

Woven Interiors

FURNISHING EARLY MEDIEVAL EGYPT



Gudrun Bühl, Sumru Belger Krody, and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams





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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AND THE TEXTILE MUSEUM
DUMBARTON OAKS RESEARCH LIBRARY AND COLLECTION

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COVER: Hanging with a Garden Archway, Egypt, 4th–5th century, the Textile Museum, Washington, DC, 71.18 (see cat. no. 2)

FRONTISPICE: Fragment of a Textile with Vessels Sprouting Vines, Egypt, 4th century, The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, 71.119 (see cat. no. 43)

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Directors' Foreword

JOHN WETENHALL
JAN ZIOLKOWSKI

UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, BYGONE ERAS CAN LOOK REMOTE: for good reason, we refer to such pasts as distant. Any and all of them may seem still further removed today, when the present is even more engrossed in itself than usual. But after viewing the rarities on show in *Woven Interiors: Furnishing Early Medieval Egypt*, no one could argue that history has become unmoving and irrelevant—that it has become, well, history. Not so! The seldom-seen textiles displayed in this fascinating exhibition pay tribute to the capacity of human beings more than a millennium ago to craft enduring beauty and meaning in handmade objects that they produced and purchased for shaping their identities, protecting their privacy, adorning their living spaces, signaling their profoundest faiths, and displaying their wealth. Designers, interior decorators, and architects, take heed: you may be surprised by what you learn.

Both texts and textiles cry out for context, which *Woven Interiors* provides. The centuries from 400 to 1000 witnessed what was formerly called the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the onset of the Dark Ages. Nowadays the epoch may be viewed less negatively as one that witnessed transformation, among other things through the rise of Christianity and Islam. These hundreds of years were a time of repurposing, when previous structures were disassembled and their components fitted into new ones. In architecture, such reused pieces go by the name of *spolia*, the Latin for 'spoils.' In literature, lines of old poetry were fitted together into new compositions known as *centos*, after patchwork garments. The noun *text* also comes from this period, a textile metaphor to signify the wording of Holy Scripture. If the fabric of society was fraying, and if disaster was looming over a world in tatters, someone forgot to tell the artists and artisans who created the art and artifacts in this exhibit. They worked on, spinning and weaving, making wardrobes, bedding and linens, and tapestries for wall hangings and rugs.

Thread is fragile, and things made from it wear out. But if unused or taken out of use, cloth protected from its natural enemies of fire and water can endure. Textiles belonged to the fabric of life from head to toe and from cradle to grave—from swaddling cloths to winding cloths. Many items in this exhibition have survived from having been employed to wrap the dead in arid environments bordering the Eastern Mediterranean. People may talk figuratively about a past shrouded in mystery, but in *Woven Interiors* they can see real shrouds.

This installation emerged from a long and close collaboration between two entities: the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum on the one hand and Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection on the other. Both institutions exist to facilitate study by experts, both serve students within major universities, and both seek to attract visitors from around the globe, across the nation, and throughout the region who come to the Nation's Capital. In this case, colleagues at two museums have held back nothing in sharing ideas, passions, materials, spaces, and other resources, all to free the furnishings of long ago from the veil of secrecy and make them come alive.

Major support for this exhibition, the accompanying book, and related programming has been provided by the Coby Foundation, Ltd., Elisabeth French, Norma and Ted Lonoff, the Markarian Foundation, and Roger and Claire Pratt.





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The Dumbarton Oaks Museum team has been instrumental in supporting our research and the logistics of the loans. Humanities Fellows Rebecca Rosen and Erica Eisen ensured the smooth organization of our two institutions' collaboration. Samuel Shapiro (Postgraduate Curatorial Fellow) stepped in cheerfully to take on research and coordination tasks as we prepared the catalogue for print. Joni Joseph (Museum Collections Manager and Registrar) worked tirelessly to coordinate loans. Ellen Richardson (Manager of Exhibitions) is responsible for the beautiful gallery design. We want to specially thank Catherine Polik (2018-19 Humanities Fellow), who provided helpful feedback on our written texts and steadfastly supported us as we prepared this catalogue for publication. We thank Marek Dospěl for his careful edits and Edna Jamandre for the elegant design.

We would like to extend our thanks to the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum staff for their encouragement, support, and collegiality. We are especially appreciative of Director John Wetenhall for his trust and support in recognizing the need for a major exhibition and a publication on this subject and for committing the necessary resources. We are enormously grateful to our museum colleagues Doug Anderson (Exhibition Production Manager), Olivia Desjardins (Exhibition Coordinator), Maria Fusco (Chief Conservator and

Margaret Wing Dodge Chair of Conservation), Thomas Goehner (Curator of Education), Mahsa Javid (Assistant Director of Development), Lori Kartchner (Programs Associate), Ana Kiss (Special Assistant to the Director), Tessa Lummis (Registrar), Doug Maas (Managing Director for Finance and Administration), Chita Middleton (Museum Communications and Marketing), Richard Timpson (Director of Exhibition Production and Museum Facilities), Danielle Tyson (Assistant Director, Museum Membership & Annual Giving), Eliza Ward (Director of Development), Kibebew Wondirad (Senior Accountant), and Cathleen Zaret (Associate Conservator). They all helped make the exhibition and this catalogue a reality, and they did so with infinite energy, extraordinary care, patience, and ever-present friendship and good humor. Brett Littlehales's exquisite photographs greatly contribute to making a long-term record of these powerful textiles. Tracy Meserve (Librarian, Arthur D. Jenkins Library) read the catalogue for clarity and accessibility to nonexpert readers. We want to express our special thanks to Elise A. Friedland (Associate Professor of Classics and Art History in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the George Washington University) for her support and encouragement from the inception of the project, as well as for her efforts to connect us with the local and national communities passionate about archaeology and the place of textiles in this field.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the scholars whose thoughtful work has informed our exhibition, especially Jennifer L. Ball, Ines Bogensperger, Kathrin Colburn, Cécilia Fluck, Petra Linscheid, Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Sabine Schrenk, Thelma K. Thomas, and Christine Verhecken-Lammens.

Introduction

GU DRUN BÜHL

SUMRU BELGER KRODY

ELIZABETH DOSPĚL WILLIAMS

IN 1971, DEBORAH THOMPSON ESTIMATED THAT 150,000 FRAGMENTS of medieval Egyptian textiles had been collected and held in European and American collections.¹ Thanks to increased scholarly interest and the ever-burgeoning importance of online databases that publicize hitherto unknown collections, our current awareness of holdings worldwide shows that this number is too modest. Among the hundreds of thousands of examples that have survived to our days, few survive intact; and the vast majority of these consists of garments. Recognizably complete furnishing textiles—pieces intended for interior decoration—are relatively rare. Their rarity may explain why they remain understudied—not only in the broader field of art history but also in the specialized world of textile scholarship.

This catalogue highlights major themes explored in the exhibition *Woven Interiors: Furnishing Early Medieval Egypt*. The textiles on display have traditionally been called “Coptic,” which is an art historical term initially used to contrast them with the refined, formal imagery of imperial arts associated with the Byzantine court. The word suggested the perceived folkiness or primitivism of the style, which privileged bright colors, bold contrasts, and geometric abstraction over classical ideals of perspective, realism, and illusion. Over time, the term has come to be associated with ethnic and religious identities of Coptic Christians, suggesting that this group was responsible for making such textiles. In actuality, few of the textiles feature explicitly religious symbols, and it is not always clear that the textiles discussed in this catalogue were used or woven exclusively by Copts.

While accepting Coptic as a traditional art historical categorization, we hope this exhibition will shift attention to the geographic and historical specificities of the fourth through tenth centuries. The objects displayed in this exhibition were made when Egypt was under Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian Persian, and Islamic rule. We might classify these periods more generally as late antique or early medieval. “Late Antiquity” covers a period beginning in roughly the fourth century, when the cultural unity that had characterized the Eastern Mediterranean at the height of imperial Rome began slowly to fragment. The designation “Late Antiquity” suggests that the period represents an end of sorts of the classical world, while in the term “early Middle Ages” we instead see the roots of a new era. From this perspective, we might define the early medieval period as starting with the rise of the Eastern Roman Empire, known today as Byzantium, which dominated the Eastern Mediterranean in the fourth through sixth centuries. In the seventh century, the region underwent major religious, political, and cultural shifts as large swaths of the population converted from Christianity to a new monotheistic religion, Islam. A focus on the early medieval context situates these objects as part of those widespread cultural changes, whose reverberations continue to shape the region today.

