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## SACRED TEXTILES FROM AN ANCIENT NUBIAN TEMPLE<sup>1</sup>

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Since so many of the temples of the Nile Valley were converted into churches after the coming of Christianity, most of the sacred objects of the temples were inevitably lost. The discovery of furnishings or ritual paraphernalia within the walls is extremely rare. As far as I know, our discovery of *textile* furnishings in the temple where they were once in use is quite simply unique.

### INTRODUCTION

The discovery of a previously unsuspected temple at the archaeological site of Qasr Ibrim,<sup>2</sup> located in Egyptian Nubia, (Fig. 1) has provided us with a rich collection of sacred objects and temple furniture unknown from other early temples. It was built by the Kushites, an African people who, by 1500 BC, had developed a high civilization with its center at the city of Kerma, located on the middle Nile in what is now the Sudan. In 751 BC the Kushites were at the height of their power. They conquered Egypt, and remained there for over 100 years. Their dynasty was a period of extensive building, not only in Egypt, but even more in their homeland, known today as Nubia. Our temple was constructed during this period-around 750 BC.

Qasr Ibrim, for almost 3000 years, was the single most important settlement in Lower Nubia--that region immediately upriver from Egypt. During its long history Qasr Ibrim was a major religious center--the site of pagan temples and later of several Christian churches and a cathedral. Its dominating situation high on a bluff overlooking the Nile gave it a natural protection from enemies as well as protection from the flooding of the river. Because it has always remained completely dry, the temple and its contents were preserved.

Constructed of mudbrick, rather than stone, the Qasr Ibrim temple is small, especially when compared to grander buildings both to the north and to the south. But it must have been a very holy place, because it remained in use for almost 1300 years. In the period just before its destruction, it was a shrine for the worship of Isis, whose cult had swept the Mediterranean world. With the coming of Christianity to Nubia in 550 AD, the temple and its contents were destroyed in a single brief, violent episode. Altars

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been adapted for the Textile Society of America 1996 Symposium, Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles, from an article in *Ars Textrina*. See Adams 1987: 85-124.

<sup>2</sup> Excavation at Qasr Ibrim has been carried out since 1961 by the Egypt Exploration Society of London under license granted by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. All of the textiles mentioned in this article are the property of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and are housed in the Cairo Museum.

were overturned and statues were smashed, actions consistent with Christianity's commandment against idols.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to statuary, offering tables, painted wooden plaques, and vessels of faience and glass, textile fragments of extraordinary quality were found within the Isis temple. Everything in the temple had been broken or damaged in some way; the fabrics were willfully torn into pieces and the fragments scattered throughout the several rooms of the temple. Ultimately, 115 textile fragments were identified as having been part of the temple furnishings; from these we recognized 20 separate specimens, of which eight were assembled or reassembled.

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TEXTILES

Considered as a group there are certain features which are worth noting. First, although the use these textiles served in the temple is unknown, it does not seem likely that they were garments. There are no signs of cutting or shaping, and the only sewing, except for the containers, is for the purpose of mending. Second, all but three were made of cotton. This is interesting in view of the flax and wool in general use in Egypt of the same period. The third remarkable feature of this collection is the limited color range. Again, with three exceptions which will be discussed later, the only colors found are dark blue, medium blue, and the natural color of the undyed cotton. Furthermore, the colors are so arranged that the two shades of blue are almost never in direct contact: they are separated by a narrow line of white.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be comparable to the law of medieval heraldry, which forbids contact between red and blue.

The temple textiles can be organized into six groups; curtains, containers, tassels, tapestry-woven fragments, three specimens which are like woven pictures, with borders and dark blue woven frames, and rolled cloths.

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller description of the temple and its contents see Driskell, Adams and French 1989: 11-54.

<sup>4</sup> Archaeological textiles cannot be considered white by today's standards. Many factors affect the appearance of fabrics which have been buried. For these pieces, the conditions of use, rather than the actual age, seem to have determined their present appearance. The temple furnishings were darkened by smoke from lamps and incense. The oily residue left by the smoke tended to attract dust, which further darkened the colors. The appearance of dark blue was affected least by these factors; undyed yarns were changed the most. The pale blues and medium blues have taken on a greenish hue, a combination of the blue and the soiling elements, which by themselves leave a tannish or golden color.

