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## FOUR EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MONUMENTAL ETHIOPIAN TABLET- WOVEN SILK CURTAINS\*

by  
Michael Gervers

In April 1868, a British expeditionary force led by Sir Robert Napier, laid siege to the Ethiopian King Tewodros in his highland fortress of Mäqdäla. Following a brief encounter, the king committed suicide on 13 April and the fortress fell into British hands.<sup>1</sup> Among the objects subsequently retrieved from Tewodros' treasury was a large tablet-woven curtain, and several panels from similar curtains, all made of heavy, thick, spun silk. One of the panels (BM1) was immediately acquired for the British Museum by Mr. Richard R. Holmes, of the Department of Manuscripts.<sup>2</sup>

The British Museum's Department of Ethnography acquired another panel (BM2) in 1973 from a descendent of Major-General Charles M. Griffiths who had also taken part in the expedition.<sup>3</sup> A third hanging, an entire curtain consisting of three panels, is presently in the Textile Department of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. It was loaned to the ROM before 1914 by Colonel George Augustus Sweny, and entered the institution's collections definitively in 1922. Sweny, too, had participated in the siege. He understood that this curtain had served as a screen separating the sanctuary in "the ancient cathedral at Gondar" from the body of the church.<sup>4</sup>

To date, only the ROM-piece (Fig. 1) has undergone a thorough physical analysis.<sup>5</sup> This shows that over 350 tablets incorporating more than 1,400 twisted silk threads were used to produce a single panel.<sup>6</sup> The monumental dimensions of the panels, measuring between 520 cms and 535 cms in length and 60 cms to 70 cms in width, make them the largest known tablet-woven fabrics in the world.<sup>7</sup> The colours are predominantly red, yellow and indigo blue, with blue-green and yellow-brown prominent in the left-hand panel. A largely deteriorated strip of bleached white warp threads provides a background for the middle third of the central panel. In terms of colour arrangement and iconography, that part is the most significant section of the entire curtain. The dominant fabric structure is a double-faced weave with three-span floats in alternate alignment.

Like the central panel of the ROM hanging, BM1 is divided into three vertical sections (Fig. 2). Designs are mostly rendered in red against a yellow background, while narrow blue stripes delineate the middle section and define the weft edges. Also like the ROM example, the middle section, which represents fully half the width of the panel, uses bleached white thread for the background warp. This white, probably the result of a milder bleaching agent, remains intact, leaving the woven pattern well preserved and distinct. Three silk cords are attached horizontally and one vertically. They still bear the occasional metal rings from which bells almost certainly once hung. The assumption that the panel was the central section of a tripartite hanging is confirmed by the short, broken threads discernible at the weft edges by which side panels were formerly attached.

The composition of BM2 (Fig. 3) is divided into five distinct vertical strips by four narrow turquoise bands, and further divided into nine unequal sections bearing woven ornamental motifs which can be compared with those in the ROM hanging, notably the vertical stripes, the small diamond network, the checker-board, zigzags and, in its centre, two bands with double rhombuses. The first four strips have alternating red and yellow

and red and white threads, while the last is made of blue-green and yellow threads with some red. The over-bleached white threads have suffered the same fate as those in the ROM's central panel.

BM1 and the ROM "triptych" are decorated with figural scenes woven between a variety of ornamental patterns. The frontally arranged composition of BM1 is divided into six superimposed registers. In the centre of the uppermost register is an enthroned king wearing a rich vestment and a turban-like head-dress embellished with a cross and delineated by an applied blue silk cord. The absence of hands and feet suggests that he is seated cross-legged with his hands under the garment. The throne stands on a platform under a canopy and is covered with a fringed textile. On either side of the king stands an angel with stylised wings wearing a long robe ornamented with crosses.