As we argue in the pages that follow, furnishing textiles were omnipresent in the medieval world as they are in ours today. They served as cozy bed cloths, they enlivened bare walls and colonnades with shocking color, they cushioned hard surfaces and veiled sacred spaces. We might say that our understanding of medieval architecture will remain incomplete until we incorporate such textiles in our discussions of the villas, palaces, pavilions, churches, mosques,

1 Thompson 1971, pp. 4–5.



and humble abodes of the early medieval world. The reintegration of textiles into medieval built space, however, requires an appreciation for the lost ephemera of medieval lives, for what was too commonplace to note in texts or too temporary to survive in place. It requires looking closely at textiles and architecture on their own terms and leaving the connections to the imagination. With this catalogue, we wish to engage readers in the imaginative process that has driven our work through the years of research and exhibition planning. We hope to encourage readers to think more critically and holistically about the role of textiles as part of early medieval interiors.

AUTHOR ABBREVIATIONS

- GB** Gudrun Bühl, Director, Museum für Lackkunst, Münster, Germany
- SBK** Sumru Belger Krody, Senior Curator, The George Washington Museum/
The Textile Museum, Washington, DC
- EDW** Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, Assistant Curator, Byzantine Collection,
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection







Textiles | Architecture | Space

GUDRUN BÜHL

Bring out hangings of fine linen ruddy of hue; bring purple steeped with Meliboean dye in brazen vessels to enrich the fleece with purest stain. Let the fabric from a far land display the heights of Ctesiphon and of Niphates, and the wild beasts racing over the field, driven to madness by wounds skillfully feigned in red, from which a blood which is no blood seems to issue, as though a real dart had pierced their sides....Let the round table be spread with linen purer than snow, and covered with laurel, with ivy and the green growths of the vine.¹

THESE OFTEN-QUOTED WORDS of the intellectual aristocrat-turned-bishop Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430–c. 489) allow a glimpse into the use and appreciation of textiles in the ancient world. Sidonius's attention lies clearly in the materiality of his fabric furnishings and the delicacy of the woven materials, especially their colors and visual depictions. The eloquent passage offers a vivid impression of the highly specific orders a patron would give to servants to prepare the space and set the scene, all to impress the guests of an upcoming dinner party. The precise details of the architectural setting and the space in the villa, though, are left to our imagination.

Whether for special occasions (such as Sidonius's dinner party), festivals, and holidays, for receiving business visitors, or for everyday life and rituals, villa owners of late antique and early medieval society in Egypt had plenty of choices when furnishing their homes with layers of fabric.² Written sources and contemporary visual depictions provide clues and insights where excavated sites and the recorded archaeological evidence remain silent. Ancient houses as we know them from architectural remains and the archaeological record are today deprived of the soft, colorful, sound- and climate-buffering textiles that once filled those spaces. The organic, fibrous materials used in such textiles deteriorated long ago.

Despite the lack of evidence excavated from houses, thousands of textile fragments from tombs and burial grounds have survived today. Such fragments were discovered in the dry soil and sand of Egypt's ancient cemeteries—mostly during the nineteenth and early twentieth century—and attest to the widespread use of textiles in late antique and early medieval society. Today, these textiles are preserved in numerous museum collections across the world. The majority of these labor-intensive, individually manufactured fabrics, though, survive only in fragments.³ Many are the remnants of furnishing textiles, such as cushions, hangings, mattress covers, pillowcases, floor covers or tablecloths, though most survive incomplete. They were

Detail of cat. no. 7
Cover with Bands of
Geometric Design

reused in graves as burial shrouds, making it challenging to answer questions about their original uses in interior spaces.

The soft and pliable textile objects (a term we may use to call the things custom-made out of wool, linen, and more rarely silk) not only fitted built spaces but also interplayed with architectural settings. They served many functions in varied social and religious contexts. Furnishing textiles complemented other house interior components, such as the permanent, fixed architectural elements of arcades, stone or mosaic floors, wall claddings, wall paintings, and built-in furniture. The fundamental relationship between furnishing textiles and the built architectural elements can be surmised when considering how regularly visual representations of columns and arcades appear on textiles (cat. no. 1). Sometimes the depicted supports are orphaned from any larger context, that is to say abstractly reduced to their proper structural nature—as in the Metropolitan Museum’s textile (cat. no. 4), where the columns do not carry an arch but rather bear floating roundels with busts of people. The design on a hanging now in St. Petersburg is similar conceptually, yet different in execution. There, trees alternate with colorfully decorated columns covered in branches, leaves, and flowers (fig. 1). The hanging suggests a relationship between built architecture and the naturally grown, upright structure of the trees, which themselves embody verticality and the natural forces of supportive strengths.

Distinct from the fixed architectural, space-defining “hardscape” of walls and colonnades, textiles were rarely intended to remain static in spaces. Instead, textiles played an active and changing role in relationship to architecture and to the people’s activities within that architecture, and could be added or removed depending on the time of day, season, or occasion. Hangings and curtains were placed in entryways and passages, as a hanging in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, vividly displays (cat. no. 1). Visual representations in other media show curtains hanging from rods and rings anchored into the supports, in colonnades or at doorways, though rarely, if ever, at windows. These images suggest that textiles like these may be called curtains but preferably (and more neutrally) hangings, since they were likely not meant to become fully open and pulled to the sides. Instead, where two halves of parting curtains or hangings are depicted, they mostly stay connected and joined in the center of the opening. A rare example of a pair of hangings in the British Museum collection (EA29771) suggests how such textiles may have been placed together. These fabrics provide clear evidence of a permeable and movable textile closure. Recent studies of the scarce remains



FIG. 1 Fragment of a hanging; 4th–9th century, wool and linen, 196 × 122.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, ДБ-11660.

of loops attached to the upper border of curtain hangings (see cat. no. 5) allow us to understand how such textiles were hung in situ, namely along a horizontal rod with rings or, alternatively, attached to hooks on door lintels. Such hooks are still in place in early Byzantine monuments, such as Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia, and holes for similar anchors are preserved in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.⁴

Textiles may have even been considered flexible walls and screens. A hanging in the Textile Museum (cat. no. 2) conflates a gabled architectural element and a semi-permanent trellis structure that provides a glimpse into a garden area and suggests thus a permeable screen. Similarly, a hanging now in the Musées Royaux in Brussels depicting a couple (named Colluthus and Tisoia, after the grave in which the textile was found) presents a screenlike trellis in its central field (fig. 2). These hangings vividly and literally express their functions as wall membranes that mediate between distinct spaces that could be divided and connected. Lisa Golombek has



FIG. 2 Colluthus and Tisoia hanging, from Antinoöpolis; 5th century, wool, 205 × 144 cm. Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels, Tx.2470.

argued that “the carpet is the floor, the curtain is the door” in the early Islamic period; we might extend this metaphor to suggest that the hanging is the wall.⁵ “Wall hangings,” a term used widely in the literature on late antique and early medieval textiles therefore may be defined as hangings that served as screens applied in openings. They were likely not affixed to the wall—in the way we hang canvas pictures today—but rather served as dividers or moving walls.⁶

While it is not possible to reconstruct the precise appearance of a textile-furnished space from fragments alone, we can come to certain conclusions about the relationship between architecture and textiles by considering the materiality of the fragments in combination with textual sources and visual depictions of furnishing textiles, for example on late antique and Byzantine mosaics.⁷

Furnishing textiles provided shelter, warmth, cushioning and overall protection.⁸ Textile curtains and hangings divided rooms and courtyards, guided (allowed or denied) access, and shielded

views.⁹ We may consider furnishing textiles as foremostly utilitarian devices helping the dwellers on a daily basis as well as on special occasions to manage the accommodation and movement of visitors and guests, and to screen operations and activities that took place indoors, outdoors, and in interstitial areas like courtyards, atriums, and porticos. Yet art historical research has traditionally foregrounded the pieces’ design and decor—the colorful abstract, floral, geometric or figurative compositions and depictions in tapestry weave—privileging iconography as the most important feature and interpreting the possible messages the textiles’ imagery communicated.¹⁰

Differentiating between the utilitarian qualities of textiles based on their materiality (physical and structural properties) on the one hand and their decoration on the other, however, limits our understanding of furnishing textiles’ roles in the homes and public buildings of the ancient Mediterranean.¹¹ Instead, we are better served if we analyze and valorize the processes of making (the materials and applied techniques) and the processes of designing (everything that drives the conceived and executed plan to choose a certain pattern and decor) in tandem and as equally important, mutually reinforcing layers that together constitute the range of significance and functions in each finished piece of fabric.¹²

An object is always much more than a list of defining qualities and properties.¹³ The focus on identifying specific uses leads us to label types of textile objects; it establishes the object as an (already) made thing, for the purpose of interpreting the textile things conceptually, perceptually and as related to their intentional purpose. Yet this approach locks the material evidence into an identity of constructed materials for the purpose of interpreting monetary value, social value, and the means of signaling status. The focus on the agency of manufactured objects subordinates the relationship of the individual thing (the textile object) to its materials.¹⁴ It does not consider the question of the relationship between the made “textile thing” and the environment. If we consider consequently the materials and the applications of the textile in relationship to the environment, space, and other things with which they came in contact and for which they were made, we discern a principle order of the late antique and early medieval textile cosmos that can be simply put into two categories: hangings and covers.

