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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Occam's Razor: Origins of a Classical Turkish Carpet Design?

Sumru Belger Krody

In March 1930, George Hewitt Myers, founder of The Textile Museum acquired a group of six textiles from Nahman Tano nephew and American representative of Greek Cypriot art dealer Phocian Jean Tano who operated out of Cairo, Egypt and Cyprus. Phocian Tano was one of Myers' major dealers and helped Myers to build his collection of both late antique and early Islamic archaeological textiles.

Upon their arrival, all six objects were recorded in the Museum's entry register as Mamluk textiles from Fayyum, Egypt dating to the 13th or 14th century and made from linen with 'inwoven' wool embroidery (fig.1). As far as the Museum's records show they have never been exhibited or published. They came to the attention of the curatorial team during the survey of the collection leading up to the selection of textiles for the Museum's upcoming 2019 exhibition of *Woven Interiors: Furnishing Early Medieval Egypt*.

Figure 1: Six textiles and fragments, Egypt, Fayyum, 13th-14th century (?). Linen and wool; balanced plain weave with supplementary-weft patterning. The Textile Museum 73.218, 73.219, 73.220, 73.222, 73.221, 73.224, and 73.223 (from top left to bottom right), acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1930. 110.5 x 216 cm, 102 x 109 cm, 127 x 193 cm, 109 x 107 cm, 142 x 107 cm, 43 x 93 cm, and 58 x 30.5 cm (H x W)

Beyond its worn state, one textile (The Textile Museum 73.221) stands out among others in this group because of its unusual design (fig. 2). Peculiar aspects of this textile make it valuable for further research to understand the forces behind its creation and the influence it had afterwards. As the research progresses, it has become more evident that this object has potential in helping us to understand many things about textile arts and history, although questions about its provenience, provenance, and date become more numerous, including, but not exclusively, if it is truly a surviving early Mamluk textile and dates to the 13th or 14th century, how it fits with the rest of the Mamluk or late Medieval textiles from Egypt, or if it was actually woven much earlier than the 13th-14th century.

Figure 2: Cover, Egypt, Fayyum, 13th-14th century (?). Linen and wool; balanced plain weave with supplementary-weft patterning. The Textile Museum 73.221, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1930. 142 x 107 cm (H x W)

The textile (TM 73.221, ‘TM cover’ hereafter) is a squarish textile of 142 x 106.5 cm (56 x 42 inches), has balanced plain-woven linen ground fabric, and is decorated with wool and linen supplementary-weft patterning. The linen warp and weft were spun in an S direction, which explains its initial and current attribution to Egypt. The fabric has 14 warp ends and 11 weft yarns per cm. The yarns used for supplemental weft are wool and linen. Wool yarns are two S-spun yarns worked together as one. They are reddish brown, blue, green, red, and dark yellow (gold). Other supplemental yarn is linen and two S-spun yarns worked together as one, similar to the wool yarn, and is white, possibly bleached.

The TM cover’s weave structure, as well as the others in the TM group, can be simply defined as a distinct version of supplementary-weft patterning on a balanced plain-weave ground. What differentiates this weave structure is the vertical striped visual effect of the pattern against the balanced plain weave ground (fig. 3). This distinct visual effect is created by the same set of warp yarns that binds the supplementary-weft yarns creating the pattern, besides being part of the

set that creates the plain weave ground. In The Textile Museum examples the supplementary-weft yarns are bound by every fourth warp yarn, meaning the weft yarn floats over three warp ends and was interlaced under one. Less visually detectable is the fact that the supplementary pattern weft is never interlaced from selvedge to selvedge but used only where it is needed.

Figure 3: Details of TM cover and TM 73.223 showing the weft stripping.

An excellent explanation of the weaving technique can be found in John Becker's 1987 book titled *Pattern and Loom* and also contemporary application was illustrated in Marla Mallett's 1998 book *Woven Structures*.¹ A fixed shed rod divides the warp into two layers for one plain weave shed. For the countershed a heddle rod is used. To obtain the shed for the supplementary-weft pattern another rod is taken into the countershed layer of warp ends alternately over and under one end. Becker posits that it was likely that late antique weavers utilized the vertical loom that they used for the weaving of tunics and it was almost certain that weaving progressed from the back. When a supplementary-weft rod is raised on edge the yarns come up in groups of three and every fourth (the binding warp) stays down. The two linen weft yarns (ground weft) interlaced in plain weave order are always thrown in between successive wool pattern weft yarns to have the same warp yarn ready for binding the next line of pattern weft.²

The selvages on the sides and warp fringes on either ends of the TM cover indicate that this is a whole textile and the pattern layout presented is how it was conceived at the creation (fig. 1). There are two two-band end borders at the top and the bottom of the textile. The 'main' border, decorated with eight-pointed stars framed in octagon medallions, surrounds the four sides of the textile. There is no clear turn or articulation in the corners of the border. The central field is filled with one row of large octagonal medallions and diamond-shaped medallions arranged in

¹ See Becker, John, *Pattern and Loom* (Copenhagen: Rhodos International Publishers, 1987), 133-5 and Mallett, Marla. *Woven Structures: A Guide to Oriental Rug and Textile Analysis* (Atlanta: published in conjunction with Christopher Publications, 1998), 90-1, especially fig. 8.18 for loom set-up.