A queen is positioned in an architectural frame directly beneath the king. She is clothed in a long, diamond-patterned, fringed tunic and court-style shoes with upturned toes. Around her neck hangs an applied blue cord, or mätāb.<sup>8</sup> Her ornamental cylindrical crown, the zäwd, surmounted by a cross and decorated with filigrees and pendants in the form of small bells, is of a type worn by Ethiopian rulers during the 17th and early 18th centuries.<sup>9</sup> The queen is accompanied by four female attendants holding whisks and cased manuscripts. Below her, a prince stands under a canopy or an architectural frame. He wears a long decorated robe, a mätāb, court slippers and a diadem. Three of the four flanking guards or courtiers wear three-quarter-length trousers and Ethiopian warriors' lion-skin head-dresses, and hold staff-crosses. The fourth bears neither staff nor head-dress.

Three subsequent registers group warriors wearing the same type of trousers, but differing in their attributes. Those in the first rank bear curved swords (the šotel) and present staff-crosses. The next four warriors hold shields on their left arms and a pair of spears with blades topped by a protective leather cover in their right hands. They also wear a lamd, or lion-skin cape. The last five figures are fusiliers armed with swords, cartridge-belts and matchlock guns.

Although technically and artistically somewhat less accomplished, the central panel of the ROM curtain is generally similar to BM1 and may be influenced by it. It consists of four figural registers. Uppermost stand three bearded ecclesiastics. They wear cone-shaped crowns, called aklil, and pectoral crosses, and hold hand-crosses with a pierced diamond-shaped design. In the centre of the second register is an orant queen whose stance, character and attributes are strikingly similar to those appearing in register 2 of BM1. She is flanked by two female orant attendants clothed in long garments. Below them, in the third register, an enthroned king sits, presumably cross-legged, under a canopy with his hands raised in praise. Although the fabric is badly deteriorated, he appears to wear a diadem, like the princely figure holding a similar position below the queen in BM1. Less successful than the throne in BM1, this one is also covered with a long, fringed textile. The king is flanked by two guards holding staff-crosses. In the lowest register are three sword-bearers closely resembling those in BM1. Each has his right hand raised and wears a head-dress combed upward in strands. A staff-cross stands before each warrior. The left and central figures are also associated with whisks, attributes of Ethiopian high-ranking officials.

It seems that this central panel is an abridged attempt to reproduce the figural registers of BM1 and also reflects a change in patronage and perhaps political succession. The king and angels of BM1 have been replaced by ecclesiastics. The queen retains an identical position in both panels, but the standing prince of BM1 has been replaced by an enthroned king. It would be unusual for a queen to appear hierarchically above her king, unless she were acting as a regent for a minor. As will be seen, there is a historical case in the Gondarene period which corresponds to this situation.

The upper of two figural scenes in the left-hand panel shows a person riding, or standing beside, a lion or lioness. The group is flanked by a pair of confronting open-bill storks. The lower scene represents processional crosses, hand-crosses and censers rendered in considerable detail. The composition is centred around a large diamond-shaped processional cross notable for its pattern of interwoven squares and the elaborate supporting arm at its base. The small, square cross attached to its top is flanked by two others. Immediately below and to the left and right of these are a green and a red square which find their counterparts in the crucifixion scene in the right-hand panel. Under the squares are two pairs of decorative hand-crosses and, below them, four processional crosses similar in form to the central cross, but smaller. These are followed by a row of seven censers, all but one of which are shown with bells attached along the supporting chains of the vessel. At the bottom are eight small crosses with slender handles and cube-shaped bases.

The figural scene in the upper part of the right-hand panel represents a religious ceremony. In the centre, a celebrant holds above his head a Gospel book marked with a cross. He wears typical liturgical vestments: a flat cap and a large cape, called the *lanqa*, with elongated flaps hanging down his sides. Two assistants accompany him; one, wearing a crown and a *lanqa*, holds a musical rattle known as the *sistrum*. The figures are separated from each other by two groups of censers and hand-crosses. The precisely rendered censers, each supported by three chains to which bells are attached, appear with their covers raised. Flanking hand-crosses inserted at the top are of the developed diamond-shaped type, while those at the bottom are of simple Roman form.