Thanks to their materiality—their very structure embodies strength and a high degree of malleability and pliability—textiles make a strong statement about flexibility, mobility, and impermanence.

FIG. 3 Wall mosaic depicting the palace of Theodoric; ca. 526. Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.



Indeed, there is a less acknowledged aspect embedded in Sidonius's evocative description quoted above: The various textile objects he ordered to be installed had not been in place before the preparations for the evening begun. We can assume that today's custom of putting a costly and elaborate cloth on the table for festive occasions can be extended to a great variety of textile applications in the premodern world, where textiles served various and changing purposes.

People of the industrialized world differ greatly from the premodern makers and users of textiles in how they value clothing and textile furnishings. Today we generally take the availability and supply of mass-produced textiles for granted. An adult American throws away approximately eighty pounds of used clothing every year.¹⁵ According to Greenpeace, "the average person buys sixty percent more items of clothing and keeps them for about half as long as fifteen years ago."¹⁶ We do not have the same kind of data for premodern fabric consumption, but it is likely that the average adult (aristocrats and rulers excluded) in late antique, early Islamic, and Byzantine times may have owned a very few garments (that is, tunics and cloaks) during an entire lifetime. The perceived value of textiles in the ancient world is thus reflected in the span of time a textile object was kept and used. The textiles found in graves, for example, were worn and used, apparently over long periods of time.

Today, textile manufacturing takes place at locations far away from most (Western) consumers, guaranteeing the industry a highly profitable way of production. Capitalizing on production technologies, trade, and distribution networks, modern buyers consume fabric quickly and cheaply. The disappearance of manufacturing from our everyday experience makes us ignorant about the complex material features of textiles and the process of making. We mostly have lost expertise and experience with the intrinsic qualities of fabric, but we

are still surrounded by textiles on a daily basis.

Since the recognition, perception, and evaluation of any product or object—in our case, things made of fibers—are tightly related to culturally conditioned knowledge of materials and manufacturing processes, we tend to look at ancient textiles with today's assumptions, unaware of cultural and historical differences. But these differences are fundamental to our interpretations of ancient textiles. In regard to more general and basic human needs for comfort and protection, the ways of living in premodern times were certainly quite similar to the modern ones; however, some culturally conditioned habits deserve to be considered as rather distinct from the modern Western world.

For example, and quite obviously, year-round air-conditioning and our desire to constantly control temperature and humidity of the indoors renders the outdoors an uncomfortable and avoidable space for many of us—at least during seasons when heat, cold, and humidity are difficult to bear. Premodern societies obviously lacked the technical capacities to exert such control over their living spaces. They nevertheless managed and applied practices and strategies to respond to challenging and changing climate conditions. Textile hangings provided an important buffer to regulate the flow of air. They were installed to the supports of the arches or the architrave in courtyards. Entrances and doors made of wood or bronze in public buildings were accompanied by door curtains and hangings; while the doors stood open during the day time and were closed and locked at night, the door curtains regulated air flow and light exposure and established a visible yet penetrable threshold signaling to those entering and leaving that they were passing between two distinct spatial realms: public versus private, religious or sacred versus profane, and so on.

Besides the different means to control air and temperature, people of the past practiced different habits of social gathering and communal living, which were again reflected in their architecture—whether for private or public use.¹⁷ The standard architecture of the ancient people around the Mediterranean basin was designed to respond to the climate conditions and the dwellers’ communal and social activities. Besides providing shelter from inhospitable weather, the floorplans created areas to control and manage publicly and privately used sections. The open-roof area in the atrium (*impluvium*) allowed for air circulation. Colonnaded peristyles surrounding interior gardens connected to adjacent *cubicula* (rooms for sleeping), thus allowing for a seamless indoor-outdoor experience. Halls were designed as passages but also for staging entertainment, including dining and artistic performances of dance and spectacle. The often-windowless rooms for dining (*triclinia*) typically opened to an ambulatory or enclosed gard. Guests of a late antique dinner party would not sit on chairs arranged around a table but rather on a bed or couch (*kline*), and those sofas were equipped with a bolster covered by a slipcover (cat. no. 7). On the floors, rugs may have warmed the guests on the colder days. The Metropolitan Museum fragment (cat. no. 6) is very likely a rare survival of such floor covers.

Since dining happened in a reclined position, and cutlery and table dishes were reduced to a minimum, we can imagine that the guests got to appreciate the fresh cloth on the bolstering. But the host may not have taken care of changing the cloth for practical reasons only; textiles likely also made it possible to distinguish guests according to the rank or could be changed according to the nature of the occasion. For example, we know from written sources that the hosts would make distinct choices in placing the right guest on the right piece of cushion.¹⁸

The practical and metaphorical meanings that textiles conveyed in late antiquity were directly determined by the social and cultural settings. But they also hinged on the materials and technology used in their production. Textiles relate to bodily movement, the human experience of space, and the growing concern and developing concept of revealing and concealing in the shifting social and religious contexts of late antique and early medieval societies. Late antique villa owners cared at least as much about the appearance of their interiors as we do today. They put considerable resources and creative thinking into their living spaces to evoke a layered and lush interior, a staged setting meant to convince the invited guest of their rank and social role within the regulated imperial society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sidonius Apollinaris 1915 ed., p. 203.
- 2 New York 2016, p. 28–40; Stephenson 2014.
- 3 New York 2016, pp. 11–14 for an overview of the field; Harlow and Nosch 2014.
- 4 See E. Maguire 2019 for further material and evidence of hanging methods and devices on curtains and hangings. See also Colburn 2019 for detailed documentation of a textile with traces of loops for hanging.
- 5 Golombek 1988, p. 30.
- 6 Schrenk 2004, pp. 24–26; Schrenk 2009.
- 7 For the first comprehensive collected studies with a focus on furnishing textiles is DeMoor and Fluck 2009.
- 8 DeMoor and Fluck 2009, pp. 8–15.
- 9 Parani 2019; E. Maguire 2019.
- 10 The contributions in New York 2016 emphasize the “messages” in the visual design of furnishing textiles despite an attempt of connecting aspects of material and technical evidence with the visual depictions and the possible significance and meaning of textiles’ imagery in constituting identity.
- 11 An early approach toward favoring and focusing on materials and materiality is Fulghum 2001–2.
- 12 Stephenson 2014 stresses the socio-cultural embedding of “Coptic” textiles in the context of late Roman society foregrounding the functional and operational aspects in an attempt to correlate the material evidence with current trends of material culture studies and materiality.
- 13 Shanks 2013.
- 14 Following Bedos-Rezak 2013.
- 15 More than fifteen million tons of used textile waste is generated each year in the United States alone, and the amount has doubled over the last twenty years. See Rick Leblanc, “Textile and Garment Recycling Facts and Figures,” *The Balance Small Business*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/textile-recycling-facts-and-figures-2878122>. Accessed July 11, 2019.
- 16 “Black Friday: Greenpeace calls timeout for fast fashion,” Greenpeace International, <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/7566/black-friday-greenpeace-calls-timeout-for-fast-fashion/>. Accessed July 11, 2019.
- 17 Stephenson 2014.
- 18 Golombek 1988, pp. 30f.

1

Hanging Depicting Ostiarius Drawing a Curtain

Egypt, 5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

188 × 93.5 cm (74 × 36¹³/₁₆ in.)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund
(57.180)

Dressed in the typical attire of a late Roman servant, a short-haired doorman (*ostiarius*) in a tunic cinched with a belt and a pair of sandals pulls a curtain to the side of a richly ornamented column. The column and its counterpart form a monumental archway. The servant draws the striped hanging back for approaching guests. The figure and the architectural elements are the remains of an originally monumental linen fabric of which only these tapestry-woven sections are preserved. The unadorned, plain-woven sections that once surrounded the servant and the arch have been removed in a later conservation effort.

