

Society for Arabian Studies Monographs No. 8

Series editors D. Kennet & St J. Simpson

Connected Hinterlands

Proceedings of Red Sea Project IV

Held at the University of Southampton
September 2008

Edited by

Lucy Blue
John Cooper
Ross Thomas
Julian Whitewright

BAR International Series 2052
2009

This title published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED
England
bar@archaeopress.com
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2052
Society for Arabian Studies Monographs No. 8

*Connected Hinterlands: Proceedings of Red Sea Project IV held at the University of Southampton
September 2008*

© Archaeopress and the individual authors 2009

DTP by Athena Trakadas

ISBN 978 1 4073 0631 5

Printed in England by Blenheim Colour Ltd

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd
122 Banbury Road
Oxford
OX2 7BP
England
bar@hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from www.archaeopress.com

Textiles with Writing from Quseir al-Qadim – Finds from the Southampton Excavations 1999-2003

Fiona J. L. Handley & Anne Regourd

Introduction

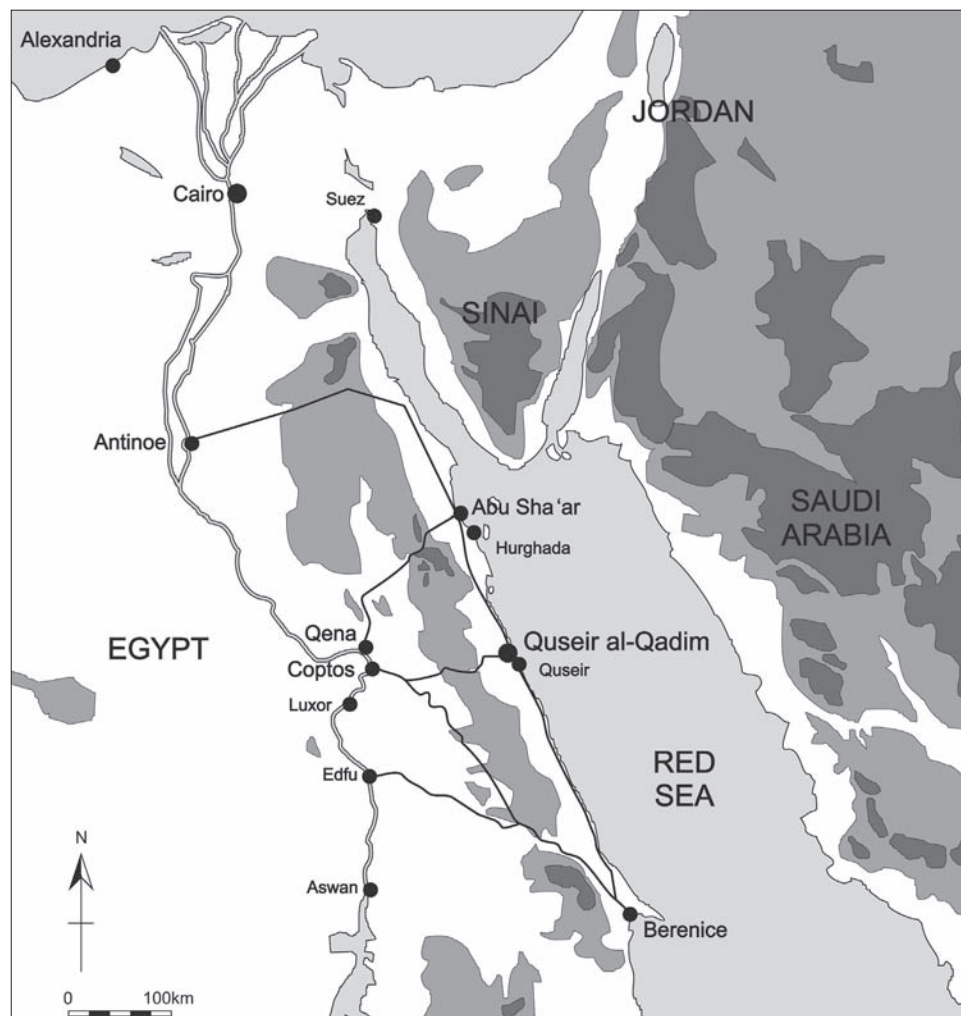
During the course of the excavations at Quseir al-Qadim on Egypt's Red Sea coast (Figure 15:1), around 7,000 pieces of textiles dating from the Islamic period (11th-13th centuries) were found. A small proportion of these were decorated with writing, and some were written upon. This paper looks at these textiles and examines the relationship between text and textiles from the perspectives of language, decoration and use.

Quseir al-Qadim had two periods of occupation; it was a Roman port during the 1st-3rd centuries AD when it was known as Myos Hormos, and later it was an 11th-16th century Islamic port known as Quseir. The site is well known through medieval documentary sources as being the port of the inland city of Quft and was the second most important port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt after 'Aydāb. It has

been the subject of two archaeological campaigns, first by a team from the Oriental Institute of Chicago from 1979-1984,¹ the second by the University of Southampton from 1999-2003.² It is the Islamic textiles collected during the latter campaign that are the subject of this paper.

Like many other sites in Egypt, the finds from Quseir are rich in organic materials. The arid climate, combined with the practice of depositing rubbish in deep fills called *sebakhs*, has meant that preservation at the site has been superb for both periods. While a site of comparable size in Europe would be considered lucky to have evidence for a handful of textiles, at Quseir 7,000 examples of Islamic textiles were examined during the Southampton excavations alone. The majority of these are linens and cottons, typically in blue checked patterns, as well as a wide range of coarse bast and woollen fabrics. Similarly, a

Figure 15:1. Location of Quseir al-Qadim in Egypt (after Peacock & Blue 2006: Fig. 1.1).



1. For the University of Chicago excavations see Whitcomb & Johnson 1979, 1982a; 1982b.
2. For the University of Southampton excavations see Peacock & Blue 2006, forthcoming.