² Becker, *Pattern and Loom*, 133-5.

diagonal order and in infinite repeat. A large curvilinear lattice with inward hanging small sprigs overlays these medallions. Thus, each ogival space created by the lattice surrounding each medallion form a perception of a larger medallion with small sprigs or tri-foil shapes hanging inward from the outer edges of the medallion.

The relationship between the TM cover and other TM textiles in this group is based more on structural and material characteristics than the design similarities, although there is some motif sharing among them. All seven of them share the same distinct supplementary-weft patterning technique, having very similar warp and weft counts—ranging from 15-12 warp ends per cm to 12-11 weft shoots per cm. The fibers used for the ground weave are linen and S-spun, while the supplementary-weft yarns are wool and linen, two S-spun yarns used together.

The observable differences between the TM cover and others in the TM group are two folds; one related to the structure and the other to the design. The linen supplemental-weft yarns in the other textiles in the group, were woven from selvedge to selvedge in plain weave to create straight lines to demarcate the design areas, and they do not appear to be part of the motifs, while in the TM cover, both wool and linen supplementary-weft yarns were used to create the design as well as demarcation as in the others (fig. 4).

Figure 4: Details of TM 73.223 and TM cover showing the different usage of linen supplementary weft.

Second, the TM cover and the others in the group share many shapes such as stars, quadrupeds, and octagons as motifs, but what sets the TM cover apart from others is its central field design. The field has a compositional layout of infinitely repeating medallions linked together with vegetal lattice. Overall design layout of the TM cover, in other words, is a combination of geometric, which can be observed in other textiles in this group, and curvilinear, which is new. The overall repeat pattern of the TM cover's central field relies on interwoven or interlaced design elements to create and connect the individual elements of the design. The use of interlacing also distinguishes it from the other examples.

Other textiles exist other with the same structural and design characteristics in various institutional collections. Two important ones are the one in the David Collection in Copenhagen³ and the one is in the Katoen Natie collection in Antwerp.⁴

The Katoen Natie cover, often referred to as carpet, was dated to the mid-8th to late 9th century.⁵ The David Collection cover is attributed to Egypt or Syria and was dated to late 7th to early 8th century partly based on the Katoen Natie cover's carbon 14 dating and on mosaics unearthed during the excavations in Khirbat-al Mafjaran, an early 8th century, Umayyad fortified palace complex near Jericho.⁶ Other smaller examples are present in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna.⁷ Work is ongoing to identify other institutional collections to determine how many more of this type and style are available for research.

Due to the lack of surviving material between this group of early textiles and the contemporary applications of the technique, it is hard to build a timeline for the weave structure and weaving methods. One large crop of material available to study the structure and methods of weaving is a group of sturdy weavings from Western Asia. Generally termed *zili* (fig. 5), they are produced in villages and nomadic encampments to create strong bags or covers, and weavers utilize wool in the production, although design aesthetics are very different (fig. 5).⁸

Figure 5: Bag with supplementary-weft patterning, Western or Central Anatolia, early 20th century. The Textile Museum 2007.30.8, donated by Harry and Diane Greenberg

³ David Collection, Copenhagen, inv. No. 12/1988, linen and wool, plain weave with supplementary-weft patterning, 106.5 x 84 cm, published in Rogers, Clive, *Early Islamic Textiles*. With contributions by Hero Granger-Taylor, Simon Crosby, Gillian Eastwood (Brighton: Rogers and Podmore, 1983) and Folsach, Kjeld von, and Anne-Marie Keblow Bernsted, *Woven Treasures: Textiles from the World of Islam* (Copenhagen: The David Collection, 1993).

⁴ Katoen Natie Collection KTN 15, linen and wool, plain weave with supplementary-weft patterning, published in Evans, Ben. *The Past Made Present*, *HALI*, vol. 171 (2012), 88-95 (London: Hali Publications).

⁵ See Evans, "The Past Made Present," 95; the date of mid-8th to late 9th century CE is based on carbon 14 dating conducted 95.4 % probability. The dye analyses conducted on the beige-pink was concluded that the yarn was dyed with a rare combination of Brazilwood (a caespaline species) and madder; the yellow was primarily weld (*Reseda luteola*), but also contained traces of Venetian sumac (*Cotinus coggyria*).

⁶ Autor's communication with Dr. Kjeld von Folsach, Director, The David Collection, on April 10, 2018 and also visit <http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/textiles/art/12-1988>.

⁷ Museum of Applied Arts collection was excavated in Saqqara, Egypt and date to 501 to 700 CE.

⁸ See Mallett, *Woven Structures*, 90-1.

The same weave structure also appears in Scandinavian weavings, ancient Icelandic traditions and weavings in the British Isles.⁹ The missing link is the textiles from Western Asia with this distinct weaving method bridging the period between the 13th century—assuming the TM cover dates to the 13th-14th century—and the examples from the 19th and 20th century West Asia.

