

Barbara Czaja-Szewczak

Textiles from Naqlun, 1999

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 10, 135-142

1999

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

TEXTILES FROM NAQLUN, 1999

Barbara Czaja-Szewczak

The 81 textiles that were uncovered during the 1999 season at Naqlun can be divided by place of origin into two separate groups: one coming from the

monastery buildings, the other from burials made in the ruins of this monastery and hence stratigraphically younger.

STATE OF PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION MEASURES

Textiles were not found in all of the graves. Burial practices are often at fault, because in simple earth graves, where textiles came into direct contact with the dry desert sand and disintegrated mudbrick, the fabric was in many cases overly dried and subject to gradual disintegration. Textiles found in burials that had a protective casing of palm-leaf ribs tied together with rope were in a better condition. The best preserved, of course, were textiles found in wooden-plank coffins. Fibers are very dry here, too, and the fabric is liable to break and pulverize when touched, but in most of the coffins the various garments of the deceased have been preserved in good order. Occasionally, as in T. 127 (wooden-plank coffin), the upper part of the body garments is in good condition, while the bottom part has completely disintegrated leaving dust or single fibers.

All the explored textiles were treated to remove sand, dirt and other superficial soiling. Delicate squirrel-bristle brushes were used for this purpose. The next step was a water bath using Pretepon G, a softener, which also helped to remove the rest of the soiling. After rinsing in distilled water, the textiles were stretched out on

glass panels and swabbed delicately with wood-wool to remove excess water. They were then left on panels to dry.

In the case of organic fibers, the speed of the process preparing the fabric for drying and indeed, accelerating the drying process itself, is important, because wet fibers of this kind become brown in a process of oxidization.

If a fabric was found to be excessively dry, it was additionally softened with a 3% solution of glycerin during the water bath.

The burial cloths bear evidence of stains and discoloration to the point of effecting changes in textile colors. This is due to contact with decaying human tissue; where the contact was most extensive and long-lasting, the fibers have been stuck together and stiffened, and are now easily crushed and broken, as well as discolored. An excellent example of this problem is a silk shawl (Nd.99410), pieces of which were found in T. 127 on Site A. The original colors have been preserved on some of the fragments, but not on all. On a few pieces green has turned into a golden brown, while a golden yellow has darkened to the color of old gold. What was initially carmine is now more brown.

BURIAL TEXTILES

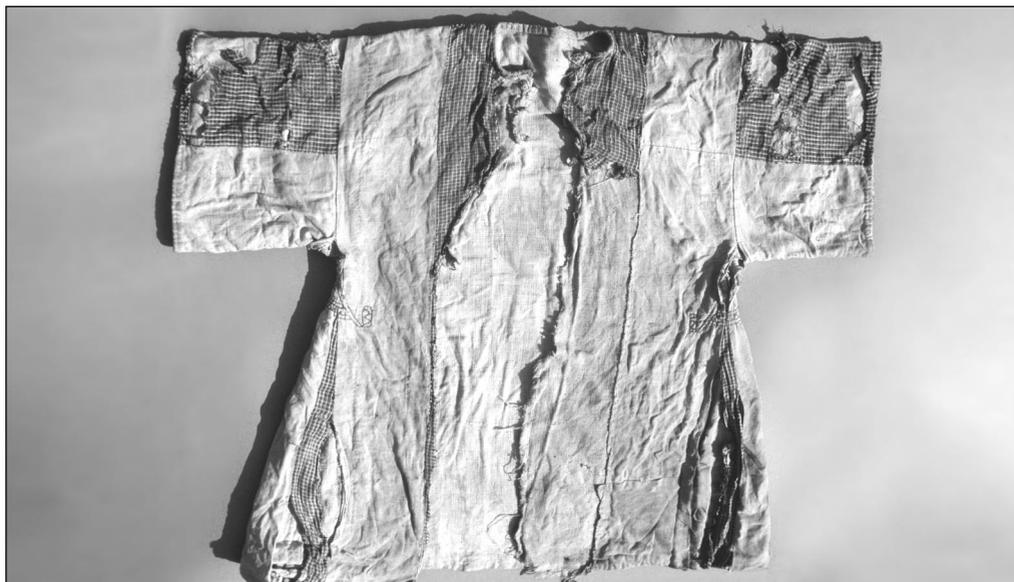
Burial methods, as well as the textiles from the graves, their number, kind and decoration, bring important new information.