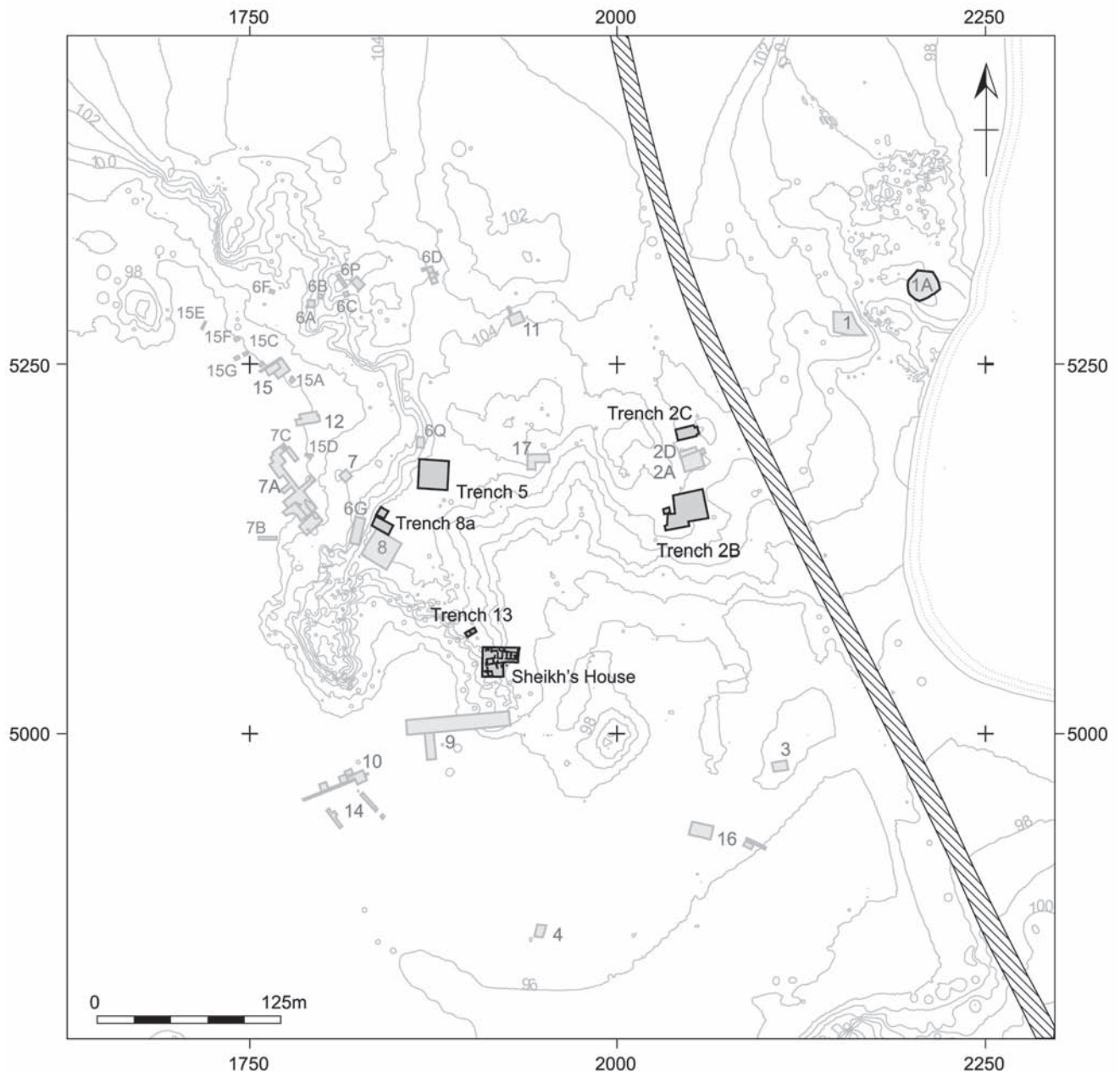


Figure 15:2. Location of the Southampton excavation trenches at Quseir (after Peacock & Blue 2006: Fig. 5.1).

huge number of paper fragments in Arabic were recorded, around 1000 in the most recent excavations, adding to the thousands of fragments uncovered during the Chicago excavations, including at least 871 from an area in the centre of the site that has come to be known as the Sheikh's House.³ The textiles presented here, like most of the Islamic textiles at the site, came from deposits of Islamic rubbish that were uncovered in Trenches 5, 13, and 2B.⁴

3. Burke & Whitcomb 2007: 86.

4. For an overview of the textiles from the excavation see Handley forthcoming.

One example came from Trench 2C and one from 8a (Figure 15:2). Out of the total number of Islamic textiles, only a very small proportion, 13 examples, have writing on them.

This paper draws together research from what are traditionally two different finds groups. Rather than publishing the material as inscribed textiles, or as writing on a different medium to the norm, this collaborative paper gives us the opportunity of exploring different facets of the practices of writing, textile creation, and textile use, based on close examination of how the writing was created, and the material evidence of how the writing was treated after it was created.

Handwriting on Textiles

Fragment 03T106

Fragment 03T106 (Figure 15:3) was a find from Trench 13, one of the richest Islamic seabas excavated at the site in 2002 and 2003. The trench was rich in both textiles and documents, including a lot of writing paraphernalia, and evidence, in the form of seam trimmings and long triangles of fabric, that a tailor was working nearby. However, it is unlikely that either the shape of the textile or the writing on it originated in the immediate vicinity. The textile is a typical example of the majority of textiles found at Islamic Quṣeir; it is in a coarsely woven bast fabric with a thick feel, making it rather inflexible but strong and hard wearing. This was the fabric typically used as sacking for bulky products. One of the main roles of Quṣeir during this period was trade in foodstuffs, with documentary sources identifying Yemen and India as destinations,⁵ although Jeddah would also seem likely. Quṣeir must have served a role for the re-bagging of broken sacks and perhaps changing the bulky goods into bigger sacks for ease of transport, or into smaller bags to serve the needs of individuals. This fragment is probably a remnant from this process. How-

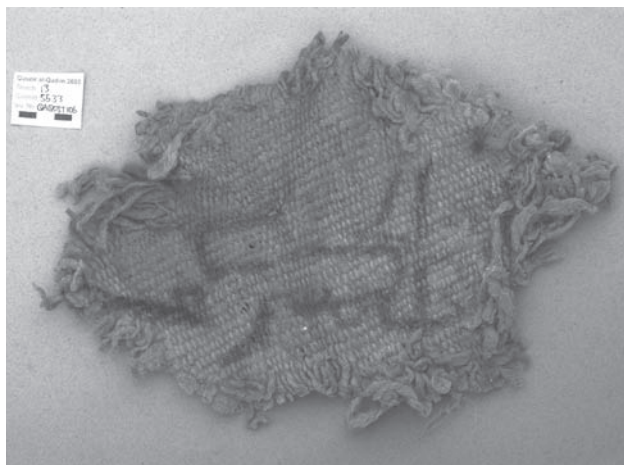
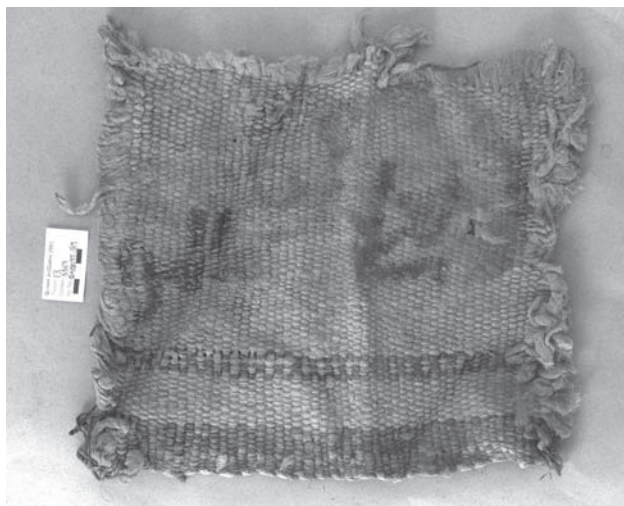


Figure 15:3. 03T106, a fragment with writing.

Figure 15:4. 03T189, a fragment with writing.



ever, it is not simply a discarded fragment. The piece has been partly ripped and partly cut from a larger piece of textile, suggesting that someone has cut out this fragment of writing to keep. Goitein, in his analysis of the Geniza documents, refers to sacks being labelled with patches, bearing the name of perhaps the sender, receiver or merchant, together with a religious formula, and this may be an example of such a patch. However, the writing remains unread, though Goitein also points out that, as many of the porters were illiterate, figurative designs were also used.⁶

Fragment 03T189

Fragment 03T189 (Figure 15:4) is another example of a textile with handwriting from Trench 13, from a late Ayyubid context.⁷ It too is in a coarse bast fabric that is typical of sacking, although the incorporation of two simple brown warp stripes suggest that this may have been originally intended as a slightly more decorative textile.

⁸[...] الو [...]

The writing on the right is too faded to be read, and is not complete on the left, but its presence on such a utilitarian piece of textile suggests that this would again relate to trade, perhaps giving the name of a person or the religious formulaic preceding it, as in 03T106.⁹ The textile's function as the bearer of information was followed by it being cut up and reused, cutting through the writing on the left of the fragment, and possibly on the right too. The presence of inserted strings along two of the edges including the edge where the writing was cut through, show that it was tied to something else, possibly as a labelling patch.¹⁰

The fragment finally ended up discarded in Trench 13, but we may have some clues as to who threw it there. Other textile fragments in the trench show that this was where a tailor disposed of scraps of fabric. Notably, many of these were folded in a particular way, leaving a distinctive pattern in the unfolded cloth, which this fragment also has. Perhaps it was kept for a while in the tailor's workshop in case a piece of coarse sacking was needed for some job, and then folded and thrown away when it was decided it was not going to be used again.