By contrast, other textiles of the same age which were abandoned before they were finished were never put into use. Their blues are still quite bright, and some of the undyed areas are much closer to the original almost-white of the unspun cotton. (Raw cotton still in its calyx has been found from this period at Qasr Ibrim). In describing patterns with complex color relationships I will use the term white for the sake of simplicity; areas of plain weave will be called undyed.

## CURTAINS

The first category, curtains, has been so designated because of their relatively large size, and the lack of any sewing or shaping. They are balanced plain weave, and all were dyed blue after weaving. As the first specimen (QI 86R660) has been assembled it measures 74 x 81 cm; it seems clear that only a small portion has been recovered. Just two sections of the right selvedge are present; all the other borders are missing and the original extent of the piece is impossible to know. The deliberate tearing is quite evident. A second curtain (QI 86R661) is similar to the first, but has a more open weave. Both of these are dark blue.

A pale blue curtain (QI 86R654) is 42 x 56 cm as reassembled. It has one selvedge and an end border of wrapped openwork. (Fig. 2) This decorative technique has been traced back to its probable place of origin at the city of Kerma, and seems to have been strictly African.<sup>5</sup> The maker used dark blue wrapping yarns as well as light blue to create an openwork pattern of diamond shapes. Like the other two curtains, the 32 fragments of this specimen are mute evidence of wanton vandalism.

## CONTAINERS

In the second group are objects which can be identified as containers. The most structurally complex is a double-chambered case, (QI 86R70) which may originally have been fitted with glass vessels or other fragile objects. Single chambered cases of this type have been found fitted with vessels of wood or ivory for the popular dark eye make-up, *kohl*. This case was constructed of a basketry framework covered by plain blue cloth. Each cylinder was originally provided with a circular bottom, and also with a lid attached to the case by a decorative plait, which acted as a hinge. The attachments can still be seen; the hinge is anchored to the case at the back with a stout knot, and on the front, a loop on the missing lid hooked over the knot. A lid which may very well be the missing member was found very near the temple. The case was decorated with an all-over pattern of couching, and decorative bands similar to the hinge strip.

The second container, a bag, (QI 86R643) may have served as a container for a pair of wooden arms. The arms were found nearby, and the bag was empty. The top is very deteriorated from long handling and possibly from being rolled or folded down. It is made from a single piece of cloth, folded along one side and the two edges stitched together along the side and across the bottom. The fabric is a complete piece--that is, having both starting and ending borders and both side borders. The dimensions are 91 x 60 cm. Decoration is provided by bands of blue and dark blue on an undyed ground.

The third member of the container group is part of a leather bag (86R71). The lining was composed of three layers of plain-weave linen cloth, attached to the leather by bold decorative stitching in flax thread. Elaborate patterns created by the decorative stitching mark it as a cover for a valued and important object. The lining is one of only three specimens from the temple furnishings containing flax.

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
<sup>5</sup> See Adams, in press.

## TASSELS

The other two flax examples are tassels. The first is a row of connected flax tassels, sewn to a strip of plain linen cloth (QI.86R644). Ripped away from the rest of its fabric, this border was found in the same area as two large flax tassels, (QI 86R645a,b) which are obviously a pair. Analysis of the decorative wrapping revealed that the brownish yarns and the white yarn are cotton; the others are flax, the same as the tassel. The technique of wrapping is a clever one which conceals the unused yarns behind the visible ones until they are needed again. On examination, I discovered that the brown yarns, where they were protected from the light and air under the wrapping, were a bright red.

The red of these two tassels and red wrapping on a little cotton tassel (QI 86R651) are the only exceptions to the limited range of blues and natural color. The wrapping technique on the cotton tassel is the same as that of the flax tassels. An interesting feature of the cotton tassel is the finial, in which the cords have been worked into a pompom, with a bit of flax cloth inside to hold the circular shape.

## TAPESTRY-WOVEN FRAGMENTS

Twenty-two cotton fragments, assembled into six specimens, comprise a group referred to as tapestry fragments because all are very fine examples of tapestry weave. The first specimen (QI 86R653), in two pieces, has a repeating pattern of closely-spaced *ankhs*.  The weaving is very fine and close, having 36 weft yarns per cm. The dark blue ground forms a rich backdrop for the *ankhs*, which were originally almost white; their color has now aged to a tawny, light brown. The second specimen, (QI 86R652) represented by a single fragment, also has a small repeating motif on a dark blue ground. It is a dot with an attached hook, woven in the tiniest possible scale (8x3 mm) and probably represents a ladle.  We see it from two perspectives: the bowl as seen from above and the handle from the side. Both the *ankh* and the ladle were important symbols in the Isis cult.