Some of the burials were very modest indeed. The deceased was wrapped in a cream-colored linen shroud and buried without a coffin or else in a coffin made of palm-leaf ribs corded together with either linen or palm-fiber rope. Coffins were made most often of palm wood, occasionally of a harder wood. In a few cases, the wooden coffin lid was covered with a simple linen shroud decorated with red-painted crosses (e.g. T. 121, T. 110). The pigment has faded, leaving yellow or orange-yellow traces.

The particular way in which the body and shroud were deposited in T. 44 deserves special attention. The coffin was bigger than usual, measuring 2.10 m. The deceased lay prostrated on his back with

arms crossed on his chest. The body had been wrapped with extra care in a cream-colored linen shroud that was fitted very close to the figure. Five folds of the cloth on the head were meant to accentuate its shape. The edges of the shroud were over-sewn, the seam running from head to foot. This is the first such case in all of the graves discovered so far at Naqlun. The enshrouded body was then tied with an ornamental woolen plaited colorful band that ran above the shoulders, was plaited together on the chest and ran to the back disappearing under the elbows. Inside this very carefully done "package" there was yet another linen shroud, ornamented with cream and dark blue bands. The deceased was wearing a long linen tunic and linen pants.

The tunic was the most popular dress used in burial. Sometimes two were used or



*Fig. 1. Child's tunic (Nd.99081)
(Photo W. Godlewski)*

else a tunic and pants of varying length (male burials). The pants had a waistband tunnel made for inserting tape or string to draw together excess material and tie after putting on. Occasionally, this part with the tunnel was sown onto the rest of the pants. The tunic is a simple garment as a rule – two rectangles of cloth sown together leaving an opening for the head. The neckline was usually of "bateau" shape with a slit in front, closed with color buttons of linen (tunic from T. 95). The tunic from T. 121 is different, having in front a kind of flap that was more ornamental than functional. Tunic sleeves could be short, three-quarters long (e.g. tunic from T. 108) or wrist-length (tunic from T. 107). They could be even longer, covering the hands, as in the case of the garment from T. 122, which was put on top of another tunic, both reaching the ankles. It does not seem likely that these garments had served their owner in life, clearly such long sleeves could not have been very practical.

A complete child's tunic was found in T. 79. (*Fig. 1.*) It had a rather frayed slit down the back with no evidence of any

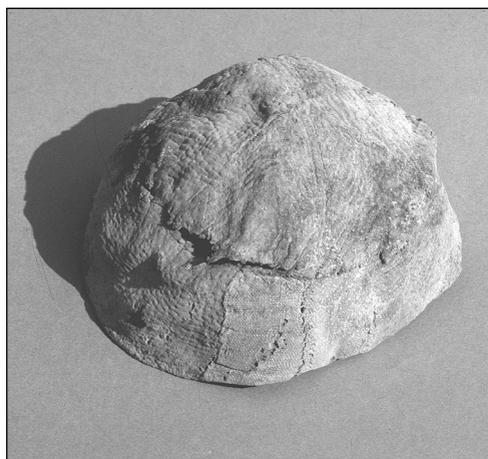


Fig. 2. Cap (Nd.99080)
(*Photo W. Godlewski*)

kind of fastening. Other parts of the garment were finished finely enough, including a trimming around the neckline and a linen lining. Under the armpits, where the side gusset seams meet, there is chain embroidery in orange-colored silk. It is practically invisible in this position, hence it was probably not meant as an ornament, but rather as a means of reinforcing a part of the dress that is easily torn.

An outer garment that was found in T. 49 is a kind of caftan with short sleeves and an open front without a fastening. It was decorated with inserts of a blue white-striped fabric. The caftan had been worn on top of a long cream-colored linen tunic. A small piece of linen with blue stripes on a cream-colored background wrapped the head, which was additionally protected with a cream-colored linen cap. (*Fig. 2.*) Caps of fundamentally the same shape were found in other burials as well (e.g. T. 79, T. 88, T. 48). What made them different was the decoration. Some were completely plain, others were quilted so that the thread created an ornamental design, still others bore fine embroidery or had blue-colored triangular inserts sewed in.

Probably one of the oldest burials discovered this season at Naqlun, T. 127 on Site A, yielded three pieces of a "pillow" covering the branches found under the head, three pieces of a shawl wrapping the head and two sections of a shroud covering the body. All the textiles were richly decorated.

The "pillow" was made of linen and silk. (*Fig. 3.*) Too fragmentary for the original size to be reconstructed, it was probably sown together from two identical pieces. The silk parts were made in tapestry weave. They form the ornament comprising rows of date palms, hares in medallions in a heraldic composition, a cat-like creature also in a medallion, finally wavy

and geometric motifs. Running between these patterns are rows of Arabic text. The undecorated parts of the fabric feature a plain balanced tabby weave. The ornamental motifs found on this textile, like the running or sitting hare, are deeply rooted in Coptic art of earlier times.

