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# TEXTILES WITH ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS EXCAVATED IN NAQLUN 1999-2003

Gisela Helmecke

The main part of the textiles excavated in Naqlun until the end of the campaign of 2003 is to be dated in the 11th and 12th century, based on their designs and Arabic inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> Most of them come from the 12th century and consist of linen fabrics, even batistes, decorated with ornamental bands in fine silk and linen tapestries, or with fine silk embroideries. Such textiles are the characteristic products of the

official and public textile manufactories (*tiraz*, pl. *turuz*) in the Nile Delta and in Cairo.

Only two examples of the typical Fayum woolen fabrics with special "Coptic" design and inscription were found (Nd.02.210 from T. 298; Nd.02.174 from T. 300). And only one shows the very special so-called tree-like *kufi*-style of the Fayum (Nd.02.210).

## TIRAZ TEXTILES

The *tiraz* next to Naqlun was that of Tutun, another one is known to have been at Madinat al-Fayum. It should be expected that some of the products of these manufactures will be found in Naqlun. Yet the few known examples from these particular places, especially from Tutun, are all dated into the 9th and 10th century. So it may be that the *tiraz* of Tutun no longer existed in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Many of the decorative bands found in Naqlun have Arabic and pseudo-Arabic inscriptions. They are part of the ornamental design and are mainly found in the thinner outer bands joining the central stripe, which bears medallions and plaited

bands. The medallions are filled with animals, either single or in pairs, such as hares, other quadruples and birds, even fabulous animals, or else with ornamental design.<sup>2</sup> The plaited bands, the spaces between and the seaming bands have stylized vegetable ornaments. In one case (Nd.99.409),<sup>3</sup> rows of big single motifs, like palm trees, are set between the bands. Exactly the same motifs are found on fabrics used by Muslims. Searching for the meaning of such motifs, we would have to say that they are "neutral", because both Christians and Muslims had their own or similar interpretations for them. This is, for example, the case of the palm tree, with

1 The early tombs on Cemetery A have been dated on archaeological grounds to the second half of the 11th century, the late tombs to the turn of the 13th century, cf. W. Godlewski, *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), 144-145.

2 Cf. Nd.02.245 and Nd.02.168, in W. Godlewski, "Naqlun. Excavations 2002", *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 167, Fig. 3.

3 B. Czaja-Szewczak, "Naqlun. Textiles conservation 2001", *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 182-183, Fig. 3.

or without birds, or the fabulous animals. Only a few real *tiraz*-inscriptions mentioning names were found, all Fatimid. Two of them are embedded in the usual design mentioned above. One of these came from an undisturbed tomb (Nd.00.073 from T. 174).<sup>4</sup> It may contain the name of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir bi-llah (427-487 H / AD 1035-1094), but misspelled. The other one is presumed to have come from a tomb destroyed when a second tomb was built in its place (Nd.02.205). From the same spot/tomb came one of the single-line *tiraz* inscriptions (Nd.02.221).

These two inscriptions refer to the period from the end of the 10th to the beginning of the 11th century. Fragment Nd.02.205 [Fig. 1] is a *tiraz* of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-'amri-llah (386-411 H / AD 996-1020). The fabric is very loosely woven and very dark blue in color. It has two decorative bands done in silk tapestry work, both incompletely preserved. In the broader band, two inscription lines accompany the central stripe, which contains medallions. The inscription lines face each other. They are yellow with dark brown outlines. One line has Quran pas-