The design of the center field in the TM cover, on the other hand, has an uncanny resemblance to a group of Turkish carpets, some of which date as early as the 16th or 17th century and by extension to 19th century Caucasian rugs.¹⁰ In the Turkish and Caucasian rugs, on the other hand, the space created by the lattice became a medallion and floral sprigs are crosses, but overall appearance of the design has undeniable resemblance to the design of the TM cover (fig. 6).

Fig 6. Detail of TM cover showing inward facing floral sprigs.

Many researchers posit that the medallion seen on these Caucasian rugs took inspiration or derived from so-called small-pattern Holbein medallions produced in the Ottoman empire from about the 14th century onwards. In this style of carpet, the interlaced strap work creates the medallions that infinitely repeat on the center field. The design is based on geometric interlaced strap work elements. We can posit that the design seen on the Turkish and Caucasian rugs has some association with the designs seen on the TM cover, but we have no concrete evidence to prove this statement.

The closest design associates for not only the TM cover but also the examples in the TM group and others such as Katoen Natie and David collections appear to be within a non-textile

⁹ Becker, *Pattern and Loom*, 134 and Geijer, Agnes. *A History of Textile Art* (London: Pasold Research Fund in association with Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1979).

¹⁰ See especially two examples, a Turkish carpet dated to 16th-17th century published in Denny, Walter, *The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets*. With contributions by Sumru Belger Krody (Washington DC: The Textile Museum 2011), 76, plate 16, and a 19th century Konakkent *sumak* rug from the Caucasus, which was published in Sabahi, Taher, *Sumakh* (Roma: Leonardo De Luca Editori, Roma, 1992), 67, pl. 10.

medium—in the mosaics and stucco wall decorations of the Khirbat-al Mafjar palace in Jericho.¹¹ The palace is one of the most beautiful and grandiose of the surviving Umayyad palaces, in terms of its stucco wall decorations and mosaic floors, which is where we find similarities in terms of design, especially extensive use of interlacing to form repeat patterns. The geometric patterns were generated by continuously crossing and overlapping bands that determined the structure of the pattern. The interlacing and its close association with late antique art is well researched as well as is its continuum into the early Islamic period, especially Umayyad art.¹²

Is the Museum's entry register correct by stating the TM cover was a Mamluk textile? There are several surviving textiles that are informative about the textile aesthetic of the Mamluk period.¹³ The design layout displaying lattice creating ogival spaces seen on the TM cover is also characteristic of silk textiles from Mamluk period. The aesthetic of using curvilinear elements in combination with very geometric shapes as seen in the TM cover are also present in the Mamluk silk textiles.

Materially, structurally, and aesthetically, on the other hand, the TM cover fits closely with the 8th to 9th century and even earlier Egyptian or Syrian textiles as well as with recovered mosaics from that period rather than the Mamluk textiles. Thus, it more likely was woven in a period between the 7th-10th century, rather than the 13th-14th century. It might be a little later than the Katoen Natie and David collection examples and could be dated to the 10th or 11th century based on its more sophisticated lattice design. If the TM cover were a 10th- or 11th-century textile, it would belong to Umayyad or Abbasid period Egypt or Syria, not Mamluk.

Other textiles dated to the 10th century that exhibit similar design elements but are attributed beyond Egypt are from further to the east towards Iran. Tri-foil design elements, similar to the floral sprigs significant to the TM cover, are also observable on textiles attributed to 10th-century Iran.¹⁴

There are still more facts to unearth to piece the puzzle together to make sense of the Textile Museum cover and the context it was made and used. So, I invite challenge, and I believe future discoveries will no doubt make changes and additions necessary. What is undeniably true so far is that these seemingly little connected textile types may help us understand how textile motifs and design forms might have moved from one to another type from one culture to another, from one part of the world to another, and from one period to another. Artistic traditions are not developed in isolation but rather in response to contemporaneous political and cultural climates

¹¹ The palace is associated with the Umayyad caliph, Hisham bin 'Abd al-Malik (r. AH 105–25 / AD 724–43) and by some scholars with Caliph al-Walid bin Yazid (r. AH 125–6 / AD 743–4). Because of its association with Hashim, it is sometimes called *Qasr Hisham* (or Hisham's Palace). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hisham%27s_Palace, accessed on April 10, 2018.

¹² See Trilling, James. *Medieval Interlacing Ornament: The Making of a Cross-cultural Idiom*, *Arte Medievale*, volume 2, issue 9 (1995), 59-86 (Roma: Istituto Della Enciclopedia Italiana, Fondata da Giovanni Treccani) and Rogers, *Early Islamic Textiles* for further discussion about interlace designs.

¹³ Mamluk Sultanate spanned what is now Egypt, Palestine, and into Syria from 1250 to 1517. See Mackie, Louise, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th –21st Century* (Cleveland, New Haven, and London: The Cleveland Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2015), 240-75 for Mamluk textiles.

¹⁴ Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 129-65.

and existing geographic realities. Examining these factors and looking beyond a single type of textile or medium are of paramount importance when understanding and evaluating textiles.

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