The textile very likely used to have a double-layered function in being itself used as a hanging or curtain to control access to an adjacent space or to mark the threshold between two differently connoted spatial realms. In this sense, the hanging creates and defines a space through both its physicality and iconography. It suggests not only its own function but also broader concepts of interior design and textiles' integral role in architectural spaces. GB

SELECTED REFERENCES

Salmon 1969; DeMoor and Fluck 2009, p. 11-12, fig. 4; New York 2016, cat. no. 59.





2

Hanging with a Garden Archway

Egypt, 4th–5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

213.4 × 117 cm (84¹/₁₆ × 46¹/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1925 (71.18)

This extraordinary textile presents an architectural frame consisting of two columns with acanthus leaf capitals, capped by a triangular gable. The space between the columns is filled with a lattice pattern formed by stylized vine leaves. The pattern itself is perhaps intended to suggest a garden archway covered with vines, similar to the peristyle gardens in late antique houses. The shading of color in the columns and in the plump birds indicates a compelling interest in creating a naturalistic, three-dimensional effect.

We may posit that a textile such as this one might have hung in a reception or dining room or along the columned inner garden, either on a wall or between columns. It would have brought the lush, outside world of spring gardens and birds to the inside, allowing banqueters to enjoy these pleasures while tasting delicacies that their wealthy host provided for them. Alternatively, we might imagine the textile guiding the guests through corridors to their destination in the banquet hall. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 22, cat. no. 2, pl. 2; Dospěl Williams 2018, p. 33, fig. 21.

3

Hanging Depicting a Devotee

Egypt, late 5th to early 7th century

121.8 × 98.5 cm (47¹⁵/₁₆ × 38³/₄ in.)

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1944 (71.79)

This textile belongs to a distinct group of hangings depicting figures either separated by rectangular borders (such as this one) or standing between pillars or inside a colonnade. The best-known examples with similar imagery are in the Katoen Natie Collection in Antwerp, the British Museum, the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Switzerland, as well as in Leiden and London. The Abegg-Stiftung textile is carbon-14-dated to 446–640 CE, allowing us to posit that this group of textiles is of a similar date.

In this group, the composition consists of vertical borders or columns decorated with floral, ornamental, or figurative designs, and of an individual figure in the center opening. The central figures have generally been regarded as mythological characters. The male figure in the present fragment faces the viewer with his head turned three-quarters to his right. He holds in either hand a floral garland of pink and yellow flowers on green stems. The left garland rests on his shoulder while he lifts the right one above his head. The identity of the figure is not clear, but figures carrying floral stems were a popular motif from Pharaonic times until the first centuries of Muslim rule in Egypt. The figures are often regarded as devotional persons or participants in a Dionysiac procession, a topic often presented in the private domain.

Architectural elements define the space for the figure and indicate the directionality of the composition; these features imply that this and similar hangings were meant to be viewed from one direction. They might have been wall hangings or room dividers. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 57, cat. no. 42; Wooley 1989, p. 29, fig. 5.





4

Hanging with Columns

Egypt, 5th–6th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

229.9 × 156.2 cm (90½ × 61½ in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Arthur S. Vernay, Inc., 1922 (22.124.3 & 4)

Depictions of architectural elements appear frequently on large-format hangings, perhaps because the textiles were intended to blur the lines between real and fictive architectural spaces. The woven columns of this hanging share similarities with the painted wall decoration at the Red Monastery in Egypt (fig. 9), suggesting a dynamic exchange of ornamental motifs between these different media. The large size of this hanging, which is over two meters tall and one and a half meters wide, is impressive and unusual. The piece is exceptional also in that it is one of several surviving fabrics that share nearly the same dimensions and iconography—possibly a set, since they were all said to have been found as part of burial shrouds at Shaykh Shatā in Egypt. These details suggest it was intended to decorate a monument large enough to accommodate such a textile. Unlike other fabrics featuring arches and colonnades (cat. nos. 1 and 2), this fabric represents columns as free-floating rather than forming a continuous architectural setting. EDW & SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Stauffer 1995, pp. 20, 43, cat. no. 1; New York 2012, pp. 80–81, cat. no. 50.

5

Hanging with Victories Holding a Bowl of Fruit

Egypt, 6th–7th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

130.8 × 174.6 cm (51½ × 68¾ in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912 (12.182.45)

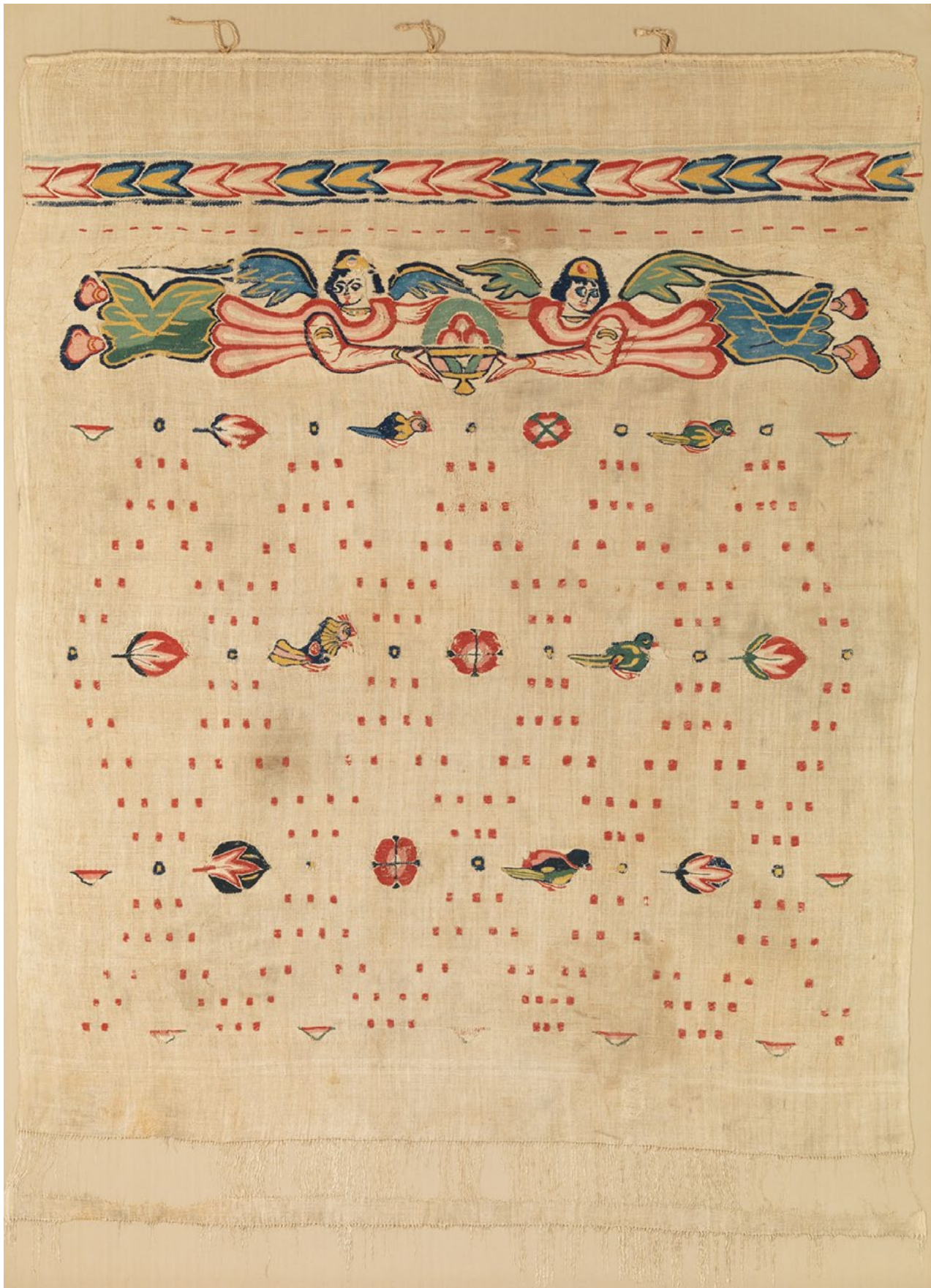
Most furnishing textiles from the late antique period are preserved in fragments, and we depend on circumstantial interpretation and comparative studies to understand their original function and use. This intact, well-preserved textile is therefore a unique and important example. Curtains and hangings rarely survive with preserved holes, hanging loops, or cords as this one does.