The lower scene on this panel represents the crucified Christ wearing a tunic which extends below his knees. Although the cross itself is absent, streamlets of blood can be seen flowing from his feet. The three crosses over him are a device for marking Golgotha, while the irregular outlines on either side could be identified as the hills Gareb and Agra. Christ is flanked by two soldiers wearing short tunics and pointed helmets, and carrying small, triangular shields. Conceived as evil persons, they are represented in profile according to Ethiopian pictorial tradition.<sup>10</sup> The blue rectangle above each of their heads may be interpreted as a symbol of the darkness which, according to the Gospel, immediately preceded Christ's death. Behind the soldiers stand two orant figures who wear long tunics and have hair hanging halfway down their necks. They bear some resemblance to the flanking female figures in the second register of the central panel, but may represent the two thieves between whom Christ was crucified. Above them can be seen a green and a red rectangle representing the Sun, which according to an apocryphal text became dark at the moment of Jesus' death, and the Moon, which turned into blood.<sup>11</sup>

The elaborate representation of crosses and censers which appear at the bottom of the left-hand panel may be seen as a symbolic representation of Christ and the apostles.

The largest cross would thus represent Christ, the two pairs of flanking processional crosses the four evangelists, and the eight hand crosses below, the rest of the apostles. Linking this scene with the Crucifixion scene opposite are the three small crosses which appear above the main cross in the left-hand panel and over the head of the crucified Christ in the right-hand panel. Equally important is the fact that in both scenes the Sun and the Moon are represented as green and red rectangles.

The last scene on the side panels of the ROM hanging, representing a man with a lion between a pair of confronting storks, remains somewhat enigmatic. The obviously religious programme points to a saintly figure. The legends of the saints contain numerous references to hermits and anchorites who kept tame lions which frequently assisted them in their arduous life in the desert. The *Vita*<sup>12</sup> of the 15th-century abba Samuel states that he cured animals, including lions, that came to his hermitage. Grateful beasts allowed him to ride on their backs - a story which inspired his most popular representation.<sup>13</sup>

The monumental dimensions of these hangings, the double-sided weaving technique used to produce them, and the obviously religious iconography, strongly suggest that they originally served as church furnishings, most probably curtains separating the sanctuary from the other parts of the interior. The iconographical programme and the precise identification of the utilitarian and ceremonial objects appearing on them indicate that the ROM and BM curtains, at least, may well have been manufactured during the so-called Gondarene epoch of Ethiopian history, i.e. between 1630 and 1730.<sup>14</sup>

The use of expensive, heavy silk further suggests royal patronage, most probably by the very individuals who are represented on BM1 and the ROM central panel. Although their identification is not certain, there is good reason to believe that they are King Bäkaffa, his wife Menteuab and their son Iyyassu II. Bäkaffa, son of the famous King Iyyassu the Great, reigned between 1721 and 1730. Like his father he supported the economical and cultural development of the country. His wife, Wälättä Giyorgis (Menteuab), was herself a great patron of literature and the arts. Her political influence came to the fore only after Bäkaffa's death when she was the regent during the minority of their son Iyyassu.<sup>15</sup> We know that Bäkaffa built the magnificent church of the Archangel Raphael in Gondar. Menteuab founded a convent and church at Qusquam near Gondar. It is quite conceivable that the hangings were commissioned for one or the other of them.

An indication that other such hangings were once current in Gondar is provided by Eduard Rüppell's description in the 1830s of the two-storey, circular oratory built a century earlier by Queen Menteuab beside her palace at Qusquam. He noted traces of the heavy silk door hangings and alcove curtains which once adorned its interior.<sup>16</sup> Despite the many references to silk hangings in the historical sources, this is the only one which describes the material as being "heavy". This quality is one of the striking characteristics of the BM and ROM panels. If the remnants cited by Rüppell were a product of the same workshop, there is reason to think that Menteuab at least, not to mention Bäkaffa and Iyyassu II, ordered similar materials to hang in other churches in Gondar.