The next specimen (QI 86R650), reassembled from two fragments, is a tapestry-woven band (Fig. 3). It consists of a repeating linear pattern in two shades of blue, carefully separated from each other by narrow white lines. A tiny, white eight-pointed star is the central motif in each section. A narrow border of wrapped openwork, similar but much simpler than that on the pale blue curtain, has the addition of a row of very full, closely-spaced tassels. Above the tapestry band is a ground weave of undyed cotton in half-basket weave.

One small fragment (QI 86R657) has a tapestry band pattern similar to the above. A second piece (QI 86R648) is related, but has a vertical orientation, with just enough of the selvage preserved to let us know that it formed part of one side of the fabric. The motif, instead of the eight pointed star, is a quatrefoil, suggesting a flower or a Greek cross. It is possible that each of these formed part of a border around a rectangular feature, but it is unlikely that they were part of the same fabric.

Fifteen fragments from three separate places in the temple were assembled for specimen QI 86R662. It is technically one of the most expert, and artistically one of the most striking of all the temple textiles. It consists of a row of figures variously termed the Knot of Isis or Meroitic Sa boldly rendered in white yarns, against a dark blue ground. (Fig. 4) Where it is preserved, a solid bar bounds the row of knots along the

top. The complete absence of borders gives us no hint of the size or configuration of the fabric.

This weaving is of such high quality that I was surprised to see both single and double wefts used with no discernible pattern. There is a narrow band of single wefts along the edges of two elements; all the other wefts are used in pairs, including the dark blue ground. A second area shows the weft yarns alternating quite randomly between singles and pairs, and here the ground is singles. It is difficult to understand the reasons for such changes; it may indicate that two weavers worked on this piece. In any case, despite the inconsistencies, this fabric remains an extraordinary example of weaving, and must have been greatly treasured in the temple before it was destroyed.

#### BORDERED CLOTHS

The most extraordinary group of temple textiles to be examined are three cotton bordered cloths which are like tapestry-woven pictures. These three cloths vary in size, but are structurally similar. All of them have a dark blue border which acts as a frame surrounding the pattern. This framing border is itself surrounded by an undyed ground weave with paired wefts. Instead of being square, the four corners of each framing border have a small triangular projection which protrudes into the ground weave. Two of the cloths were mended in antiquity.

Within the dark blue framing border of the smallest cloth (QI 86R649, Fig. 5) is a central field, and a second field which surrounds it. The pattern is woven in such a way that the central field appears to be superimposed over the outer field. Within the medium blue central field are seven horizontal dark blue rectangles, each outlined with a narrow white line. Their arrangement is staggered, with three in one row, four in the other. Inside each rectangle are two white horizontal *ankhs* lying side by side. The outer field has a diamond pattern made of dark blue stepped squares on a white ground. Within each diamond shape is a single horizontal *ankh* in white. Narrow lines of dark blue and white border the edges of the outer field. Along the inner edges of the dark blue framing border is a single row of alternately larger and smaller white dots.

The middle-sized bordered cloth, (QI 86R656) in addition to the ground weave and framing border found also in the small one, has two additional borders surrounding a single field. The field is similar to the one just described, except that the motif inside each dark blue rectangle is a quatrefoil suggesting a flower or Greek cross. The rectangles number thirty-eight, and are arranged horizontally in four staggered rows of alternately nine and ten each. At the outer edge of the field is a narrow dark blue border with a single row of alternately larger and smaller white dots. Between the framing border and the inner border is a meander, which breaks into separate elements along the sides. There is no white line between the blues of the field and the border--one of the few cases where the practice of separating the blues is broken.

The largest and most complex of the three bordered cloths (QI 86R659) has the double field arrangement seen in the smallest cloth. (Figure 6) Both fields have the diamond pattern made of stepped squares, distinguished only by different use of the three colors. The outer field has the same color relationships as the outer field of the smallest cloth: dark blue on a white ground. The diamond pattern of the central field is made of sky blue stepped squares, completely edged with a narrow white line, against a dark blue ground. The motif inside each diamond shape of both fields is an eight-pointed star: white in the central field and dark blue in the outer field. A small dot in the center of each star is of the opposite color. Between the two fields are narrow lines of white and

dark blue; the same occurs in reversed order between the outer field and an inner border. The inner border, one centimeter wide, has a dark blue ground through the center of which runs a row of sky blue dots joined side by side. Even these have been very carefully outlined in white to separate the two shades of blue.