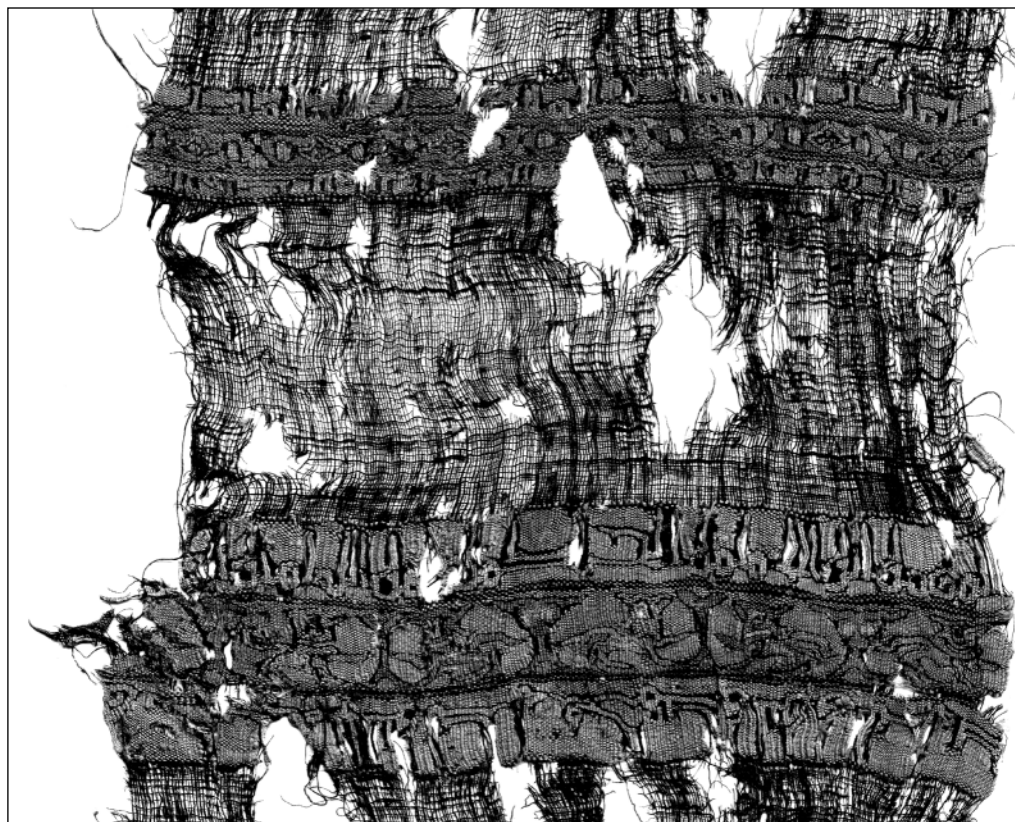


Fig. 1. Fragment of shawl. Nd.02.205  
(Photo W. Godlewski)

<sup>4</sup> Czaja-Szewczak, PAM XIII, op. cit., 178-180, Fig. 1.

sages, followed by blessings for the prophet Muhammad, and then the name of the caliph and his title *amir al-mu'minin* ("commander of the faithful"). In the narrower band only the pious devise *al-mulk li-llah* ("the kingdom is of God") is repeated in the seams.

Fragment Nd.02.221 [Fig. 2] is a *tiraz* from the period after al-Hakim. The beginning and end of the line is missing, and the name of the caliph is not preserved. But there is the title *safi amir al-mu'minin* ("best friend of the commander of the faithful"). This title was first given to the vizier al-Djardjaray who was in office from 418 H / AD 1027 under al-Hakim's son, the Fatimid caliph az-Zahir (411-427 H / AD 1021-1025), and under his follower al-Mustansir bi-llah (427-487 H / AD 1035-1094) until 436 H / AD 1044. Thus, the inscription is to be dated to between 1027 and 1044. It is done in fine tapestry work with blue silk, and around the letters also in fine natural-colored linen thread. The style is a neat thin *kufi* with thin tendrils between the stems of the letters.

The other single-line *tiraz* inscription is made in embroidery (Nd.02.144). The text repeats a religious devise (cf. below).

There is a third inscription, also embroidered, on the upper part of a tunic sleeve (Nd.02.213). Unfortunately, the silk threads have virtually disappeared, and it is no longer possible to read the text.