Further evidence links the production of these silk hangings to a workshop active at the time of this royal family. There is in the British Library a lavishly illustrated ms. which was made either for King Bäkaffa, for his queen or for his son and heir. In order to turn to each miniature, a piece of silk yarn has been passed through a small hole in each folio and knotted, to serve as a tab and protect the manuscript itself. That silk yarn, in

blue, green, red and yellow, is of remarkably similar quality and colours as the silk used in the hangings.<sup>17</sup>

Such temporal and material associations would suggest that the royal figures appearing on BM1 may be King Bäkaffa, Queen Menteuab and their son Iyyassu. Those in the second and third registers of the central ROM panel may be the queen and her son. Following Bäkaffa's death in 1730, Menteuab acted as regent during Iyyassu's long minority. According to the chronicle of his reign, it was Iyyassu who not only acknowledged her as the real ruler of the country, but who also declared that she should wear his crown: "Make my mother reign, crown her with my crown because without her my reign cannot go on ...."<sup>18</sup> Seen in this light, it may be postulated that BM1 was produced under King Bäkaffa's patronage somewhere between 1721 and 1730, and that the central panel of the ROM hanging was ordered by Queen Menteuab sometime before Iyyassu II reached his majority in about 1738. The evidence reflects the posture of the chronicle, which makes it quite clear that although Iyyassu was the legitimate successor to the throne, the reins of government were held by his mother, who wore the crown.

There is a postscript to this story. In 1995, Paul Henze discovered another of these curtains in the rural monastery of Abba Garima, near Adowa, in the province of Tigray in northern Ethiopia (Fig. 4). Like its ROM counterpart, it consists of three panels and dye analysis performed by the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa has shown that the dyes compare favourably with those from the silk in BL OR ms 590 and with those in the BM2 panel. Evidence is insufficient at this stage to conclude that the silk for all these hangings was prepared in the same imperial workshop, but the existence of the Abba Garima piece leads us to suspect that field research will bring other examples to light and that as their numbers grow the circumstances surrounding their manufacture will become increasingly clear.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> TREVENEN JAMES HOLLAND AND HENRY M. HOZIER: *Record of the expedition to Abyssinia*, London [1870], I, pp. 12-13, 15, 56, 229-31 and II, pp. 22, 56-8, 72; S. RUBENSON: *King of Kings, Tewodros of Ethiopia*, Oxford [1966], pp. 67-89.

<sup>2</sup> O.M. DALTON: *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum*, London [1901], pp. 181-82. There, the hanging is erroneously identified as an altar-cloth, a mistake deriving from the Museum's hand-written Register of Acquisitions for 1868 where, among the objects "obtained in Abyssinia by R.R. Holmes Esq.", it is described as an "altar cloth of woven silk in various colours with fringe at each end [and] six sets of figures (chiefly three) down the centre: borders on each side with six single frames. L. 16ft 2, W. 2ft." Holmes was given £1,000, apparently to purchase on behalf of the Realm whatever objects he deemed worthy of the Museum's collections.

<sup>3</sup> British Museum, Register of acquisitions.

<sup>4</sup> Sweny goes on to relate that his information “was obtained from both Abyssinians and Europeans”. Of the former, he cites only Beru Goshee (Berru Gošhu), dādjadj of Godjam and father-in-law of Tewodros, whom the king had taken prisoner during his campaign against Gondar in 1854. Of the latter, he mentions the traveller and missionary DR JOHANN LUDWIG KRAPP, author of Travels, researches and missionary labours during an eighteen years residence in Eastern Africa, London [1860, rpt. 1968] (for Gondar, see pt. III, chs. II and III).

<sup>5</sup> This analysis was commissioned by the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, prior to the much-needed conservation of the item which took place in 1993 and 1994 (see the report of M. FRAME, The Gondar Hanging: Structure and Construction, The Canadian Conservation Institute, Ottawa [1993]).

<sup>6</sup> Some of the widest examples of tablet weaving to have survived derive from northern Europe and belong to the first millennium AD (P. COLLINGWOOD: The Techniques of Tablet Weaving, London [1982], pp. 12-18).

<sup>7</sup> ROM (reg. no. 926.26.1): 535 cm long, 212 cm wide (consists of three 70 cm wide panels sewn together); BM1 (reg. no. 1868.10-1.22): 520 cm long, 60 cm wide (central section of a textile originally similar in format to that of the ROM); BM2 (reg. no. 1973 Af 38.1): 536 cm long, 60 cm wide.