The dark blue framing border is in four pieces, but, very fortunately, one of them still retains a corner of ground weave with part of a selvedge and a portion of end border having a few remaining stumps of wrapped openwork. Figure 7 reveals the extraordinary quality of the work. The even spinning of the yarn and the regularity of the weave make this piece the finest example of textile art yet recovered from this period.

## ROLLED CLOTHS

The final group may have been the most sacred of all the textiles in the temple, although they are very plain compared to the preceding specimens. Eleven pieces were found placed together in one corner of the inner hall. All had been soaked in liquid and then wrapped in neat rolls before they dried. The bundles were quite hard and stiff, but not discolored as they would have been if they had been soaked in blood or wine. At first I thought that they contained something, but after unrolling three and finding nothing, I concluded that their importance lay in the liquid which caused their stiffness. An inorganic chemical analysis has revealed the presence of calcium, and organic analyses have indicated that certain amino acids found in proteins and fat are present.<sup>6</sup> These data suggest that milk may be the liquid which dried in these cloths. It is known that milk libations were an important part of the Isis ritual.<sup>7</sup>

Although it would seem that we have identified the liquid, we still need to know why milk was preserved by soaking it up in small rolls of cloth. Were these amulets for pilgrims to the Isis shrine to carry away back to their homes? Or were they perhaps a form of votive offering?

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the extraordinary circumstances of their discovery, the textiles themselves fit within the generally recognized parameters of textiles of late classical times in Nubia. These include the predominant use of cotton, all spinning in the "s" direction, weaves limited to plain weave, including half-basket and basket weaves, tapestry weave, and weft loop pile. The use of color was for decoration and was generally limited to shades of blue and very occasionally, red. One other feature, unique to the Kushites and their descendants, the Meroites and the Ballana people, is the technique of wrapped openwork.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I am very grateful to Textile Fibers, Research Division, of Petersburg, Virginia, and to Ms. Donna Harris, who kindly provided me with this information.

<sup>7</sup> Janice Yellin has discussed the use of milk in Isis ritual. See Yellin 1982: 151-155. For further information about the cult of Isis see Witt 1971.

<sup>8</sup> There are many examples from Qasr Ibrim of this technique reported by Crowfoot 1984: 10-17. Specimens have also been reported from Karanog by Randall-MacIver and Woolley 1910: Pl. 108, Fig. 5; from Gebel Adda by Crowfoot n.d.: number 5; from Qustul by Thurman 1979: 40-41; and from Aksha by Vila 1967: 176-77, Figs. 155b and 156a and b.

What then, has this discovery added to our knowledge of late classical Nubian textiles? The three blue curtains, all dyed in the piece, are a real departure from the prevailing practice. In analysing more than three thousand textile fragments of this period from elsewhere on the site, fewer than ten have been s-spun cotton, piece-dyed blue. It now seems possible that these few were also pieces of the destroyed curtains, since none of them was complete.

Although we have no idea where in the temple these curtains originally hung, it seems possible that they may have been a *parapetasma* which has been described as the "precious curtain which forms an essential part of the setting for a ritual sacrifice."<sup>9</sup> Such a curtain appears in the upper right corner of a carved ivory plaque of an Isis cult scene, now in Dumbarton Oaks.<sup>10</sup> The plain weave does not seem very special to our eyes, but to the ancients, a solid blue cloth must have been precious indeed, since most of their fabric was undyed.

A second contribution is the complex pattern of the cloths with woven frames. Nothing similar to these, with their framed, bordered, elaborate tapestry-woven rectangles, surrounded by an undyed plain ground weave has ever been reported. With the exception of the *ankhs* on the smallest cloth, the motifs are geometric, not iconographic. Yet, given their provenience, the religious nature of these fabrics must now be taken into account when temple furnishings are considered.

The outstanding quality of the tapestry-woven furnishings raises our estimation of weaving to higher levels of artistic achievement in this period. We had been aware that these people were competent spinners and weavers and were very skilled at sewing and embroidery. Fragments of tapestry weaving had been recovered previously, but nothing so complex or so finely woven as these.