Most of the inscriptions found bear repeated pious devises. The longest of these is *nasr min allah wa-fath qarib* ("assistance from God and speedy victory"), found on one fabric (Nd.02.246) with four tapestry bands [Fig. 3]. Each repeats this devise. The inscription is done in natural-colored linen thread on a brown silk ground, which is filled with a spiral yellow tendril with green leaves. The calligraphic style is the cursive *naskhi*. It can be placed in the 12th century. This devise is often found in the shorter version which gives the first part, *nasr min allah*, only. It was very much used in the mainly yellow-red tapestries of the 12th century.<sup>5</sup> Other devises found are *baraka min allah* ("blessing from God"), *al-yumn min allah wal-afiya* ("good luck/success and prosperity from God"), *yumn min allah* ("good luck/success from God"), *al-mulk li-llah* ("the kingdom is of God"). We find also one word only, *baraka* ("blessing"), *allah*, or even parts of such words.<sup>6</sup> Fragment

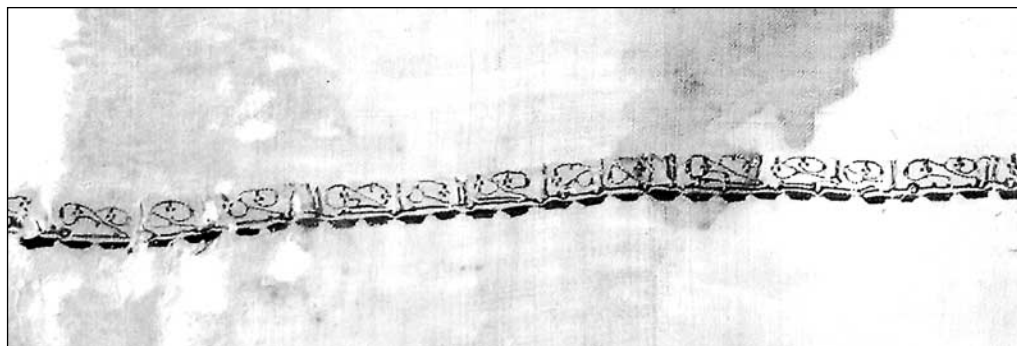


Fig. 2. Coffin shroud, fragment Nd.02.221  
(Photo T. Szmagier)

5 Cf. Nd.02.168 from a tunic in: Godlewski, PAM XIV, op. cit., 167, Fig. 3b

Nd.02.173, for example, repeats *allah* or *bi-llab*, in *kufi* style, accompanied by a small ornamental cartouche [Fig. 4]. The inscription is embroidered in thin dark brown silk and came from a tunic.

Most of these wishes are of a general character and may be acceptable for a Christian,

too. But *nasr min allah wa-fath qarib* is surely Islamic. This is an essential passage found in the Quran (sura 61, verse 13). Thus, it may be said that no explicit Christian character is visible either in the ornamental repertoire or the Arabic inscriptions.

## SHROUDS

In many graves in Naqlun, the burial included two shrouds, an inner and outer one. Different scarves were used as shrouds, obviously depending on the wealth of the deceased. Three different types of decorated shrouds have been found. One type has the characteristic tapestry bands of the Fatimid manufactories. Some of them have simple pious religious devises as part of the decoration. An example of this type is the

abovementioned Nd.02.246 [cf. Fig. 3]. It was an inner shroud and has four small bands ending in a longed leaf. Two of them are placed at every end.

The second type of decorated shroud has single embroidered bands. These embroideries are made in a combination of different techniques and different material: colored fine silk thread and stronger floss silk thread, with some natural-colored linen