<sup>8</sup> In Ethiopia, the mātāb is worn only by Christians (TADDESSE TAMRAT: “The Matab”, Bulletin of the Ethnological Society, University College of Addis Ababa, 9 [1959], pp. 38-43).

<sup>9</sup> R. BRUS: “Ethiopian Crowns”, African Arts, 8:4 [1974], pp. 8-13, 84.

<sup>10</sup> W. STAUDE, “Profilregel in der christlichen Malerei Äthiopiens und die Furcht vor dem ‘Bösen Blick’”, Archiv für Völkerkunde, 9 [1954], pp. 116-61.

<sup>11</sup> On the Anaphora Pilati, see K. VON TISCHENDORF: Evangelia apocrypha, Leipzig [1967], pp. 248, 310.

<sup>12</sup> B. TURAYEV, ed.: Vita Samuelis Valdebani, in: Monumenta Aethiopiae Hagiologica, Zapiski Istoriko-filologičeskogo Fakulteta Imp. S.-Peterburgskago Universiteta, 65/2 [1902], pp. 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also J. LEROY: Ethiopian Painting in the Late Middle Ages and under the Gondar Dynasty, London [1964], p. 33, fig. 11; STANISLAUS CHOJNACKI: Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting, Wiesbaden [1983], fig. 133; Mensch und Geschichte in Äthiopiens Volksmalerei, Innsbruck [1985], fig. 97.

<sup>14</sup> J. DORESSE: La vie quotidienne des Éthiopiens chrétiens aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, Paris [1972].

<sup>15</sup> E.A.W. BUDGE: A History of Ethiopia, London [1928] pp. 443-59.

<sup>16</sup> “Hier und da gibt noch eine Spur von schweren seidenen Thürvorhängen und Alkoven-Gardinen” (EDUARD RÜPPELL: Reise in Abyssinien, Frankfurt am Main [1840], II, p. 116).

<sup>17</sup> ELIZABETH MOFFATT, “Analysis of the Dyes on Silk Fibres from Three Ethiopian Artifacts”, unpublished Canadian Conservation Institute Analytical Report, ARL 3534, file no. 5105-2, Ottawa [2 August 1996], pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> IGNAZIO GUIDI, ed.: Annales regum Iyyasu II et Iyo’as, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores aethiopici, series altera, VI, Rome [1912; rpt. Louvain, 1955], pp.41-3.

