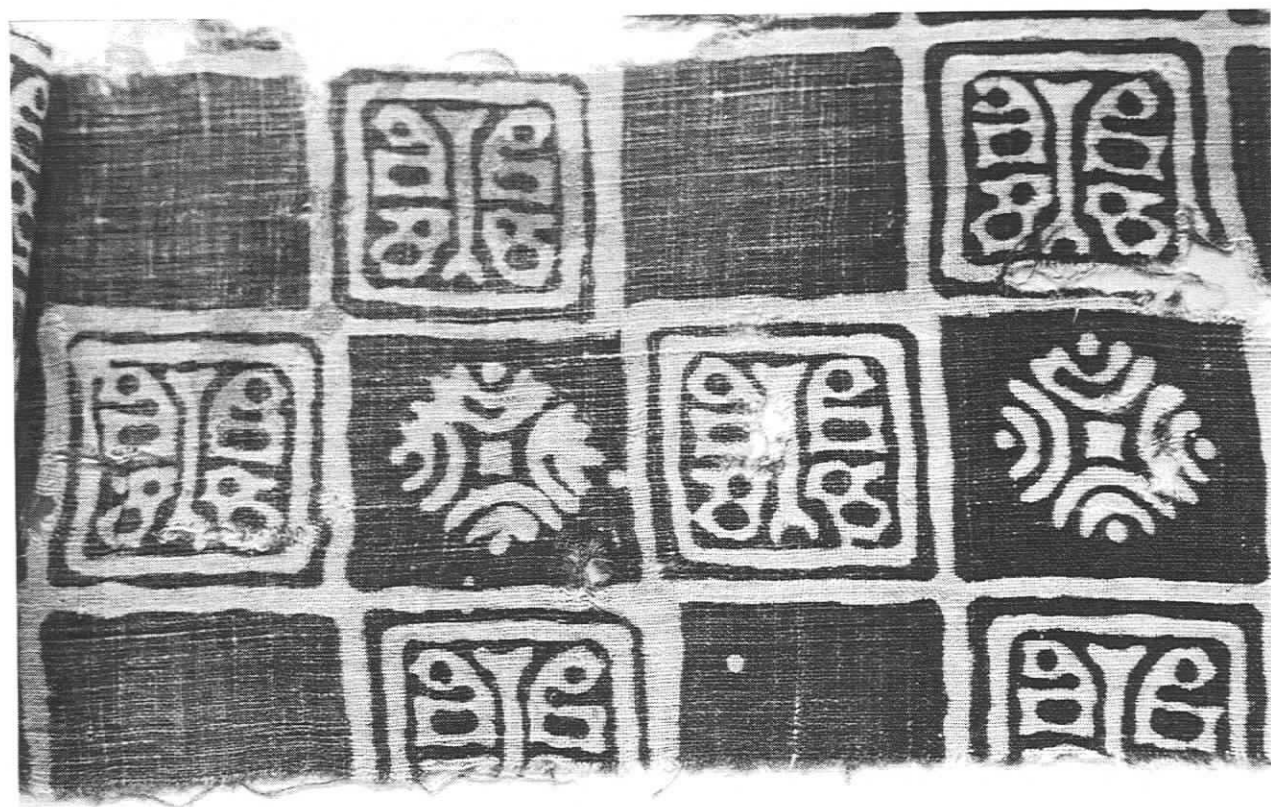


Fig.2: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.146



Fig.3: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.1122