Fragment 03T040

Fragment 03T040 (Figure 15:5) was also a find from Trench 13. The textile is a fragment of plain, ordinary cotton fabric, that has been torn, rather than cut into shape,

5. See Guo 2004: 58ff.

6. Goitein 1967: 336-337. Thanks to Prof. Jean-Michel Mouton (École Pratique des Hautes Études, IV^e section) who kindly pointed us towards this reference during his seminar held in Paris, where we presented the paper "Textiles de Quṣeir al-Qadim" on the 2nd November 2006.

7. Regourd forthcoming.

8. [...] الو [...] is also possible.

9. See Goitein 1967: 336-337, in his chapter "Packing, Shipping, and Storage".

10. Goitein 1967: 336-337, on the practice of putting patches on bales.

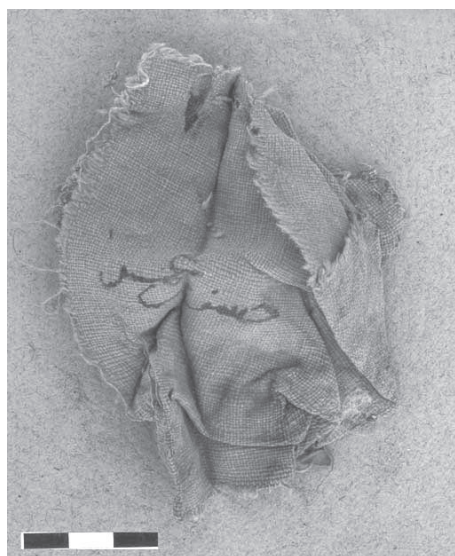
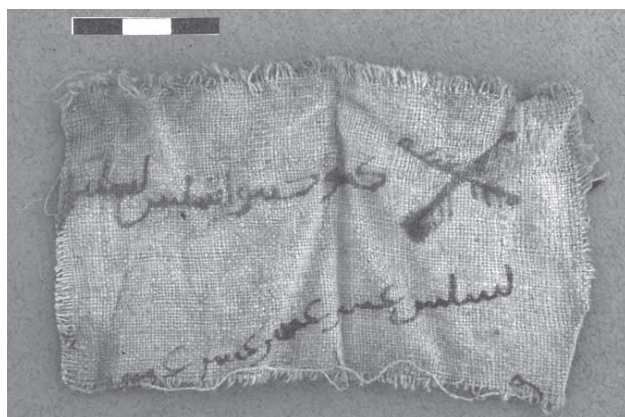


Figure 15:5. 03T040, a fragment with writing.

Figure 15:6. 03T107, a talisman.



measuring 11 cm x 18.5 cm. There are some faded blue marks which suggest it was also used as a cleaning cloth at some point. The black mark towards the top of the fragment is also typical of cloths used by scribes as they cleaned their nibs, and this is perhaps contemporary with the fragment of writing. There are three words visible that form a complete personal name, Ḥasan b. ‘Umar. No other reference to anyone called Ḥasan b. ‘Umar has been found in the other documents at Quṣeir, so we have no further documentary evidence regarding him. Moreover, the name appears here without its *nisba* – a name comprising an ethnic or geographical attribute – which does not help in identifying him. It does indicate that the man was well known to the people to whom the inscription was directed at the time the writing was made, since his *ism* (given name) and his *kunya* (agnomen or nickname) – that is, the two parts Ḥasan + b. ‘Umar – were enough to identify him.

The fabric is deeply creased through the middle of the writing, and there is a small stitch towards the top which

suggests that it may have been made into another object such as a small bag, but also means that this crease was reinforced and the piece could never be completely folded flat. The other folds are probably random. There are two possible interpretations of this. Either the writing or the name itself was of little consequence and ended up being reused on the inside of another textile object, or that the fold and the stitch somehow relate to the name. It seems unlikely that such a small, rather dirty fragment such as this would be reused, and thus it would seem that the fold and the stitch refer to the name, enclosing and protecting it.

This suggests that there is a talismanic element to this piece. Magic artefacts are not unusual in Quṣeir: some block-print amulets, and handwritten charms in Arabic on paper were uncovered,¹¹ as well as a talisman of the *ḥujāb* type, also on leather.¹² But it is worth noting here that there is an important tradition of writing talismans on cloth, and indeed on sewn garments, the best-known examples being talismanic charts and talismanic shirts or shorts. These are also made with ink, but the extant examples are usually on high quality cloth.¹³ The exceptions are contemporary talismanic shirts and shorts from West Africa, which are created on ordinary cotton fabric.¹⁴ However, in this instance this link is perhaps quite tenuous.

Fragment 03T107

A much clearer example of a talisman is this textile, 03T107 (Figure 15:6), which was also found in Trench 13 from a late Ayyubid context,¹⁵ and like the previous example is a fragment of ordinary cotton fabric, similar to that used for simple clothing. It measures 6 x 10.5 cm and the top and left edge have been cut, while the right and bottom edges have been torn. There are two features of the writing that show that this was a talisman. The first ‘X’-shaped letter, with circles at the end and spines is an indicator of a talisman. At the bottom right-hand corner, there is the upper part of a similar ‘letter’. Therefore this is a fragment of a bigger piece. The repetition of the word “‘*asr*”, which, in this magic context means “fast”, is the second feature.

11. Guo 2004: 75-82, 83-89.

12. Southampton campaign, Trench 8a, context 8251, see Phillips 2002: 73.

13. See pictures in Savage-Smith 1997: 108-116, 117-123; Baker *et al.* 1996: 228-248; Tezcan 2006; Sotheby’s 1993: 77, lot 128; *ibid.* 1995: 72, lot 65; Christie’s 1996: 56, lots 106 and 108; *ibid.* 1997: 41, lot 73; Regourd 2007: 136-137, n° 48.

14. “Le tissu employé dans les vêtements talismaniques est de deux sortes: ou bien cotonnades légères de fabrication industrielle (armure toile serrée, coton enduit *schint*, toile à patron, autres), blanches ou de couleur (blanc, rouge, noir, autres), ou bien tissage traditionnel en bandes cousues, de façon à constituer un pagne blanc, écru ou teinté en marron. Les tissus blancs, blanc écru de fabrication industrielle, prédominent”; Epelboin *et al.* 2007: 148, coll., collected in contemporary Senegal.

15. Regourd forthcoming.

The 'X'-shaped letter is made up of a *mīm* and a *ḥā'*, *mīm* being the initial of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, and *ḥā'* is the end of Allah.¹⁶ The first letter (the 'X'-shaped letter) is repeated once, the second word is repeated twice, then the third three times and the fourth, at least four times. One can therefore state that the text of the talisman is complete on its right and left sides, and that *this* text is complete, in respect of the structure of it. The second word is, tentatively, '*kammū*'(?), 'block, close the orifice,' and the third, '*salas*,' refers to a continuous flow of urine. So we have: "*Kammū li-salas! 'Asr!*" It could therefore be a talisman for someone who has a continuous flow of urine, to prevent it.¹⁷

1. [م هـ] كمو كمو؟ لسل لسل [س]
2. لسل عسر عسر عسر عسر [ر]
- (space)
3. [م هـ] ؟ [.....]