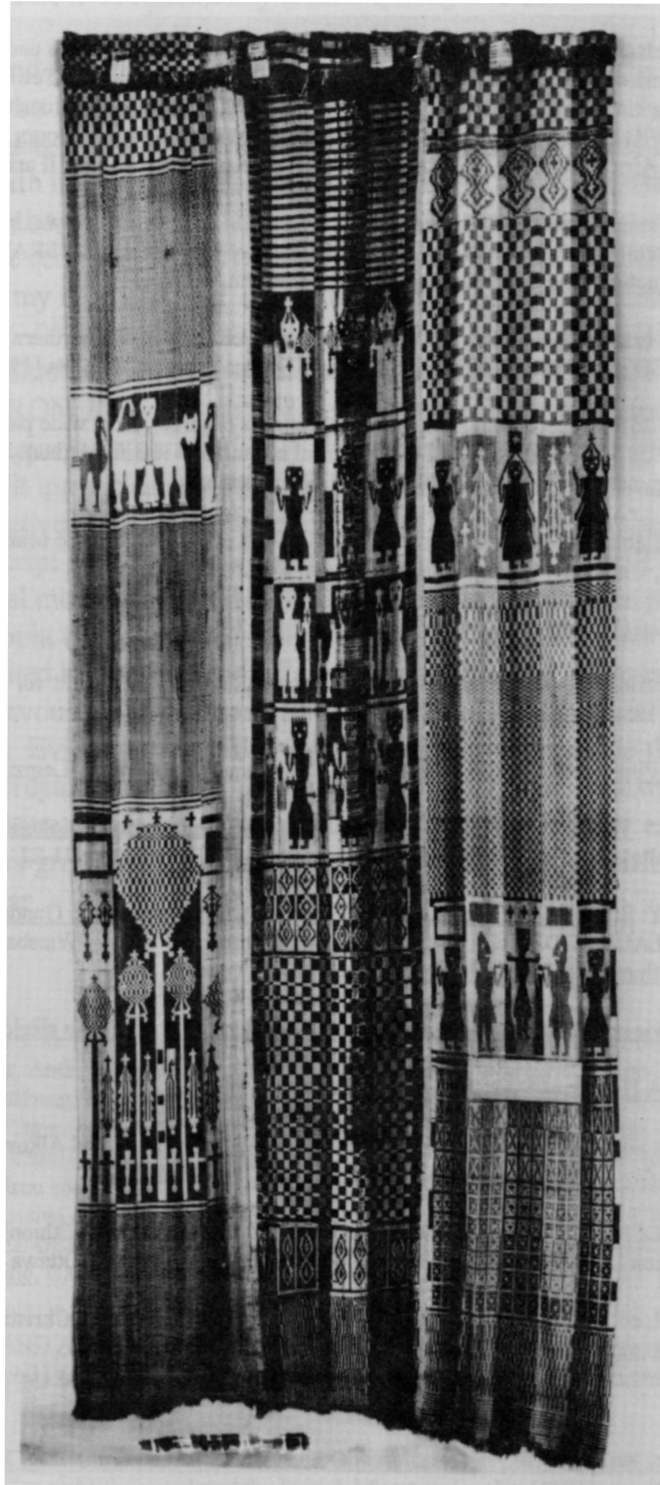


Fig. 1. Three-paneled, tablet-woven silk hanging from Ethiopia. Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum: Textile Department, reg. no. 926.26.1 (photo: R.O.M.).



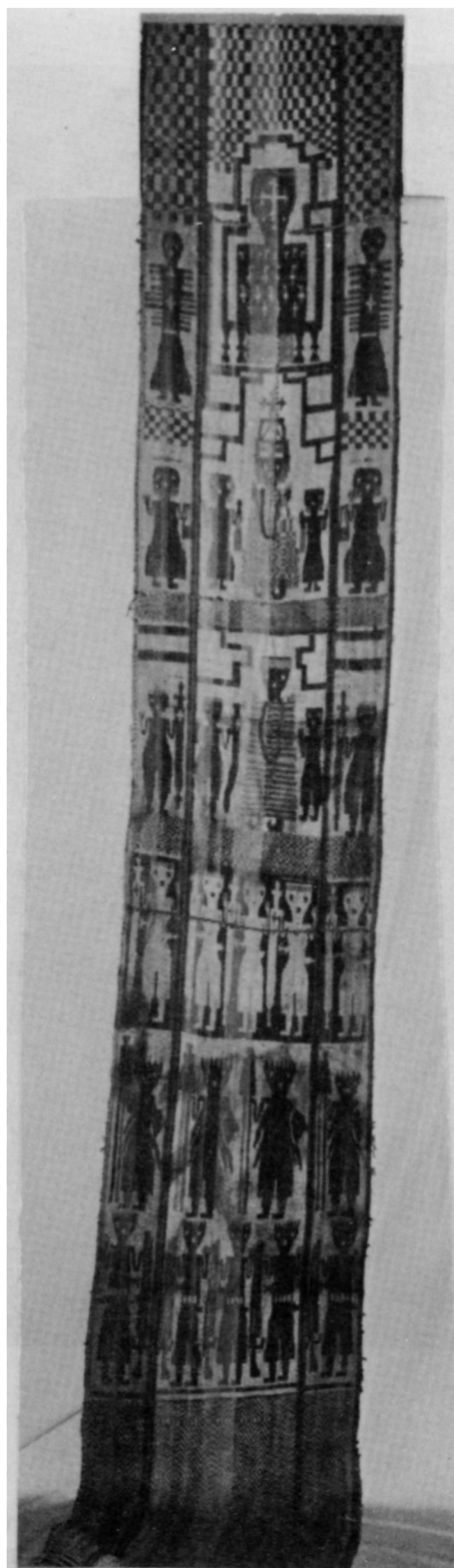


Fig. 2. Central panel of an Ethiopian silk hanging with six registers depicting a royal family and armed attendants. London, British Museum: Ethnography Department, reg. no. 1868.10-1.22 (photo, 1995: Michael Gervers).