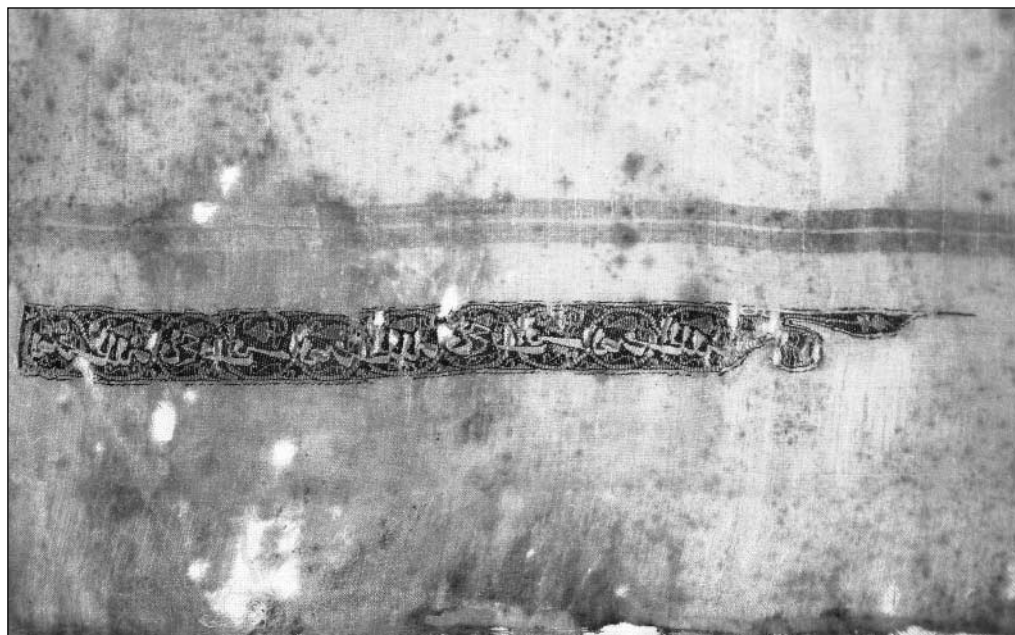


Fig. 3. *Shawl, fragment. Nd.02.246*  
(Photo T. Szmagier)

6 Cf. Nd.02.245 in: Godlewski, *PAM XIV*, op. cit., 167, Fig. 3a.

thread. Part of these bands is purely ornamental (Nd.02.058, Nd.02.331). Another part has calligraphic elements in an ornamental way or as pseudo-inscription (Nd.02.097, Nd.02.122). No real text, however, was visible in these embroidered bands. The calligraphic style is more cursive, so these embroideries could be dated in the 12th century.

The third type has embroidered lines of inscriptions and pseudo-inscriptions. Only one real inscription was found (Nd.02.144). The line starts at a little distance from the

selvage. The end is not preserved, so it cannot be said whether the line went all the way to the other end of the scarf. The inscription starts as usual with *bismillab* ("in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate") and repeats short religious devises. Based on the calligraphic style, this embroidered text should have been executed in the 11th century. It is embroidered in fine blue silk thread in the technique of Cairene workshops.

Thus, also for the shrouds no pure Christian context could be discerned.

## COFFIN COVERS

Four coffin covers found in Naqlun have small but long lines of pseudo-inscriptions in a style, which was also seen on burial tunics. They are all embroidered with fine

silk thread, mostly in dark brown color. They start at some distance from the selvage. All are nearly equal: showing one line with stems at short distances, and

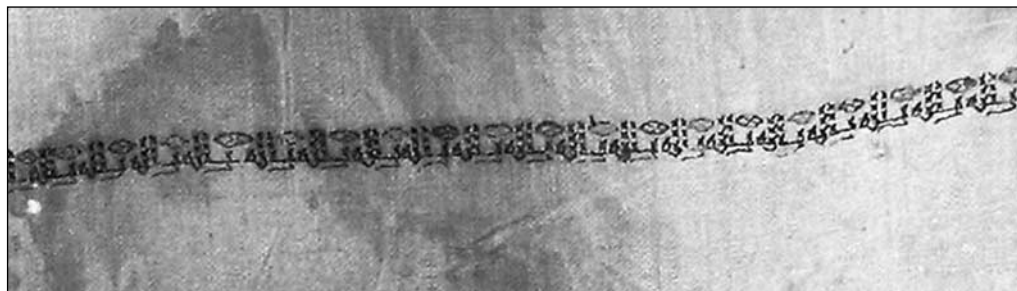


Fig. 4. Burial tunic, fragment with Arabic inscription. Nd.02.173  
(Photo T. Szmagier)



Fig. 5. Burial tunic, fragment with Arabic inscription. Nd.02.178  
(Photo T. Szmagier)

underlined with half moons. Set between the stems are spirals with a straight (Nd.02.178, *Fig. 5*) or diagonal upright. These covers are partly unused. They must have been produced in the same time and place. Thus, it is likely that they were produced in workshops to be sold as covers. It is very possible that these workshops were in the Fayum.