The following observations signal that the present textile most likely was a curtain. It was woven to create a relatively thin and flexible fabric in a vertical, rectangular format; the motifs are organized in a loose but evenly distributed pattern with a heavily decorated top portion indicating its original vertical orientation. Furthermore, its structure is tapestry, making the design clearly visible on both sides; and it has regularly spaced loops on the top for mounting on a rod.

The top is decorated with two winged Nikai (Victories) carrying a bowl of fruit (?), set over a trellis pattern inhabited by vividly colored birds and flowers, possibly lotus buds and blossoms. Frequent symbols of victory in the classical world, winged Nike retained their pre-Christian association with victory and prosperity even in the Byzantine era, where they were transformed into angels. Both Nikai and lotus flowers were associated with the abundance of the Nile. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCE

Stauffer 1995, pp. 23, 47, cat. no. 47.







6

Fragment of a Rug

Egypt, 4th-5th century

Supplementary weft pile, polychrome wool

102 × 117 cm (40³/₁₆ × 46¹/₁₆ in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1931 (31.2.1)

This textile is a rare example of a furnishing fabric intended as floor covering, likely a rug. It is telling that its overall design is directly linked to decorative patterns familiar from late antique wall paintings and floor mosaic pavements found throughout southern and eastern Mediterranean (see fig. 33). Its vivid colors, interlocking designs, and shaded geometric forms create an illusionistic effect. These different media complemented each other visually when appearing together in an architectural setting. The tactile qualities of this and similar textiles and their capacity to moderate temperature were valuable additions to the comfort and ambience of domestic interiors. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Stauffer 1995, pp. 10, 14, 24, 48, cat. no. 54; Swift 2009, plate 1;
Denny 2014, p. 56, fig. 42.

7

Cover with Bands of Geometric Design

Eastern Mediterranean, 5th century

Complementary weft weave in plain weave interlacing,
polychrome wool

239 × 125 cm (94 × 49¼ in.)

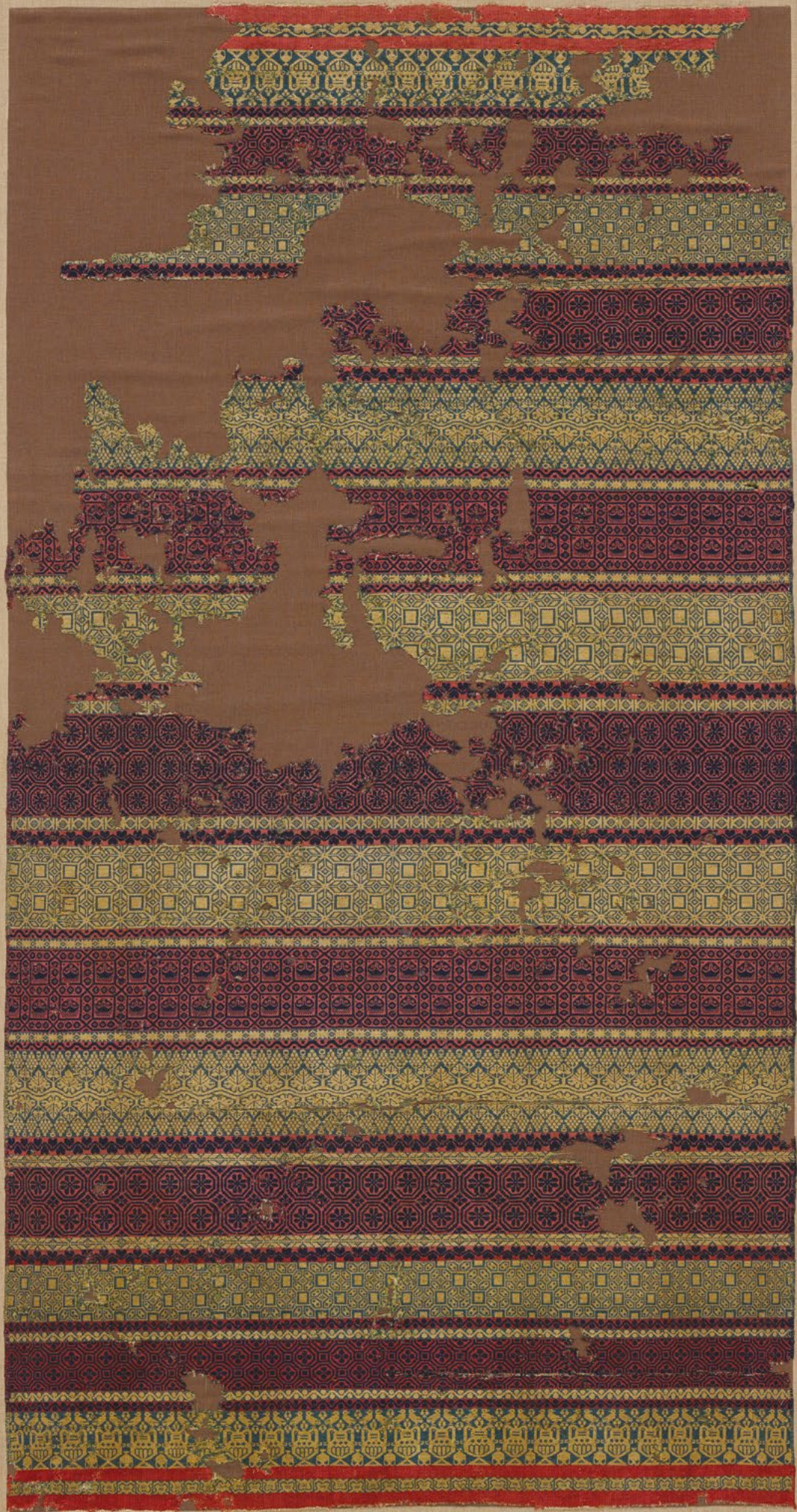
The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt
Myers, 1950 (31.11)

The impressive weaving of this cover shows great technical accomplishment. The variety and elaborate nature of each individual band is breathtaking, indicating a highly developed patterning technique. An example in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (243-1890) that similarly combines tapestry-woven areas with complementary weft weave in plain weave interlacing allows us to posit that such textiles were probably produced on the same loom, only with added heddles, to repeat the patterns horizontally and vertically.

Made of wool, this cover is thick but pliable—the ideal qualities for a bed or bench cover. The various interlocking polygons are known from many early medieval floor mosaics, which survive in greater numbers than textiles, thus exemplifying the artistic interrelations between mosaics, wall paintings, and textiles. Textiles must have integrated seamlessly with the rest of domestic decor. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 28, cat. no. 108, pl. 8; Schrenk 2004, p. 143.





Private Spectacle

ELIZABETH DOSPÉL WILLIAMS

TEXTILES PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE in the social experience of space, perhaps even most significantly in the elite dining room. The iconographic themes shared among fabrics, dining vessels, and floor mosaics make it clear that such works operated together in late antique decoration, particularly in the rituals of hospitality and dining culture. But to immerse ourselves in the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of a late antique dining room, we must use some imagination, since no archaeological evidence points clearly to the uses of textiles in these contexts.

We can look to floor mosaics as snapshots of long-ago dining parties—one possible context for such fabrics. A particularly evocative mosaic panel, probably from Lebanon, helps us imagine how textiles might have featured in these festive gatherings (fig. 4). Nine men, some wearing full togas and others bare-chested, recline in a semi-circle as they enjoy their meal. A small dog picks at one of the many animal bones that lay scattered before the banqueters, the remnants of the meal that have yet to be cleaned from the floor.¹ Most notably, textiles are abundantly represented throughout the scene: fluffy cushions beneath the men's arms, a hanging that screens the door on the right, and even tablecloths beneath heavy silver platters on the three central tables. The care that the mosaicist has taken in rendering these textiles—particularly the table cloths with floral motifs and bare-warp edges (features typical of the surviving large-format textiles) suggests that the pictured textiles may represent actual patterns of usage.