The deep crease through the writing is probably original. It was roughly central, because there is only one half of a letter missing on the left, and there would not have been a fourth repetition of a third word. The whole talisman was longer however, as the writing continues where the bottom half has been torn off. We do not know why the talisman was torn, but it might be that it was torn along another crease perpendicular to the first.

it is not clear how the fragment was used. It could have been folded and carried in a pocket or put in a case, presumably by the person with a continuous flow of urine, and then torn and discarded once it had been effective. If it formed part of a larger garment such as a shirt, then this would suggest that it would have been cut down, folded, torn and discarded after the shirt had been worn and been effective. Thousands of talismanic shirts and shorts have been collected in the main rubbish dump of Dakar, in Senegal, since the 1980s, raising the question of why these have been thrown away.¹⁸ But the piece our fragment can be most closely compared to is a piece of yellow linen, 9.5 x 7 cm, which belongs to the Erzherzog Rainer Collection at the Austrian National Library and comes from the region of Fayyūm (Egypt).¹⁹ It was found together with other artefacts in the 1870s by Sebbakhin in Madīnat al-Fayyūm (Arsinoe Krokodilopolis).²⁰ The datation by Grohmann, 2nd/8th century, is based on the style of the script.²¹ It bears an embroidered religious formula, presumably prophy-

lactic: three lines of text contain the Muslim affirmation of faith (*ṣahāda*) and a blessing for Muhammad, the Messenger of God. The catalogues referred to here suggested it is an amulet, and more recently an amulet of *ruqya* type, probably on the basis that the written text is to be spoken out loud and is an indirect invocation to God.²² Our text is of a different type of magic as it seems to be addressed to spirits (djinnns), maybe as the cause of the sickness ('bad' djinnns) or as servants of a man of magic ('good djinnns'). But what makes the Austrian example crucial for us is that it was cut off on three sides, torn on one, and may possibly have been part of a man's or woman's robe.²³ Despite these similarities, our talisman is exceptional, as no other examples of this particular formula used on cloth have been published.

Indian Trade Textiles

The talisman is a unique example of something individually produced. The following examples are very different, in that they were mass-produced, and other very similar textiles have been found across Egypt. All are examples of Indian resist decorated textiles, of which 73 were found during the Southampton excavations at Quṣeir. These are in addition to the examples found during the Chicago excavations.²⁴ Six examples uncovered during the Southampton excavation were decorated with writing. Generally, the patterns are created by block printing a resist paste onto a medium quality cotton fabric. They are then dyed with indigo creating reverse patterns including lozenges, flowers, stylised arabesques, and bands of writing. Over time, the white cotton has faded to a yellow colour, while the blue has probably faded from being an almost black colour to a dark blue. Similar textiles have been found throughout sites across Egypt, mostly from sites that were looted in the late 19th century. While they are not luxury imports, their bright colours and striking patterns meant that they entered European museum collections relatively early, and have been well studied.²⁵ The fabrics were important trade items, fulfilling the need for brightly patterned cheap furnishing (and occasionally clothing) fabrics as an alternative to the luxurious silks that are considered more typical of this time period. Some examples also include writing as part of the design, though these are in the minority. Only one example was found in the Chicago excavations at Quṣeir.²⁶ There are 39 examples of trade textiles with script in the Newberry Collection at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, though only two are comparable to the examples

16. We are grateful to Constant Hames (Paris, CNRS) for his contribution to the analysis of these types of sign, which are generally simply referred to as "caractères à lunette".

17. Cf. Al-Asyūṭī (Pseudo-), Undated, p. 183, "*Fī 'ilāj salas al-bawl*", and 185, "*Fī 'ilāj ḥuṣr al-bawl*".

18. Hames & Epelboin 1993: 239-241.

19. Ref. PERF 64, P. Bad. V 152 and P. Vindob, A. L. 27, published in: PERF: 12, no. 64; Grohmann 1934: 427, no. 152, and plate 15a; Demiri & Römer 2009: 42, no. 16, with ill.; Grohmann 1932: only in pl. Va; Klos 1955: no. 33, only listed; Hunger 1962: no. 40, only listed.

20. Communication of Carl Lucian Reinfandt, University of Vienna.

21. Grohmann 1934: 427, no. 152. Karabacek formerly proposed 3rd/9th century in PERF: 12, no. 64.

22. For comparison, see a papyrus dated through palaeography from the 3rd/9th century, borrowing some evidence on the practice of *ruqya* at that time, in David-Weill 1952, and for an overview of *ruqya*, see Fahd 1995.

23. Demiri & Römer 2009: 42, no. 16.

24. See Vogelsang-Eastwood 1989, and for further analysis of six of these pieces from a late Ayyubid context, see Burke & Whitcomb 2007.

25. See Kendrick 1924; Pfister 1938.

26. See Vogelsang-Eastwood 1989: Catalogue number 37, a cartouche containing phrase "Glory to our Lord [the sultan]".

at Quṣeir²⁷ The Collection Bouvier, a private collection, was exhibited at the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva in 1993-1994 and has two pieces directly comparable to Quṣeir examples.²⁸

Fragment 99T634

In fragment 99T634 (Figure 15:7) the edge of the printing block can be clearly seen where there is slight shifting of the pattern where the next block begins, but there is no break in the writing.

The text in Arabic seems to be:

[... بركة لصاحبه واليمن لصاحبه] واليمن
“[... Blessing] for his owner and happiness! Blessing for his owner [and happiness!] etc.”

The ‘shape’ is very similar to Collection Bouvier 1993: 315, n° 210, JFB I 128.

Fragment 03T124

Although fragmentary, the inscription on 03T124 (Figure 15:8) is an excerpt from the same text that appears on 99T634. From: “Blessing for his owner and happiness!”, only “happiness!” remains. A white circle appears at the end of the last word in Arabic as a mark for the end of the sentence. This kind of formula is normally repeated, though of course it would not be here as it is at the edge of the fabric, with the selvedge clearly visible on the left hand side. Looking at it in the context of the whole piece, the fragment comes from a long strip of 43 cm running along a selvedge. Selvedges often survive because they have slightly more robust structure than other areas of the fabric, in this case the selvedge has been formed by the final 10 warps being paired. There are holes along the length of the fabric, suggesting that this was perhaps tacked to a frame, and pulled slightly, perhaps by a breeze, thus creating bigger holes and eventually allowing a long rip to form. The wrinkles also suggest it was pulled down along its length, perhaps by being weighted at the bottom. This wear would be consistent with it being used as a curtain, nailed along one length to a frame, for example.



Figure 15:7. 99T634, a fragment of resist-dyed textile.

Fragment 03T041

Fragment 03T041 (Figure 15:9) is a long rectangular piece with a fragment of writing along one end. The word is not complete but the letters are:

[...] والك [...].

The examples from the Collection Bouvier are very helpful in confirming our reading of the article *al-* and the letter *kāf*. The upper angular shape of the *wāw*, in 03T041, is particularly noticeable to us. The repetitions of the formula (بركة لصاحبه واليمن, i.e. “Blessing for his owner and happiness!”), identified in the Collection Bouvier JFB I 128 and I 127 and in the Quṣeir example 99T634, suggests that the formula on this fragment was also repeated.

The script of fragment 03T041, like those of fragments 99T634, 03T124, 03T108 and 99T480, is very similar to that in Pfister.²⁹ In particular, the rosette between the quadrants and strokes, which appears on the opposite side of the inscription in fragment 03T041 is exactly the same as the rosette positioned below the inscription in Pfister.