The question arises, where were these textiles produced? We shall probably never be certain. Textiles are so easily transportable; these may have come long distances. A possible origin may have been the city of Meroe itself. Because of the climate, few textiles have been recovered from there. But, one small fragment of wrapped openwork has been reported<sup>11</sup> and it is far finer than any from Qasr Ibrim. Grace Crowfoot's descriptions of the several textiles she examined, and her thread counts, indicate that yarn and weaving were extremely fine at Meroe.

These are just some of the many issues raised by the discovery of this extraordinary temple and its contents. Although archaeological excavation provides us with many answers about the past, it also leaves us with questions we didn't even wonder about before the digging started.

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<sup>9</sup> Weitzmann 1972: 6.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*: 5-7, Plate 1.

<sup>11</sup> Griffith and Crowfoot 1934: 10, Fig. 1.



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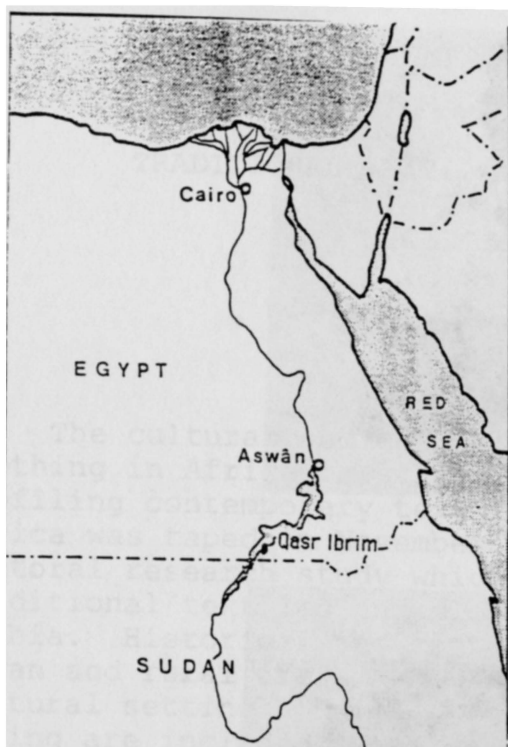