Another two coffin covers have embroidered bands like the above mentioned shroud, made in different techniques and of different material: colored fine silk thread and stronger floss silk thread, with some natural-colored linen thread. Neither were these covers used before.

One of these is only fragmentarily preserved (Nd.00.091). It has a row of hexagonal medallions. In these medallions and between them, elements of cursive script

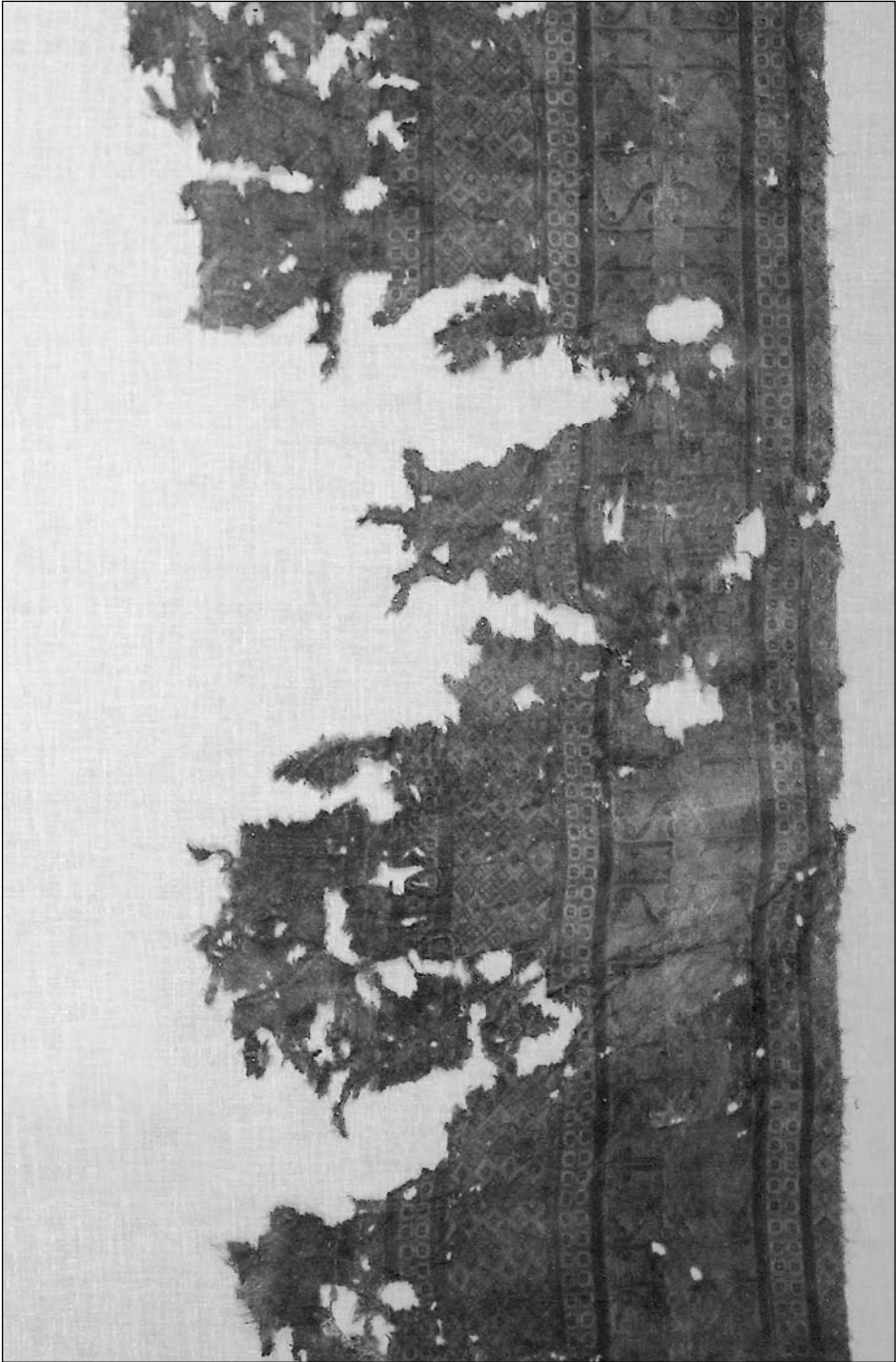
made of white linen thread are visible [*Fig. 6*]. These inscriptions may be identified as *allah* in the medallions and as *al-'izz* ("power") in between, but the condition of the embroidery is so bad that verification is all but impossible.