The writing takes up just a small part of the object, which measures 31 cm in length (see Figure 15:9). Wrinkle marks in the fabric show that after this was torn into a strip, most of its length was tied, creating creases along its length, with the complete motif at the other end of the fabric hanging free. This suggests that the cloth was then possibly used

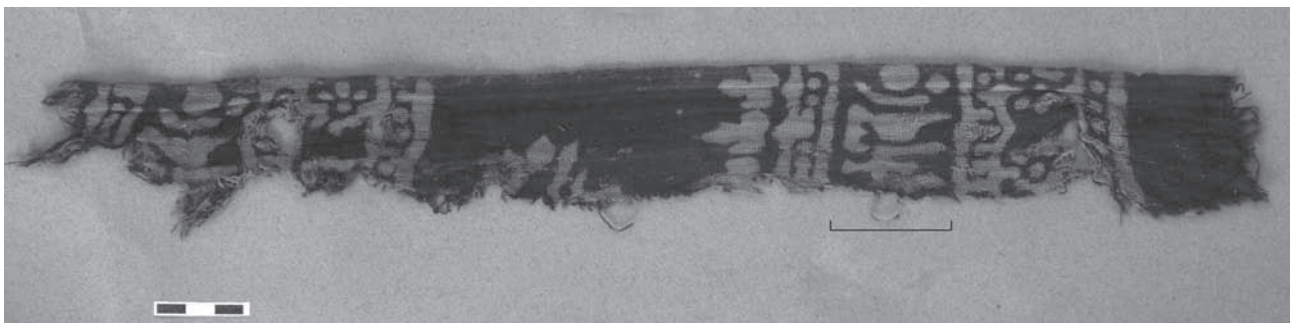


Figure 15:8. 03T124, a fragment of resist-dyed textile. The inscription is noted by the bracket.

27. Barnes 1997: nos 140 and 141.

28. Collection Bouvier 1993: 315-316, Catalogue entry 210, inventory numbers JFB I 128 and I 127.

29. Pfister 1938: pl. XXVc.



Figure 15:9. 03T041, a fragment of resist-dyed textile. The inscription is noted by the bracket.

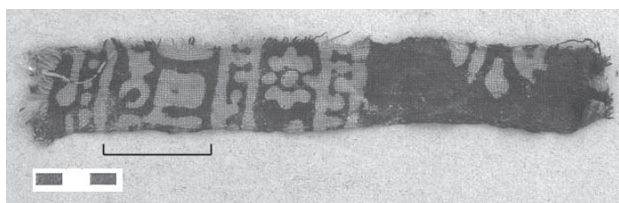


Figure 15:10. 03T108, a fragment of resist-dyed textile. The inscription is noted by the bracket.

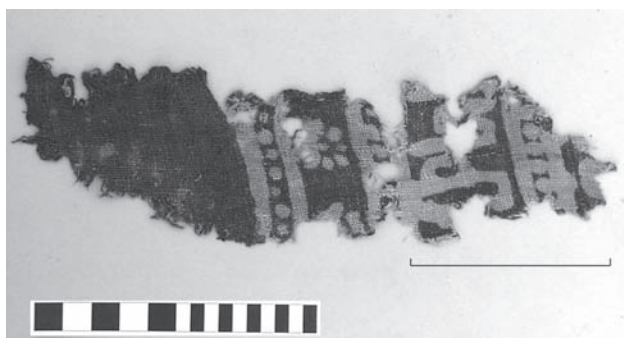


Figure 15:11. 99T480, a fragment of resist-dyed textile. The inscription is noted by the bracket.



Figure 15:12. 00T403, a fragment of resist-dyed textile.

as a scarf or belt, with the visual emphasis being on the square motif which hung free at the end. The writing would therefore not only have been fragmentary, but lost in the folds of the scarf, not even serving a decorative function.

Fragment 03T108

Fragment 03T108 (Figure 15:10) has a short section of lettering between a pattern of bordered dots. The right-hand edge of the fabric is a weft selvedge. The printing block has been positioned to run over it, so no starting point in the written formula can be seen. However, it is part of the formula:

[بركة لصاحبه واليمن]

“[Blessing for] his [own]er and [happiness!]”

Fragment 99T480

Fragment 99T480 (Figures 15:11) is a similar example to 03T108. A little too much resist was placed on the block resulting in the border of dots between lines being blurred. There are no indications as to where it was on the piece of textile as it is frayed around all its edges. It is another example of part of the formula:

[بركة لصاحبه واليمن]

“[Bless]ing for his own[er and happiness!]”

Fragment 00T403

Fragment 00T403 (Figure 15:12) is also a resist-dyed textile made in India, but decorated using a slightly different technique. Instead of being printed with a block, here the pattern is hand drawn in resist onto the fabric. The fabric is then dipped into a bath of mordant, which helps the dye to adhere to the fabric, and then into the dye bath. The resist protects the fabric from both the mordant and the dye itself. The writing, probably in *naskhī* script, is again fragmentary, and only part of a sentence can be read:

[الامر لله؟]

meaning something like: “All things are in God’s hand!”

It is likely that the same expression was repeated several times. The letter *mīm* is identical to that on item inv. JFB I 126 in the Collection Bouvier, described as a fragment of cotton cloth “... imprimée à la reserve ...” with an inscription from India, probably Gujarat, 14th-15th centuries.³⁰

The textile has been reused until just a tiny scrap remains. It is torn on all sides, and slightly pinched at the top, possibly suggesting that it may have been tied with string to make a tassel, although no remains of this string survive.

Ṭirāz Fragments

The following three examples are more typical of the published inscribed textiles of this time period, when there was a centralised production of expensive silk textiles decorated with writing, that were known as *ṭirāz*. These are probably the best known Islamic textiles, and make up the majority of the collections of museums. Most were looted from sites in the late 19th century, but have the advantage of sometimes including names and dates which mean that

30. Collection Bouvier 1993: 313, no. 208.

they are intrinsically dateable. The most prestigious examples were created in the royal workshops and were mostly used as a form of tribute, or as gifts, and most of the inscriptions have a religious theme or honour particular caliphs. Medium quality *ṭirāz* was also made in workshops to satisfy a middle class demand for fabrics that fulfilled a similar role, however, these were less likely to be bespoke made and so contain more general blessings. Strictly speaking, *ṭirāz* means embroidery produced in the royal workshops, but in practice it refers to all textiles where the lettering is worked in thread, whether embroidery, tapestry or braiding, and of any quality, not just the highest. Despite their importance in documentary sources and in museum collections, examples of *ṭirāz* are extremely rare at Quseir, with only five examples having been found in the course of both the Chicago and Southampton excavations.

Ṭirāz textiles have received a lot of attention since the beginning of the 20th century because of their inscriptions. Numerous publications on collections around the world detail the information from the inscriptions, but few explicitly explore the ways these textiles were used, or analyse this as significant. No systematic study has been undertaken into the contexts where the textiles were found, or their patterns of wear. Generally most *ṭirāz* textiles come from burial contexts, and many seem to have been buried in pristine condition, to the extent that some of them may have been specially made as shrouds. This brings a new dimension to understanding how these texts were used, as they cannot be considered in the same way as other texts created for display, for example on buildings or ceramics, or indeed compared to the textiles depicted in illustrations or written about in documents. Deciphering the texts, and using that information to explain the function of the textile has provided an easy, but we think flawed, end-point to analysing how these textiles were used and understood. The issue of *ṭirāz* is, therefore, one that needs more careful of examination, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Fragment 99T728

Fragment 99T728 (Figure 15:13) is a fragment of silk embroidery on a linen background. It is the largest piece of *ṭirāz* found at Quseir, and the inscription measures 9 x 2 cm. The colour scheme of white lettering highlighted with red and black on a blue background and the distinctive palmette work, creating the appearance of ‘masked eyes’ is typically late Ayyubid, and numerous comparable



Figure 15:13. 99T728, a fragment of silk embroidery.

examples exist in major collections.³¹ The inscription is bordered to the left and top by a red line, and it is unclear whether the whole piece has been clumsily cut or ripped from the larger piece of textile. The lettering is worked in white thread, possibly in stem stitch with red fill on the scrolls of the letters. From the organisation of the other decoration, it would appear that the lettering was worked first, and the background then filled in. This may partially add to the slightly blurred appearance of the script, as the rather loosely worked background embroidery slightly disguises the edges of the lettering. The order of the stitching is unclear from the photo. However, it seems likely that the outlines of the letters were created first and then filled in.