Figure 1

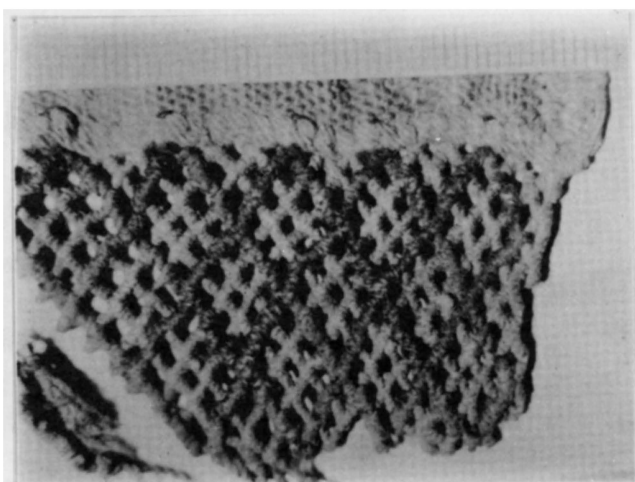


Figure 2

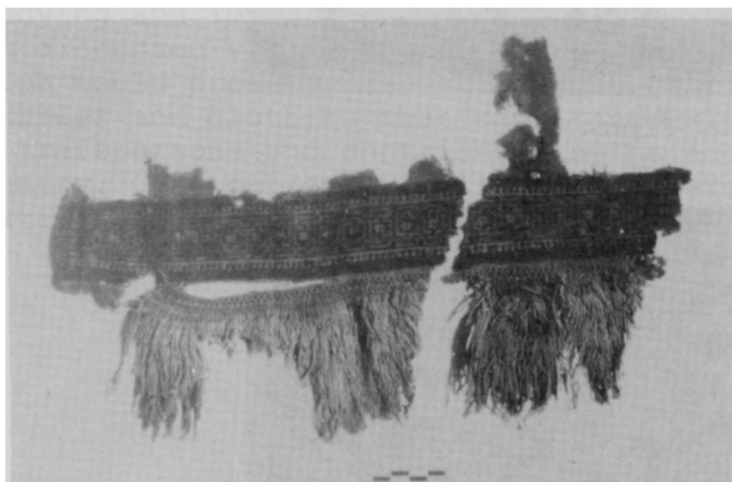


Figure 3

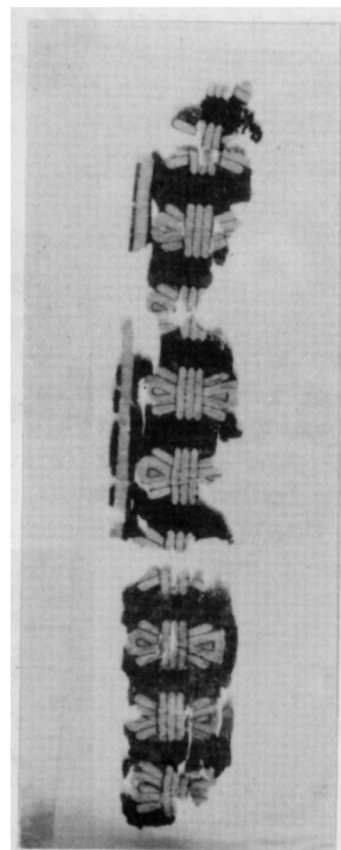


Figure 4

Figures 2-7 are shown with the direction of the warp oriented vertically.

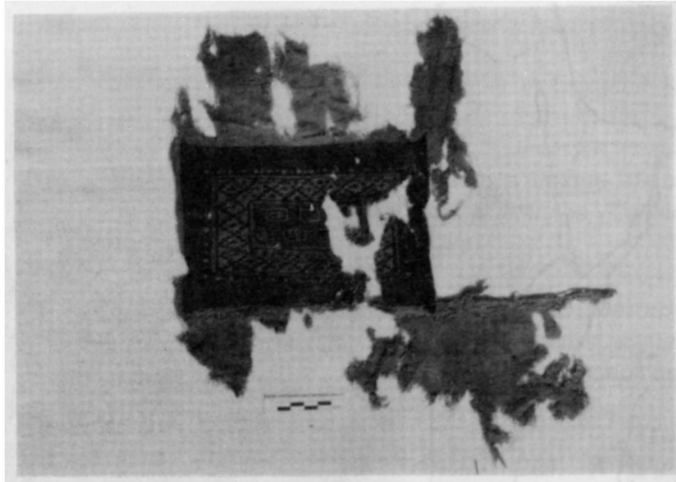


Figure 5

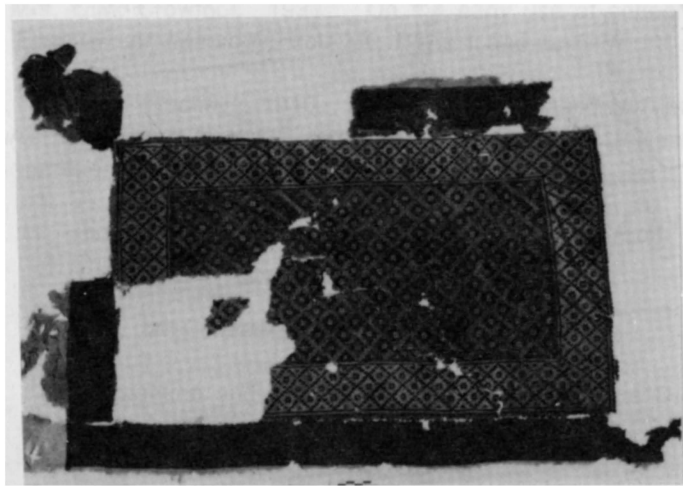


Figure 6

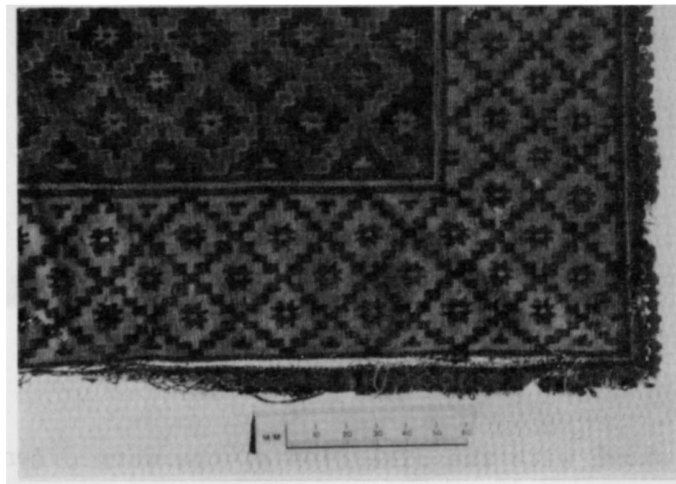


Figure 7