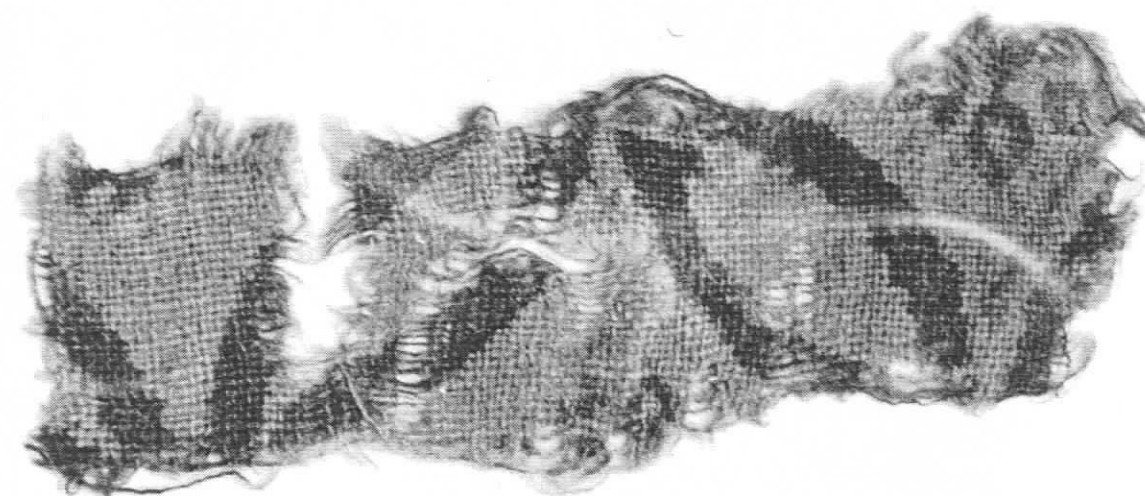


Fig.4: Quseir al-Qadim 82/97

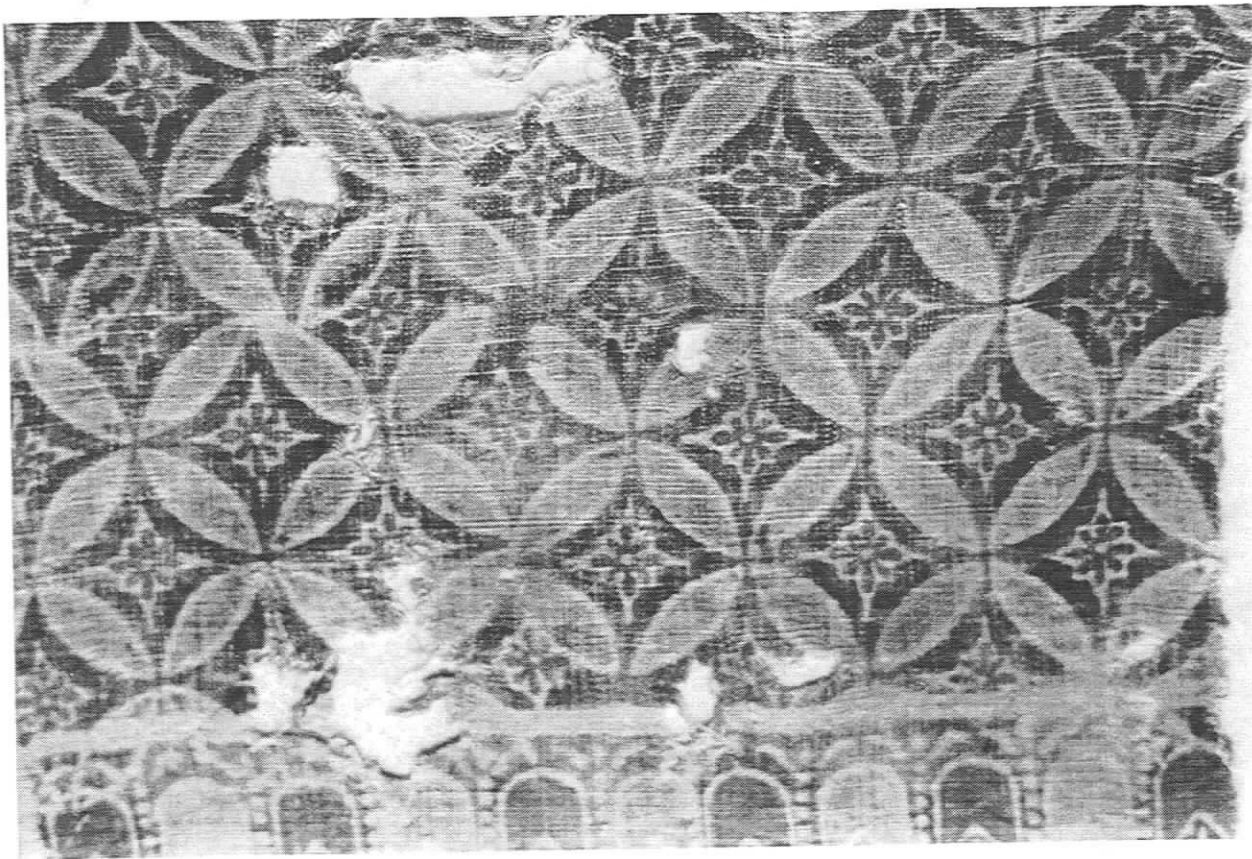


Fig.5: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.1099

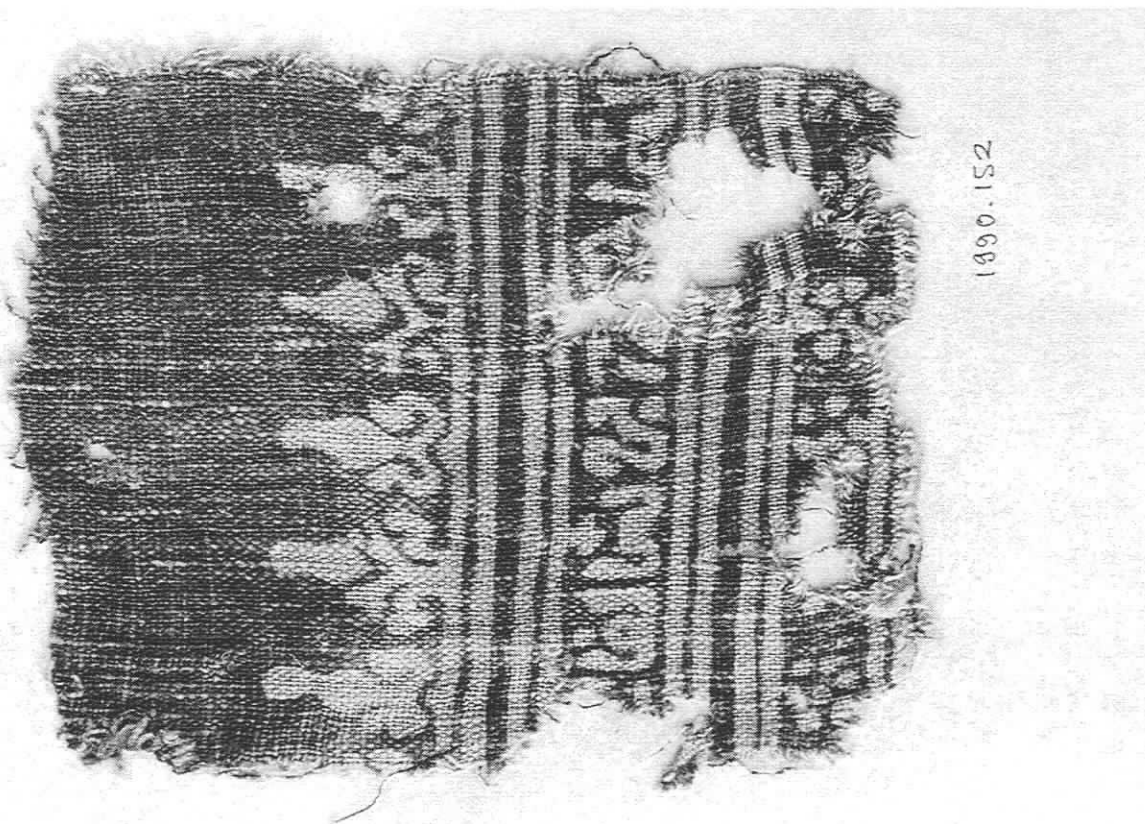