The silk shawl from this interesting burial had been used to wrap the head of the deceased. (Fig. 4) Again, its fragmentary condition excludes any reconstruction of its length (the preserved pieces are 79 cm long), its width, however, is known – 102 cm across. The ornamental band running crosswise to the fabric was deco-

rated in the *samit façonné* technique.¹⁾ In the center there are two rows of alternating palmettes and *kantharoi* with a row of octagons running in between. Inside the octagons are medallions with rosettes. Octagons were an especially popular motif in Fatimid times.²⁾ Flanking the central band are seven other bands of different width decorated with geometric patterns, rosettes or left plain. The rest of the shawl of carmine color was executed in balanced plain tabby. The textile is two-sided, meaning that one side of the patterned fabric is a negative of the other. The colors form a limited palette: carmine, cream,



Fig. 3. Textile, detail (Nd.99409), see cover for bigger fragment
(Photo W. Godlewski)

¹⁾ Technique used for patterned fabrics where the weft and warp form a twilled weave; on the right side, the over-thread jumps five and the under-thread one with rows running toward Z, while the left side of the fabric is different, the weft covering three successive warp threads, then going under one and over the next and again under the warp thread. The left side of the fabric is much more clearly striped than the right side.

²⁾ P. du Bourguet, "La fabrication des tissus coptes aurait-elle largement survécu à la conquête arabe?", *BSAA* 40 (1953), 29.

golden-yellow and green. Textiles executed in the *samit façonné* and *taqueté façonné* techniques and featuring a similar ornament were found, for instance, at Antinoe.³⁾

The third textile from T. 127 is a shroud preserved in two pieces (*Fig. 5*), once wrapping the body of the deceased. Its total width is 194 cm, its length – the surviving section – 80 cm. From the waist down the warp has become totally disintegrated, leaving merely some loose bunches of weft threads. The weave here was plain balanced tabby. Decorating the piece across its width, 3.0 cm from both the upper and bottom edges, are two dark blue silk bands flanked

with narrow red bands that were also made of silk, all in the same tabby weave. The interest of this textile lies in two silk bands of tapestry, each 8.7 cm wide, running across the fabric. The characteristic decoration, as well as the fairly modest, monochromatic coloring put this fabric in a small group (six pieces have been published so far) of textiles produced in the second half of the 12th century, that is, at the close of the Fatimid period. All six are decorated with silk tapestry bands with a typical decoration executed in red thread on a golden background. The ornaments consist of a wavy design, bands with an inscription in Arabic



Fig. 4. Shawl (Nd. 99410)
(Photo W. Godlewski)

³⁾ Some textiles from the Louvre feature patterns and ornaments that are analogous to the Naqlun piece, cf. M. Martiniani-Reber, *Textiles et mode sassanides* (1997), 19, 70, cat. 21; 104, cat. 49; 127, cat. 74; 130, cat. 77.

and a central band of plaiting with medallions containing figures of birds or hares. The writing style had undergone a progressive deformation in late Fatimid times and the inscriptions on the textiles are obvious proof of this. Indeed, a transitory form of calligraphy had appeared at this time, featuring all the characteristics of *Qufic* writing, but more rounded and with cursive characters already portending the *nashki* script.⁴⁾

The Naqlun textile has seven bands of decoration. The central band, the widest

at 3.5 cm, features a plaited ornament with medallions filled with figures of hares. Flanking it on either side are two bands of a wavy ornament separated by a band with Arabic writing. The overall impression is that of *horror vacui*. The analogous textiles are held by the Egyptian Museum in Cairo,⁵⁾ the Bouvier collection in Geneva,⁶⁾ the Abegg de Riggisberg Foundation,⁷⁾ the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto,⁸⁾ the David Collection in Copenhagen⁹⁾ and a collection in London.¹⁰⁾



Fig. 5. *Shroud (Nd.99411)*
(Photo W. Godlewski)

⁴⁾ M.C. Bruwier (ed.), *Égyptiennes étoffes coptes du Nil* (Mariemont 1997), 219.

⁵⁾ *Islamic Art in Egypt, 969-1517* (Cairo 1969), cat. 246.

⁶⁾ *Tissus d'Égypte. Témoins du monde arabe. VIIIe-XVe siècles* (Geneva-Paris 1993), 259, cat. 158.