A very similar piece to this was found during the Chicago excavation,³² measuring 3 x 7 cm. That example was embroidered on a grid, but is clearly the same type of work. The inscription, *المحلق فلما*, is translated as “the gazer his two (?) ...”. The text of 99T728 is different. It seems that the same text is repeated, on the right and left side of the red diamond motif which appears in the middle of the fragment. A beginning and an end can then be identified. The first part of the formula partially disappears at right, and has been shortened as a result of the fabrication process.

Ṭirāz was traditionally used in clothing, and pictorial sources clearly show *ṭirāz* as part of turbans, sashes, and as arm bands. For example, the only other piece of *ṭirāz* found during the Chicago excavations is from the edge of a neck of a *ṭawb*, or long robe.³³ As fragment 99T728 is incomplete, its original function is unknown. However, its final size suggests that it was destined to be re-sewn onto a sleeve as a band, as probably was the published Chicago example in a similar style. For whatever reason, the fragment, which shows no other signs of wear, was thrown away before it could be used at all.

Fragment 00T257

Fragment 00T257 (Figure 15:14) is a tiny fragment of *ṭirāz* worked in tapestry, with black and blue wefts on a plain linen background. There are no legible letters, but the design in the upper cartouche seems inspired by writing. This fragment and the following were found in Trench 5, a place reputed to be “an important structure,” with “evidence for decoration in some of the rooms, traces of painted plaster and a carved screen”.³⁴

Fragment 02T274

Fragment 02T274 (Figure 15:15) is a fragment of tapestry worked in silk on a linen ground. It was found in the same context as a document bearing the date of 10 Rajab 700 AH/AD 1301, at the very beginning of the Mamluk pe-

31. For example, see Ellis 2001: entry 8.

32. Whelan 1979: RN 118, F9c-14.

33. Unpublished, inventory number *80/RN601, kindly shared by Gillian Vogelsang Eastwood.

34. Peacock & Blue 2006: 172.

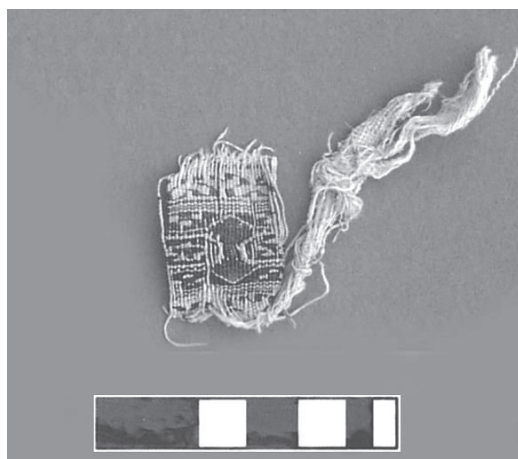


Figure 15:14. 00T257, a fragment of silk tapestry.



Figure 15:15. 02T274, a fragment of silk tapestry.

riod.³⁵ The blocks of colour are built up individually, without covering the whole width of the warp. The edges of the piece roughly correspond to the edges of these blocks of colour, which not being interlocked, are weak points. So, although the edges appear neat in places, they do not represent the edges of the textile. The lettering here is therefore constructed by weaving short lengths of yellow silk over and under the linen warps. Where possible the lettering is worked first, before the dark brown background, unless it makes sense technically to do it the other way round. The letters are very fragmentary and so are unreadable, but presumably this would be from a dedicatory or religious text or one bringing good fortune.

Writing, Reading and Understanding

Understanding the use and value of these textiles revolves around questions of the literacy of the people creating the writing, and the viewers and readers of the writing. Most obviously, being able to read and understand the text is an indicator of the reader's education and knowledge. However, this occurs on a sliding scale – from a complete comprehension of the text, to being able to read the words but not understand their wider meaning or context, to being able to recognise the decoration as text without being able to read it, to not being able to distinguish text from other forms of decoration. Each of these is an indicator of what Van der Vliet³⁶ describes as status, reflecting the reader's immersion into the practice of literacy and highlighting the wider set of skills and knowledge that this is associated with. These different levels of literacy were acknowledged even at the time, as the wide range of decoration using letter forms that are illegible demonstrates.

Each of the different techniques of adding writing to the textiles presumes different levels of literacy in the creators

of the inscription on the textile, who are not necessarily the writers (in the sense of understanding the words) of that text. This is an important consideration when thinking about the practice of writing in terms of individuals in the past. Four different techniques in the creation of textile with writing have been identified at Quṣeir.

1. Handwriting with ink, shaping the letters one by one, creating the words as they are sounded out, and at a rate that is slower, but not incomparable to speech. The writers of the handwritten examples on sacking and cotton textiles must have understood Arabic and how the information written would be used. The other example of handwriting, on the Indian trade textile, is probably copied, as most commentators presume that the creators of the Indian trade textiles had little understanding of Arabic. The writing could have been started at the end, or even in the middle of the word, as there would be no 'sounding out' in writing it.
2. Indian trade textiles that are block-printed are derived from a wooden block that was hand carved with the lettering in reverse and in relief. The inscriptions on these textiles are not in a typical calligraphic style of the time, and the blocks were probably carved by someone with little understanding of Arabic. Of course, the calligraphy would also be influenced by the technique of production which was completely divorced from hand writing. The letters carved into the blocks were mirror-images of their legible shapes, and were formed by removing, rather than adding material. The tendency would therefore be towards the thickening of letter shapes and leaving decorative patches, both of which can be seen in these examples. This creates challenges in terms of legibility, as dots above and below letters change their meaning in Arabic.
3. The embroidered *tirāz* example uses small stitches to create the shape of the letters, following their form and then filling in these shapes. It was made in Egypt, so while the creator may or may not have been able to read and understand the text, the widespread use of text means that

35. Regourd 2004: 277.

36. Van der Vliet 2006: 25ff.

the embroiderer was at least aware of the importance of the script, and may have had a partial understanding of the letters, the text, and/or its meaning. It was, presumably, copied, either from an embroidery sampler or a drawing. A closer inspection would be needed to discover the direction in which the letters were worked, which in turn would have implications for the orientation of the embroidery and the starting point for the creation of letters. However, while the initial outlining of the letter shapes would roughly follow the same process of handwriting with a pen, the filling-in would be different, and would lose that connection with letter forming and writing. The legibility of the piece is compromised by the decoration, as the needlework interferes with the letter forms, and more confusingly, the lunette patterns themselves are derived from letter shapes, though they do not contribute to the meaning of the inscription. The key to legibility is therefore to know to follow just the letters along the bottom of the piece, and not to be distracted by the hints of letters forming the patterns higher up. This technique of reading is different to that needed for inscribed metalwork, for example, which is equally florid, but where the words do sometimes move upwards through the pattern.

4. Tapestry is even further removed from the act of handwriting. Although the letters are for the most part formed before the background is filled in, they are worked from the bottom up in segments that may cut across letters, meaning that the bottom half of a piece of script is worked first, and the legible text only appears when the final rows of stitches are completed. This is quite different from both the practice of handwriting and reading. However, the intricacies of this tapestry design suggest that it was most likely worked from a similar textile or a drawn pattern, which must have been positioned behind the warps of the tapestry loom, or from an outline sketched onto the warps of the loom. Therefore the weaver must have been continually conscious of the complete text while working up the fragmentary letters.