Fig.6: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.152

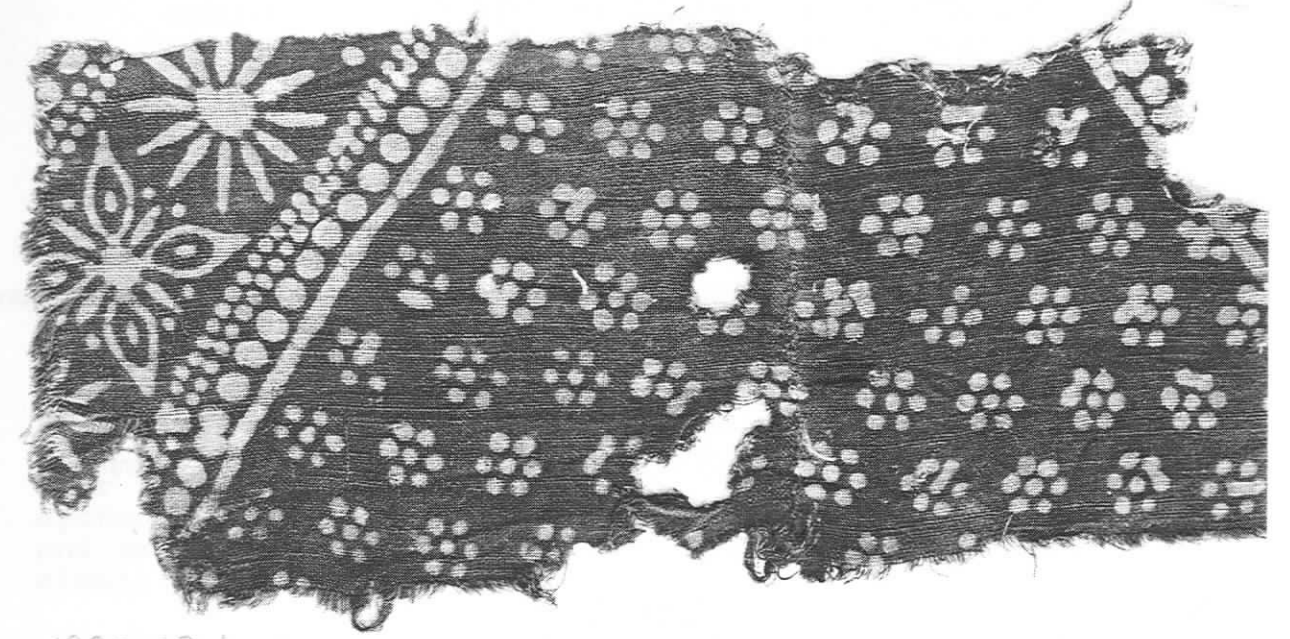


Fig.7: Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum 1990.121