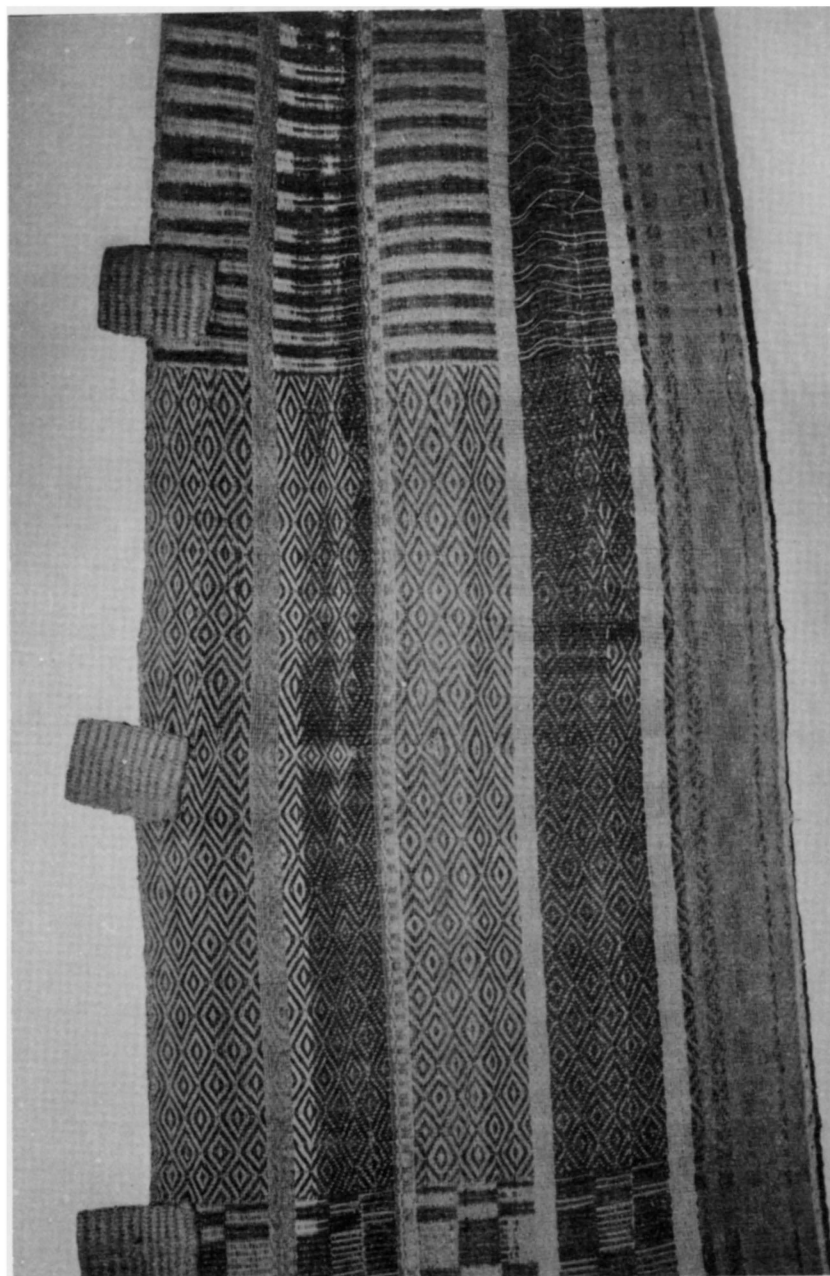


Fig. 3 Detail of a patterned silk hanging from Ethiopia showing deterioration of bleached white threads (second vertical strip from left) and tabs for supporting a rod so the piece could hang horizontally. London, British Museum: Ethnography Department, reg. no. 1973 Af 38.1 (photo, 1995: Michael Gervers).