There is, therefore, a variety of levels of engagement with the text when creating it, and a variety of techniques needed to read the texts. Even literate textile workers will become divorced from the text if they are not reading it as it is created, by not sounding out the words as they are created, either because of the length of time taken to create the letters, or because the letters do not form individually or in the order that they would if they were read. While this must divorce the creator from that process, this may be compensated for by the attention to detail for each letter or, in the case of tapestry working, creating each letter in three dimensions. The intensity of this practice is more akin to a sculptor than a scribe, as the letters lose their linearity and become more solid. This is one of the reasons why textiles were so highly valued, because of the high quality fabric this time-consuming technique produces. To have the fabric of the textile constructed from the words themselves (in the case of tapestry), or held together with stitches (as in embroidery) reinforces the notion of the importance of

the words, in a way that the superficial application of ink to paper does not. The text becomes embedded in the textile, and becomes more than just decoration.

The Status of the Words

The fate of the textiles with writing indicates how those fragments of text were valued. The words of the more utilitarian example (fragment 03T189) were destroyed by being cut in half – clearly those words were no longer relevant, important, or worth keeping. Similarly, the writing on fragment 03T041 ended up scrunched up at one end of a piece of clothing, while the decorative motif at the other end continued to be displayed. The other Indian trade textiles were similarly worn to rags, and it seems that no particular attention was paid to saving the fragments of writing above the other decoration. Conversely, the embroidered *ṭirāz* has been cut or torn from its backing fabric, and the words carefully kept. Seemingly it was destined to become part of a garment, but instead ended up being discarded. This highlights the difference between these two types of textile: the block-printed textiles were a cheap alternative to richer embroideries and silk fabrics and were easily discarded. However the embroidery and tapestry added a special dimension – and of course cost – to the fabric, that reinforced the importance of those written words. The high level of technical skill needed to create these textiles demonstrates that a part of their value was in the thought and concentration put into their production, even if the thinking and involvement did not relate to the meaning of the words themselves.

The Function of the Textiles

An examination of the range of uses of these textiles generates this list. The texts, along with the textiles, can:

- Communicate information in labels
- Engender good fortune
- Cure an illness
- Resemble legible text
- Create furnished interiors
- Be used in dress
- Be carried in a pocket or case

The fragments discussed here constitute a very small sample from which to create generalisations, but the list does highlight some more general patterns in Islamic textiles. The writing is concerned with attracting good luck and good health – in a sense, protecting from bad luck and bad health – in the same vein as the more obvious examples of patronage in royal *ṭirāz*. The question of why textiles were considered the appropriate medium for these texts becomes a little clearer when we consider the role of textiles in protection. Clothing protects people from the wind, sun and rain, and insulates people from the world and other people. Furnishings in homes create a barrier with the hard ground and fierce sun, and create spaces that represent security, family and privacy. Clothes were one of the most expensive items owned, and represented a form of financial protection that could be sold in times of need. Textiles are therefore positioned between that which needs protect-

ing, and physical or social danger. By writing protective messages on textiles, the relationship between the written word and the physical function of the textile was reaffirmed; a written instruction was combined with a tangible item that supported that instruction, by both carrying the message of protection and by helping make that instruction active in the real world. The text may *give* a blessing, but it is the physical object that the textile is made into that *makes* that blessing apparent.

If textiles represent protection, then it might be that a fragment of cloth could be an appropriate stand-in for the complete piece that actively functions in a protective role. Textiles may also be a more suitable medium for carrying a cure or spell that relates to the body than paper, whose physical characteristics make it is less easily worn against the body. The close association between textiles and bodies through covering and protecting them in clothing, makes fragments of textile particularly suitable as a vehicle for texts that heal, protect or control bodies. This suggests that textiles are imbued with a much wider range of complex meanings beyond functionalist approaches.

Writing on Textiles: a Broader Perspective

The analysis of textiles with writing in medieval Islamic Egypt has traditionally focussed on *ṭirāz* and Indian trade textiles, by textile specialists interested in technical production and epigraphers examining the writing. It has long been understood that analysis of *ṭirāz* must move beyond epigraphic and provenance issues to thinking about function and use³⁷ but there has been very little further exploration of these issues, with the exception of Sokoly's work on *ṭirāz* as burial garments.³⁸ Hopefully, more recent work,³⁹ and this paper, will inspire research beyond production techniques and epigraphic analysis to thinking about how these textiles were used in everyday life, as a method of understanding their function – and, moreover, their representation – in the society that used them.

Catalogue

Handwriting

03T106: Fragment of sacking with writing, 19 x 25 cm, coarse bast, warp-faced tabby, s-spun in both directions, thread count 6/2 per cm, warp thread width 0.1 cm, weft thread width 0.3 cm, both medium spin angle. Writing in black ink [Trench 13; context 5533].

03T189: Fragment of sacking or saddlery with writing, 32 x 27 cm, coarse bast, warp-faced tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 5/1.5 per cm, warp thread width 0.3 cm, weft thread width 0.4 cm, both medium spin angle. Brown warp stripe 2.5 cm wide along simple weft selvedge. Another brown warp stripe 1.5 cm wide. Writing in black ink [13; 5517].

03T40: Fragment of textile with writing, 11 x 18.5 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 16/18 per cm, warp thread width 0.04 cm, weft thread width 0.04 cm, both medium spin angle. Writing in black ink, some smudges, one small stitch [13; surface].

03T107: Talisman with writing, 6 x 10.5 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 14/18 per cm, warp thread width 0.05 cm, weft thread width 0.04 cm, both medium spin angle. Writing is in black ink. Also recorded as TX063 [13; 5519].

Indian Trade Textiles

99T634: Block-printed resist textile, 18 x 6 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 16/14 per cm. Block-printed resist dyed with a dark blue background, line of running stitches in white z-spun cotton [2B; 1004].

03T108: Block-printed resist textile, 3.5 x 21 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 14/12 per cm, thread width 0.04 cm, medium spin. Block-printed resist dyed with a dark blue background. Simple selvedge created from 11 pairs of warps [13; 5524].

99T480: Block-printed resist textile, 7 x 21 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 14/16 per cm. Block-printed resist dyed with a dark blue background [2B; 1012].

03T124: Block-printed resist textile, 43 x 5 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 14/14 per cm, thread width 0.04 cm, medium spin. Block-printed resist dyed with a dark blue background. Selvedge around 10 paired warps [13; 5523].

03T041: Block-printed resist textile, 31 x 6.5 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 6/10 per cm, thread width 0.04 mm, warp thread medium spin, weft thread tight spin. Block-printed resist dyed with a dark blue background [13; surface].

00T403: Pen-work resist textile, 5.0 x 1.8 cm, cotton, tabby, z-spun in both directions, thread count 14/14 per cm. Resist decorated in pen work, on a red background [2B; 2133].

Ṭirāz

99T728: Fragment of embroidered *ṭirāz*, 12 x 3.2 cm, linen, tabby, warp unknown spin, z-spun weft, thread count 30/28 per cm. Decorated with red, black and blue silk embroidery [2B; 1530].

00T257: Fragment of tapestry *ṭirāz*, 1.5 x 1 cm, linen warp, silk weft, tapestry, z-spun warp, i-spun weft, 24 warps per cm. Tapestry in blue, green and black [5; 3067].

02T274: Fragment of tapestry *ṭirāz*, 1.5 x 1.5 cm, linen warp, silk weft, tapestry, s-spun warp, i-spun weft, thread count 19/64 per cm, warp thread width 0.015 cm, weft thread width 0.02 cm, warp medium spin. Tapestry in green, red, dark brown and white [8A; 8251].