Much has been written on the protocol, customs, and settings of late antique dining.² Evocative traces have survived not only in visual depictions, such as mosaics, but also in furnishings, such as spoons, forks, bowls, and ewers. The most luxurious works depict learned topics drawn from classical mythology. Silver, especially, frequently features imagery drawn from ancient myths, philosophy, and literature, and was closely associated with elite dining culture and learning.³

Many such themes continued well into the Christian era, suggesting a long-lived legacy of these stories that transcended specific religious connotations. Scholars have argued that *paideia* (classical education, mainly through rhetoric and textual learning) was especially prized among the upper echelons of late antique society. Figures from classical mythology, such as Hercules, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Neptune, and the Nereids, feature prominently in the floor mosaics of elite homes throughout Roman and Byzantine territories. Other mosaics depict theater masks, scenes of women at their toilette, and other hints of a rarefied world. Hunting scenes, too,

Detail of cat. no. 13
Hanging with Nereids and
Dolphins in Nilotic Setting



FIG. 4 Floor mosaic with symposium scene and unswept floor; late 3rd or early 4th century, 350 × 250 cm. Private collection, on loan to the Musée de la vigne et du vin, Château de Boudry.



FIG. 5 Detail of a floor mosaic with hunting scenes, from Antioch, Syria; late 5th to early 6th century. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1938.74a&c.



FIG. 6 Hanging depicting Dionysus and his retinue; 4th century, 210 cm × 700 cm. Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, 3100a.

were popular in floor mosaics, possibly because the hunt itself was associated with elite pastimes (fig. 5).

Paideia carried with it a mark of class-based distinction, since it was presupposed that classical education—the ability to recognize cultural nuances and to participate in its prescribed behaviors of witty, informed conversation—fundamentally distinguished social elites from everyone else. In this light, the celebratory iconography depicted on dining accoutrements and in floor mosaics reflected more than auspicious signs or hopes for the good life.⁴ The images also reinforced class differences in perpetuating elite tastes and privileging those with knowledge of the images' content. A parallel today might be a conservatively arranged dining room, with elaborate place settings requiring knowledge of the sequence of meals and the proper fork or spoon to use at each course. Elite tastes for such imagery, informed by the educational advantages underpinning *paideia*, served as a way of marking status and connecting wealthy citizens across the Mediterranean in a shared culture of power.⁵

It is then perhaps not surprising that the iconographic repertory seen in silver plate and on floor mosaics appears also in large-scale textiles, often depicting the same mythological figures. Here, though, we are left with many questions, since little evidence survives to help us understand precisely what connotations these fabrics may have carried or how they functioned in the rooms of elite private homes. They presumably served as backdrops of sorts. Their large scale seems to suggest that they were meant to be seen by several people at once; many depict specific, singular aspects of ancient myths—often decontextualized from broader narratives—suggesting that they were meant to provoke discussion and offer inspirational, perhaps even scintillating, viewing.

Few representations were as popular in late antique dining spaces as those depicting Dionysus and his retinue—including Pan, satyrs, and bacchantes.⁶ This may have been due to the god's association with merriment, partying, and the decadent pleasures of wine. A spectacular hanging in Riggisberg, for example, depicts a languid, nude Dionysus and his various male and female companions in a running colonnade composed of colorful grapevines and flowers (fig. 6). At over two meters high and seven meters long, the piece was meant to overwhelm the viewer through its sheer size. But recounting the narrative of Dionysus's myth seems quite beside the point in this hanging, since there is absolutely no effort at linear narrative in the sequence of the figures or in the choices of iconographic details.⁷ Instead, the individual figures stand alone and evoke an erotic charge in their poses and explicit nudity. This is also the case in a fragmentary hanging now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (cat. no. 8), where the god is provocatively posed. Similar depictions of semi-nude Nereids—also divorced from any pretense of narrative—appear on several other furnishings, giving the impression that such scenes were meant to titillate viewers of a whole range of sexual preferences and persuasions (cat. nos. 12 and 13).

In contrast, the many depictions of heroes and hunting scenes carry a didactic, almost pedagogical charge, and many of the compositions appear serious-minded and even stern. For example, a very fine tapestry-woven furnishing fabric in Riggisberg presents elegantly rendered portrayals of Meleager and Atalanta at over two meters in height (fig. 7).⁸ Although these mythological personages are similarly placed in architectural frames, the military accoutrements of the two figures are given special attention, and their rigid frontal poses suggest monumentality and seriousness of purpose that stand in marked contrast to the sinuous and sensual

depictions on the hangings with Dionysus. The postures of the figures in a hanging at the Textile Museum depicting a hunting or battle scene—possibly representations of Meleager and Atalanta—present stoic chaos, as an Amazon clings to a rearing horse and a semi-nude man dramatically lifts his sword to finish off an enemy (cat. no. 11). In these examples, the overt and playful eroticism of the Dionysus or Nereid hangings has been replaced with instructive examples of successful battling and righteous bloodshed.

Behind the scenes in the elite households where these extravagant textiles were displayed, countless numbers cleaned the floors, scrubbed dishes, and prepared menus for entertaining dinner parties. In the mosaic depicting a dining scene discussed at the beginning of this essay, for example, servants quite literally inhabit the interstices of the room around the large central couch. They are depicted in various stages of hurry as they crouch to serve food, bend over to pour wine from a serving vessel, and rush about in all directions to fill the reclining men's cups and plates. At top right, two figures interact in front of a door veiled with a curtain, which has been partially pulled back to reveal a staging area or perhaps even a kitchen beyond. Large-scale hangings, then, not only served as entertainment for diners, but may also have pragmatically kept the banal preparations for elegant meals hidden from guests' view.

It may sound surprising that so many large-format furnishing textiles depict such lowly servants, who are often portrayed at work, bearing utensils, candlesticks, and platters. An example from the Art Institute of Chicago is one of many weft-loop pile pieces to depict servants in this manner (cat. no. 23). We can only imagine the lively effects that these woven representations of servants imparted in the presence of actual servants at work, though it is difficult to understand the intentions behind such depictions. Were these furnishings meant to pay eternal tribute to the slaves' toils? Were they intended to blur the lines between real and fictive space? Or were they supposed to be merely amusing to their elite owners—as a kind of caricature of the serving class?

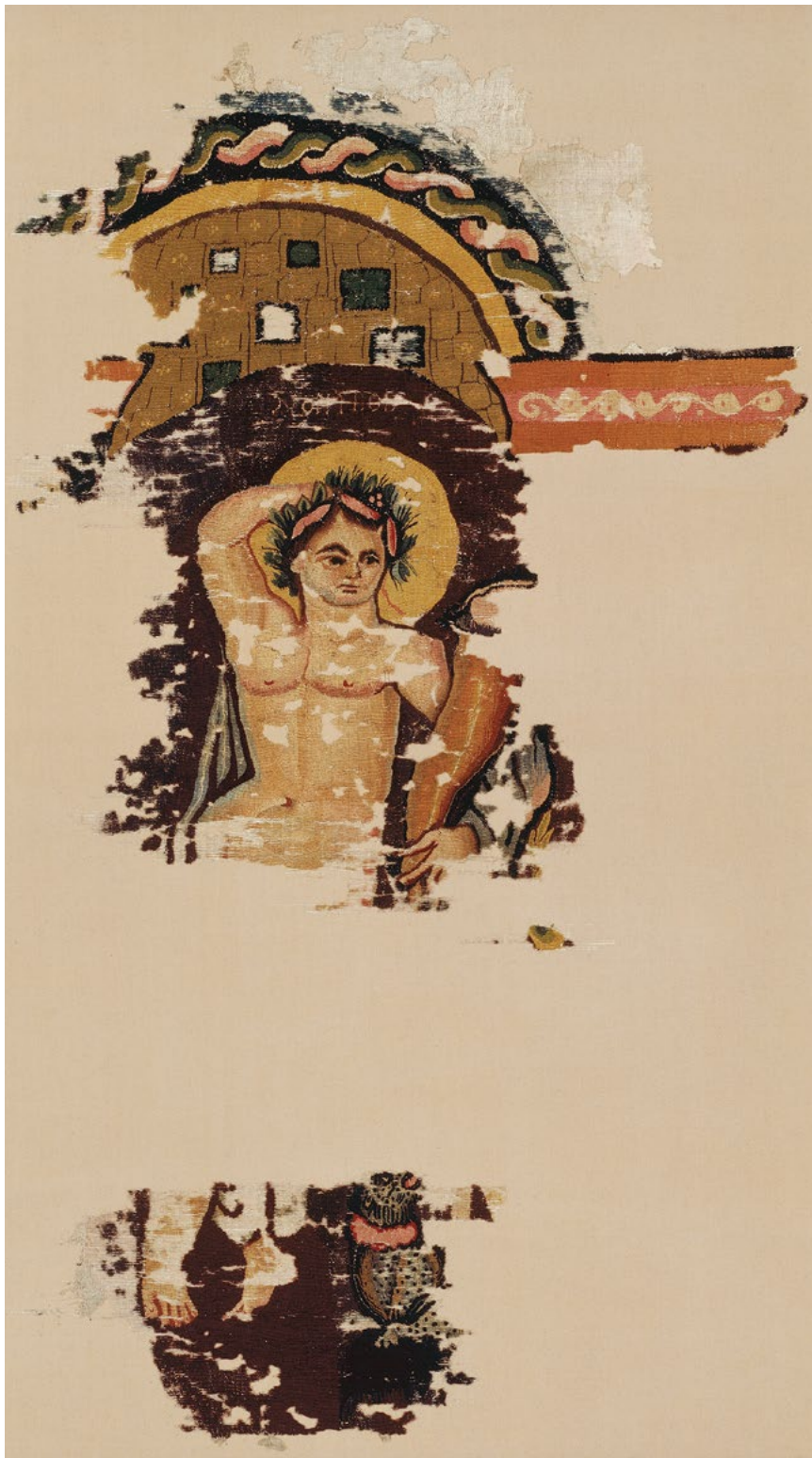
In the final analysis, our imagination must supply the context for these large-format hangings as we try to place them in the immersive environment of refined late antique homes. The fabrics' similarities to other media, the variety in their iconographic repertory, the range in their weaving quality, and the differing arrangement of their narrative elements all provide fascinating, though incomplete, evidence for these spectacular textiles' meanings, uses, and contexts in late antique elite domestic spaces.