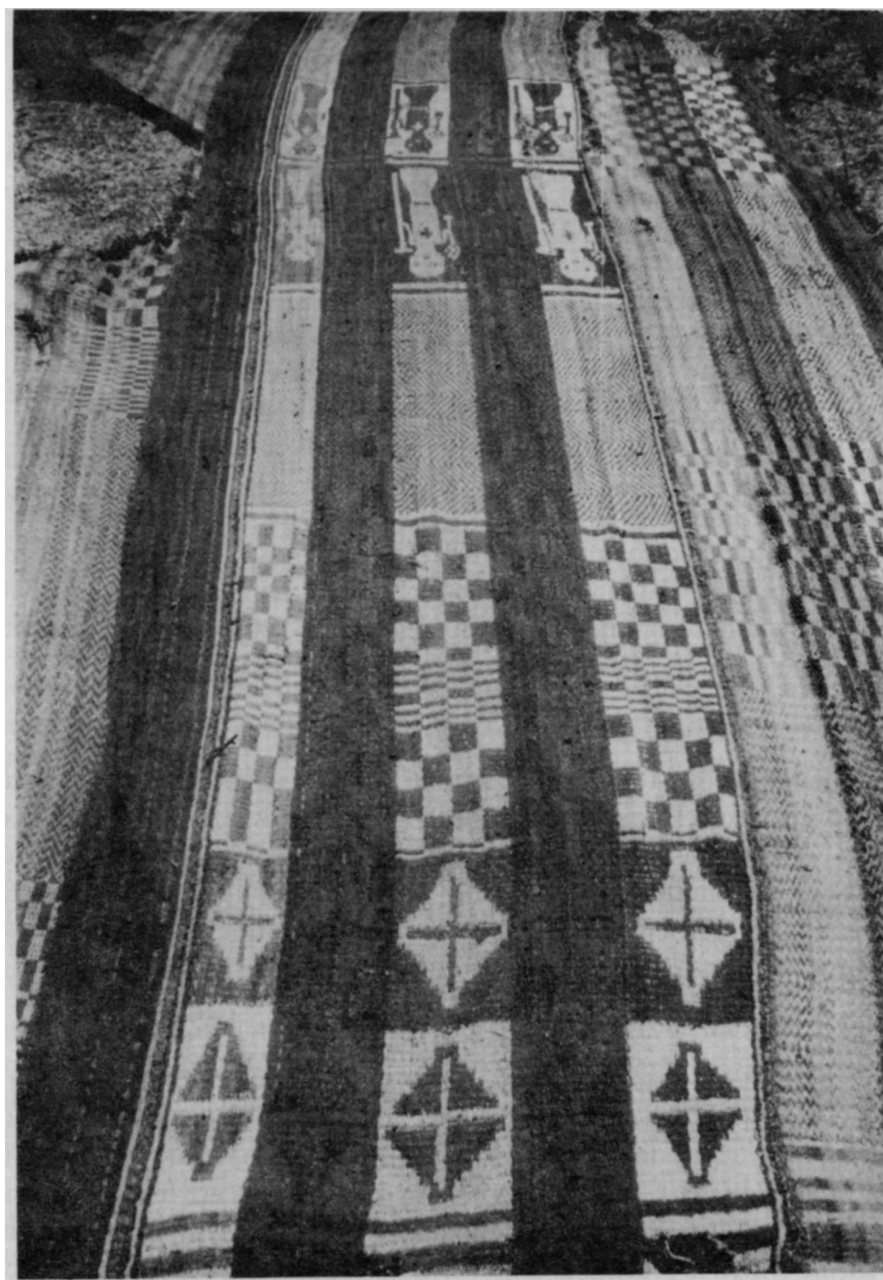


Fig. 4. Three-paneled silk hanging from the monastery of Abba Garima, near Adowa, Tigray Province, Ethiopia (photo, 1995: Paul Henze).