37. See Golembek & Gervers 1977.

38. Sokoly 1997.

39. For example Fluck & Helmeke 2006.

References

- Al-Asyūfī (Pseudo-). Undated. *al-Raḥma fī al-tibb wa-al-ḥikma*, Beyrouth: Maktabat al-ḥadīth.
- Baker, P., Tezcan, H. & Wearden, J. 1996. *Silks for the Sultans. Ottoman Imperial garments from Topkapı Palace*. Istanbul: Ertuğ & Kocabıyık.
- Barnes, R. 1997. *Indian Block-printed Textiles in Egypt: the Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum Volume 1*, Oxford. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blair, S. 1997. Inscriptions of Medieval Islamic Textiles. *Islamische Textilunst des Mittelalters: Aktuelle Probleme*. Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung.
- Britton, N. P. 1942. Pre-Mameluke Tirāz in the Newberry Collection. *Ars Islamica* 9: 158-166.
- Burke, K. S. & Whitcomb, D. 2007. Quseir al-Qadīm in the Thirteenth Century: A Community and Its Textiles. *Ars Orientalis* 34(2005): 82-97.
- Christie's Auction Catalogue, 1996 & 1997.
- Collection Bouvier. 1993. *Tissus d'Égypte: Témoins du Monde Arabe VIIIe-XVe Siècles*. Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe.
- David-Weill, J. 1952. Un papyrus arabe inédit du Musée du Louvre. *Semitica* IV: 67-71.
- Demiri, L., & Römer C. 2009. *Texts from the Early Islamic Period of Egypt. Muslims and Christians at their First Encounter. Arabic Papyri from the Erzherzog Rainer Collection, Austrian National Library, Vienna*. Vienne: Phoibos.
- Ellis, M. 2001. Embroideries from Islamic Medieval Egypt in the Newberry Collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. *Textile History* 32: 61-74.
- Epelboin, A., Hames, C., & Raggi, A. 2007. Cinq tuniques talismaniques récentes. In *Coran et talismans. Textes et pratiques magiques en milieu musulman*, C. Hames (ed.), pp. 147-174. Paris: Karthala.
- Fahd, T. 1995. Rukya. In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. 8*, 2nd Edn. C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs & G. Lecomte (eds.), pp. 619-620. Leiden: Brill.
- Fluck, C. & Helmecke, G. (eds), 2006. *Textile Messages: Inscribed Fabrics from Roman to Abbasid Egypt*. Leiden: Brill.
- Goitein S. D. 1967. *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish communities of the Arab World as portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza. Volume 1: Economic Foundations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Golombek, L. & Gervers, V. 1977. Tiraz Fabrics in the Royal Ontario Museum. In *Studies in Textile History: In Memory of Harold B. Burnham*, V. Gervers (ed.), pp. 82-125. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.
- Grohmann, A. 1932. *Aperçu de papyrologie Arabe*. Prague: Études de papyrologie 1.
- Grohmann, A. 1934. Islamische Zaubertexte. *Veröffentlichungen aus den badischen Papyrussammlungen* 5: 418-447.
- Guo, L. 2004. *Commerce, Culture and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents from Quseir*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hames, C. & Epelboin, A. 1993. Trois vêtements talismaniques provenant du Sénégal (décharge de Dakar-Pikine). In *Sciences occultes et Islam*, P. Lory & A. Regourd (ed.), pp. 217-241. *Bull. d'études orientales* 44.
- Handley, F. (forthcoming). The Textiles: An Overview. In *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadīm. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea. Volume 2: The Finds*. Peacock, D. & Blue, L. (eds), Oxford: BAR International Series.
- Handley, F. 2007 "I have bought cloth for you and will deliver it myself". Using Documentary Sources in the Analysis of the Archaeological Textile Finds from Quseir al-Qadīm, Egypt. In *Textiles and Text: Re-establishing the Links between Archival and Object-Based Research*, M. Hayward, & E. Kramer (eds.), London: Archetype.
- Hunger, H. 1962. *Die Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Katalog der ständigen Ausstellung*. 2nd revised edition. Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.
- Kendrick, A. F. 1924. *Catalogue of Muhammadan Textiles of the Medieval Period*. London: HM Stationery Office.
- Klos, H. 1955. *Die Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Mit einem Katalog der ständigen Ausstellung*. Vienna.
- Peacock, D. & Blue, L. (eds), 2006. *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadīm. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea. Volume 1: Survey and Excavations 1999-2003*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Peacock, D. & Blue, L. (eds), (forthcoming). *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadīm. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea. Volume 2: The Finds*. Oxford: Bar International Series.
- PERF = *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer. Führer durch die Ausstellung*, A Hölder (ed.) 1894. Vienna: Gradenwitz.
- Pfister, R. 1938. *Les Toiles Imprimées de Fostat et l'Hindoustan*, Paris : Les Editions d'Art et d'Histoire.
- Phillips, J. 2002. Leather. In *Myos Hormos-Quseir al-Qadīm. A Roman & Islamic port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt*. D. Peacock, L. Blue & S. Moser (eds.), p. 73. University of Southampton: Interim Report.
- Regourd, A. 2004. Trade on the Red Sea during the Ayubide and the Mamluk period: The Quseir paper manuscript collection 1999-2003, first data. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 34(2003): 277-292.
- Regourd, A. 2007. *Chefs-d'oeuvre islamiques de l'Aga Khan Museum*, Catalogue de l'exposition musée du Louvre, 5 oct. 2007-7 janv. 2008. Paris: Musée du Louvre.

- Regourd, A. (forthcoming). Arabic language documents on paper. In *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadīm. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea. Volume 2: The Finds*, D. Peacock & L. Blue (eds). Oxford: BAR International Series.
- Savage-Smith, E. 1997. Talismanic charts and Talismanic shirts. In *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, vol. XII: Science, Tools & Magic*, F. Maddison & E. Savage-Smith (eds), pp. 106-111, 117-123. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sokoly, J. 1997. Between Life and Death: the Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles. *Islamische Textiljunst des Mittelalters: Aktuelle Probleme*. Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung.
- Sotheby's Auction Catalogue, 1993 & 1995.
- Tezcan, H. 2006. *Topkapı Sarayı'ndaki. Şifalı Gömlekler*. Istanbul: Euromat.
- Van der Vliet, J. 2006. In a Robe of Gold: Status, Magic and Politics on Inscribed Christian Textiles from Egypt. In *Textile Messages: Inscribed Fabrics from Roman to Abbasid Egypt*, C. Fluck & G. Helmecke (eds.), pp. 23-67. Leiden: Brill.
- Vogelsang-Eastwood, G. 1989. *Resist Dyed Textiles from Quseir al-Qadīm*. Egypt (Paris: AEDTA).
- Whelan, E. J. 1979. Unusual Islamic Finds. In *Quseir al-Qadīm 1978: Preliminary Report*, D. S. Whitcomb & J. H. Johnson (eds.), pp. 211-219. Cairo: American Research Centre in Egypt. Reviewed by G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, in *Hali* 67 (1993): 85-89.
- Whitcomb, D. S. & Johnson, J. H. 1979. *Quseir al-Qadīm 1978. Preliminary Report*. Cairo: American Research Centre in Egypt.
- Whitcomb, D. S. & Johnson, J. H. 1982a. *Quseir al-Qadīm 1980. Preliminary Report*. Cairo: American Research Centre in Egypt.
- Whitcomb, D. S. & Johnson, J. H. 1982b. Season of Excavation at Quseir al-Qadīm. *American Research Centre in Egypt, Newsletter* 120: 24-30.