⁷⁾ K. Otavsky, *Muhammad Abbas Muhammad Salim, Mittelalterliche Textilien I. Ägypten, Persien und Mesopotamien, Spanien und Nordafrika* (Riggisberg 1995), 92, cat. 53.

⁸⁾ L. Golombek, V. Gervers, *Tiraz Fabrics in the Royal Ontario Museum*, in: *Studies in Textile History. In Memory of Harold B. Burnham* (Toronto 1977), 118, cat. 23.

⁹⁾ Kj. Von Folsach, *Islamic Art. The David Collection* (Copenhagen 1990), fig. 393.

¹⁰⁾ P.L. Baker, *Islamic Textiles* (London 1995), 58.

Inscriptions are to be found also on a richly decorated linen shroud (Nd.99311) from T. 122. Two silk tapestry bands are admirable for their rich coloring – blue, dark blue, red, celadon, brown and cream. Birds in medallions inserted in a plaited ornament fill the central band, flanked with bands of writing in Arabic. Du Bourguet refers to these birds as "coqs sassanides"¹¹⁾ and expresses the opinion that the Egyptian weavers drew on Sassanid textiles for inspiration. The birds are usually of small size, hence their schematization and resulting deformation. Bird motifs of this sort, inserted in a medallion surrounded by a plaited pattern, are common on Fatimid silks.¹²⁾ Linen textiles with multicolored silk bands and ornaments comprising birds, hares and abstract motifs in medallions, flanked with inscriptions, actual or supposed, were produced in Arab manufactures known as *tiraz*. These textiles were executed for private users, as well as for the royal court.¹³⁾

From a child's burial (T. 110), found on top and in connection with T. 127, comes a piece of tunic sleeve made from linen cloth with a decorative linen insert sewn onto it. The insert bears a dark blue checker pattern on a blue background. The body had been wrapped in a plain linen shroud; a surviving piece shows that it had been executed in plain tabby weave. A wad of textiles was found tied around the child's head. One of these is a linen fabric resembling gauze, the opposite selvages of which were decorated with blue and red silk bands. The most interesting piece, however, is one (Nd.99421) with decoration that is analogous to that on the above-men-

tioned shroud from T. 127, except that it looks like a simplified version of the piece from the adult's burial. There is a less intricate plaited pattern and hares in medallions, just as on the shroud. The undecorated part of the textile displays balanced tabby weave, while the ornamental band is silk weft-faced tabby. The fragment is too small for a precise reconstruction of the pattern, but the absence of writing is quite obvious. The coloring is limited to just red and yellow. Two blue stripes of various width run alongside the edge of the fabric.

Embroidery is featured on a few of the textiles discovered this season. Burial T. 121 was especially rich in textiles bearing embroidered decoration. Under the head of the deceased there were leaves covered with a linen piece of tabby weave decorated with silk embroidery (split-stitch embroidery) (Nd.99308), preserving the colors of the thread in ideal condition: red, pale green, black, yellow and pale blue. Colored geometric patterns appear here next to monochrome arabesques. The same burial yielded a selvage piece of a shroud (Nd.99307) decorated with a narrow band of yellow-black silk embroidery (running stitch) presenting a geometric pattern, and a piece of tunic sleeve (Nd.99309) with an embroidered silk floral ornament executed in running stitch.

Another example of embroidery, cross-stitching this time, is featured on a headband (Nd.99136) from T. 79. In the center of the piece there is a triangle made up of 15 rows of smaller triangles, embroidered with woolen thread of three different colors – brown, dark blue and red.

¹¹⁾ Du Bourguet, op. cit., 24.

¹²⁾ Du Bourguet, op. cit., 25.

¹³⁾ A. Baginski, A. Tihdar, *Textiles from Egypt 4th-13th Centuries C.E.* (Jerusalem 1980), 17.

TEXTILES FROM THE MONASTERY BUILDINGS

Small pieces of textiles found in the monastery buildings on sites A, D and E constitute a fairly big group of finds. While too fragmentary for their exact nature to be interpreted, these pieces provide a great deal of valuable data on weaving techniques, fibers, coloring, and sometimes also iconography. The materials used in their production are invariably wool and linen, the weaves are mainly

tabby and tapestry, sometimes accompanied by lancer and brocher cloth. Selvages have also been preserved in a few cases.

Linen cloth has a natural color on the whole; it may be dyed blue on occasion. The woolen fabrics are richer in terms of the colors used, these including dark blues, sky blues, oranges, reds, celadons, greens, beiges and browns.