The other cover is the more interesting of the two (Nd.86.475).<sup>7</sup> It is completely preserved and has a wide, richly embroidered band, which covers the middle of the length of the coffin. The key to the decoration was a line of pseudo-inscription with double stems at equal distances, and underlined with half moons. Between the double stems there are either spiral ornaments or cursive script. Around this band of embroidery, nine big crosses were painted with ochre. The crosses alone indicate in this case that the dead person was a Christian.



*Fig. 6. Coffin shroud, fragment. Nd.00.091*  
(Photo T. Szmagier)

<sup>7</sup> Now in the Coptic Museum in Cairo.



*Fig. 7. Shawl, fragment. Nd.02.199  
(Photo T. Szmajter)*



## SPECIAL TEXTILES

Three very beautiful decorated silks were also excavated at Naqlun. Two of these were found between the tombs (Nd.02.131, Nd.02.199), one was a woman's shoulder scarf (Nd.99.410, T. 127). All have broad ornamental bands, some of them with short Arabic inscriptions. On two silks the word *baraka* ("blessing") is repeated. It is written in a longed and pressed *kufi* style, mirrored in pairs. This inscription pattern is only one part of the design of these silks. The word

*baraka* is a very general wish, for Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. In silk Nd.02.199 [Fig. 7], also one word is mirrored in pairs and repeated. It could be read as *yumn* ("good luck") or more certainly as *amn* ("peace, protection"). It is written in a well balanced, big flowering *kufi*. In contrast to the other two silks, the inscription here is a dominant part of the design. These silks were woven in al-Andalus, that is, Islamic Spain.

## CONCLUSION

The Arabic inscriptions on textiles found in cemetery A in Naqlun during fieldwork in 1999-2003 demonstrate the full domination of Muslim culture in Egypt in the 11th/12th centuries. The Christians had widely humored this situation or adapted to it in their daily life. It is known that it was not an easy process because of repressions against the *dhimmis*, the non-Muslims, taking place in the time of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim, for example. The dress and draperies of the Christian dead show no clear Christian context. The inscriptions found on these textiles mostly give general blessings from God. Purely Islamic *tiraz*-texts were also found, however, and they indicate the status of integration of the

Christians in a Muslim society, and give us dates.

In the light of this, the Coptic inscription found on a woolen robe in Naqlun may indicate that the owner was a clerical person.<sup>8</sup>

The variety of material found in the burial ground – from simple linen robes to rich decorated silks – indicates the different social status of the buried persons. The silks show that even very precious material was available and used. We know from the Arab written sources, that silk textiles from Spain came to Egypt from the 10th to the first half of the 12th century. As we see, they even reached provincial places, like Fayum, in that period.

8 B. Czaja-Szewczak, "Naqlun 2003. From scraps to tunic", *PAM* XV, op. cit., 159-164. The inscription was published by Jacques van der Vliet, 'In a Robe of Gold', Status, magic and politics on inscribed Christian textiles from Egypt, in press.