FIG. 7 Hanging depicting Meleager and Atalanta; wool and linen, late 4th to early 5th century, 213 × 156 cm. Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, 1100.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a discussion of the unswept floor mosaic type, see Fathy 2017.
- 2 Vroom 2008; Ellis 1997.
- 3 Leader-Newby 2004.
- 4 H. Maguire 1999.
- 5 A. Barnes 2011.
- 6 Parrish 1995.
- 7 Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, inv. no. 31000 in Schrenk 2004, pp. 26–34, cat. no. 1. See also Willers and Niekamp 2015.
- 8 Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, inv. no. 1100 in Schrenk 2004, pp. 41–45, cat. no. 5.



8

Fragment Depicting Dionysus in an Arcade

Egypt, 4th–5th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

139 × 79 cm (54¾ × 31⅛ in.)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund (1973.290)

A nearly life-size figure of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and festivity, poses beneath an arcade. Dionysus is presented in the so-called Lykeios pose, showing the figure with the arm resting on the head. The earliest surviving use of the pose is for Apollo sculptures in the fifth century BCE. By the second century CE, the pose was fully adopted for Dionysus. In this fragment, we can guess that Dionysus was the central figure in a long line of other figures under an ornate arcade. In his left hand, Dionysus holds a cornucopia, perhaps as a suggestion to visiting guests of bounteous feasts to come. The fragment is a great example of how large textile hangings have visual appeal as colorful, aesthetically powerful objects (cat. no. 3). It would have hung in the colonnade of a lavishly decorated elite home as a display of wealth and prosperity of the owner. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

MacMillan Arensberg 1977; Rutschowskaya 1990, p. 87; New York 2016, p. 91, fig. 2-1.3, 13.





9

Hanging with Dionysian Figures

Egypt, late 5th–early 6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

64.8 × 147.3 cm (25½ × 58 in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1931 (31.9.3)

Although presenting an overtly pagan subject of Dionysian revelry, this hanging is probably from the late fifth or early sixth century. This attribution is based on stylistic features of its design shared with mosaics and other art forms from this period. These similarities include the decorative composition of overall repeat pattern, the ornamental frame around the whole composition, the use of compact interlace pattern that encircles the figures in medallions, and the prominent outlines and reduced modeling of figures combined with a more schematic arrangement of their costumes.

Dionysian scenes were widely popular among educated people of all religions in the late antique world, especially in Egypt. Rather than expressions of religious sentiment, they were typical demonstrations of the continuity of interest in classical culture, and acknowledgments of the past. This textile most probably gave its owner opportunity to prove to his guests his sophistication and knowledge of classical learning. sbk

SELECTED REFERENCES

New York 1979, pp. 150–51, cat. no. 129; Providence 1989, pp. 132–33, cat. no. 42; Stauffer 1995, pp. 18–20, cat. no. 45; New York 2016, pp. 22–23, 132–34, 145, figs. 1-1.1, 2-5.6, cat. no. 9.

10

Fragment of a Hanging with Two Hunters

Egypt, 7th–9th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

95 × 82.5 cm (37³/₈ × 32¹/₂ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1937.14)

The proportions and style of the diminutive hunters surviving on this fragment might not appear especially imposing. Drawing from a long tradition of representing humans attacking animals for sport, these images abound on late antique and Byzantine dress and furnishing textiles, but also on silver plates and mosaics. Such images may connote man's dominance and power over the natural world—an iconographic theme popular from ancient times and especially associated with rulership and might. The incomplete and fragmentary state of this piece makes it hard to determine whether the original textile had only the two surviving registers or whether the piece was vertically oriented and included more rows with hunting imagery. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCE

Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1937.14.





11

Fragment of Hanging with Amazons and Greeks

Egypt, 4th–5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

80 × 106 cm (41¾ × 31½ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1946 (71.90)

The complex design, intriguing story it depicts, and the vibrant colors of the textile must have made this hanging a great conversation piece. The inspiration for imagery was most likely drawn from the Amazonomachy—the battles between Amazons and Greeks. The theme was very popular in classical art, specifically in mosaics, vase painting, friezes, and reliefs (including on sarcophagi). Amazons typically ride horses and wear short tunics and short billowing mantles, while their male adversaries, the Greeks, display their braveness and physical strength by appearing naked. We can posit that certain poses were codified to represent specific myths, and that this iconography was carried through centuries to late antiquity and early Middle Ages.

Only the hind legs of two big cats (lions?) survive in this hanging. It is hard to see how the cats fit with the scene; it might have been a visual clue to remind the viewer of the myth of Hercules and the Amazonian queen Hippolyta.

Similar design—only without the cats—is attested on a hanging in the Katoen Natie collection (KTN 2095). The Katoen Natie hanging is much more complete than the present textile and may give an idea of what the Textile Museum fragment might have looked like. Intriguingly, the central scene in the Katoen Natie hanging is framed by a floral border at the top, featuring a zigzag band with heart-shaped buds at the bottom and Corinthian columns on either side. The whole textile is conceptualized as a framed picture to be hung. sbk

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 43, cat. no. 21; Schrenk et al. 2013, p. 232, fig. 11b.



12

Fragment of a Hanging with Two Nereids

Egypt, 5th–6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

95.0 × 143.5 cm (37³/₈ × 56¹/₂ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC (BZ.1932.1)

This large-scale furnishing textile presents two Nereids, or nymphs of the calm sea, on a deep red ground almost as if they were cutouts. The weavers have taken great care in rendering details of the Nereids' curly hair, sheer costume, and valuable jewelry. The right Nereid scrutinizes her own reflection in a mirror while the earrings of the dark-haired Nereid on the left appear as if jolting forward in an effort to suggest movement. The outer border includes a variety of birds set within a scrolling vine. The color scheme is especially vibrant thanks to the deep red of the ground and the underlying warp structure. Such bright colors and simplified decoration may have been preferred to maximize the piece's legibility in a darkened or candle-lit interior. While more furnishings depict the Nereids in various states of dress or undress (cat. no. 13), the present fabric is unrivaled in its charming details and the skill of its tapestry weaving. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCE

Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1932.1.

13

Hanging with Nereids and Dolphins in Nilotic Setting

Egypt, 4th–6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

212 × 162 cm (83½ × 63¹³/₁₆ in).

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1950 (1.48)

This large hanging depicts the Nereids (sea nymphs)—a theme well known in the late antiquity. The execution differs from the other example in this exhibition (cat. no. 12). Was the same weaving pattern (cartoon) used for both? Were they woven in the same workshop? If so, how much could a workshop alter the design while remaining true to the basic design/cartoon? Recent research on papyrus weaving cartoons reveals that weavers using the same pattern sample could vary their interpretation. Another major factor was the skill level, knowledge, and experience of individual weavers.

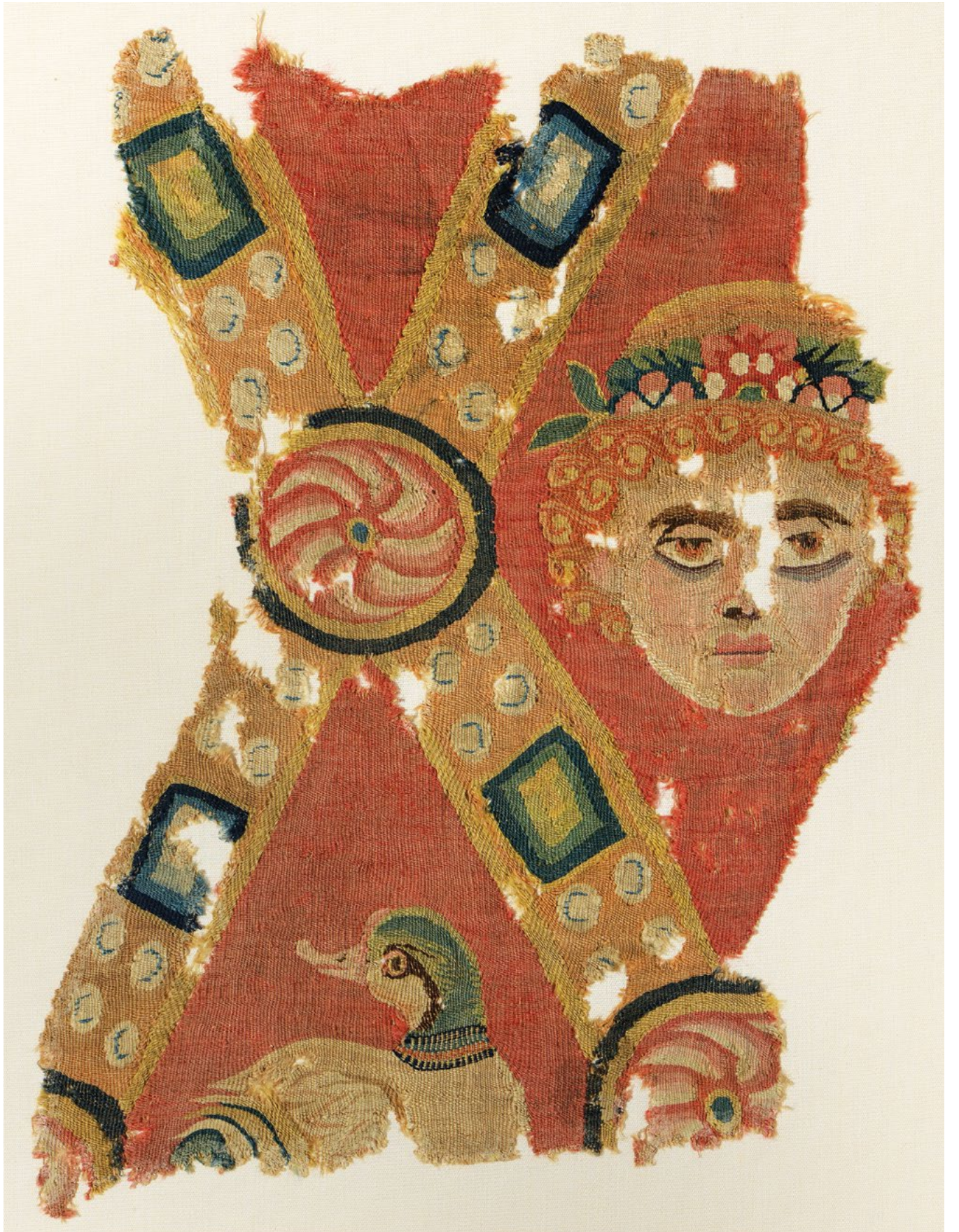
The four Nereids, positioned in the four corners, hold their scarves over their heads while riding various sea creatures—dolphins and seahorses (*hippocampus*). The center figure (possibly another Nereid) is unclear due to damage. She is flanked by four fishermen in two boats. The border design features grazing winged horses—possibly Pegasus. Scattered through the central field are flowers—dried lotus seed pods.

Compared to the other example in the show (cat. no. 12), the workmanship of this hanging is less precise. The Nereids look rather awkward and less three-dimensional, without the animated gestures of the Dumbarton Oaks hanging. sbk

SELECTED REFERENCES

New York 1979, p. 171, cat. no. 150, pl. 4; Woolley 1989, p. 26, fig. 1.





14

Textile Fragment with Head and Duck

Egypt, early 5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

32.9 × 21.5 cm (12¹⁵/₁₆ × 8⁷/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington,
DC (BZ.1946.16)

With its dense weave structure, sensitivity to color and shading, and elegant design, this fragment represents the great craftsmanship of late antique tapestry weaving. The weavers' efforts at mimicry are particularly admirable in the subtle shading of the gems and pearls. The fragment may have once belonged to the main field of a large furnishing fabric, much like the Textile Museum's hanging with a grid pattern of birds and heads set in a pearl lattice (cat. no. 49). This organizing design principle finds parallels in late antique floor mosaics featuring lattices set with floral, vegetal, and human figures. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCE

Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1946.16.

15

Roundel Fragment

Egypt, 4th–6th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool, undyed linen and gold leaf

36.0 × 34.5 cm (14 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1947 (71.91)

A rare example of a tapestry weave with gold thread, this piece gives us an idea of the luxurious textiles in use in the highest echelons of late antique society. It is not clear whether this roundel comes from a large table cover with matching roundels in each of the four corners and in the center or whether it belonged to a tunic with both upper sleeves decorated with a roundel.

The intricate interlacing bands that surround the central portrait (rendered with gold threads) were drawn with precision. The delicate linear pattern was worked in extremely fine linen threads over a ground of plain tapestry weave giving it an appearance of embroidery. The design with supplementary-weft yarn was worked simultaneously with the rest of the textile. This technique of creating fine patterns with supplementary-weft yarns is often referred to as flying shuttle, flying needle, or flying-thread brocading. A set of bobbins or needles made of ebony and, possibly, of bone were probably used to create the fine lines. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 27, cat. no. 83, pl. 7; Providence 1989, p. 150, cat. no. 60.





16

Necklace with Pendant of Aphrodite Anadyomene

Egypt, early 7th century

Gold, lapis lazuli, and gemstones

43.2 × 20.3 × 1.9 cm (17 × 8 × ¾ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC
(BZ.1928.6)

17

Three Sections of Goldwork with Gemstones

Eastern Mediterranean, 4th century

Gold and gemstones

Lengths 6.2, 8.8, 5.8 cm (2⅞, 3⅞, 2¼ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC
(BZ.1975.7a-c)



Textiles and jewelry counted among the most valuable personal possessions in late antiquity. Both men and women wore gold and silver adornments, which conveyed the wealth of the individual and, by extension, of his or her family. And since jewelry was complementary to textiles, we might imagine the rich dress of diners sitting at an elite table amidst finely woven hangings and wearing extravagant jewels.

We tend to think of jewelry in terms of its aesthetic impact, but the premodern world valued it as much for its artistry and craft as for its precious materials. The present pendant, for example, includes a large chunk of lapis lazuli, a stone particularly rare in the late antique world. The stone, in turn, is set within a gold enclosure depicting Aphrodite fixing her hair. Aphrodite's association with beautification and eroticism may have been a particularly significant choice for the imagery of this necklace, which we can imagine beautifying the neck of an elegant, well-off person.

The function and potential wearer of the tripartite goldwork pieces, in contrast, remains unclear. Even though the stones are not as rare as lapis lazuli and the settings do not use a significant amount of gold, the intricate openwork goldsmithing betrays an elite status. The shapes of the sections do not lend themselves to easy interpretation: they may have been part of a necklace or diadem, or sewn on to actual clothing, a practice known only from texts and visual depictions that describe the dress practices of the uppermost strata of late antique society. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

BZ.1928.6

Cambridge, MA 2003, p. 18, fig. 3; Ross 2005, pp. 18-19, cat. no. 12, pl. 20, color plate C; New York 2012, p. 193, cat. no. 133.

BZ.1975.7A-C

Geroulanou 1999, p. 90, cat. no. 47, fig. 150; Ross 2005, pp. 159-66, cat. no. 182, pl. 111-3, color pl. J.



18

Plate with Hunting Scene

Constantinople or Asia Minor, 5th century

Silver

Diam. 28 cm (11 in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1947.12)

19

Bowl with Dionysiac Procession

Constantinople or Asia Minor, 5th century

Silver

Diam. 30.5 cm (12 in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1947.13)

20

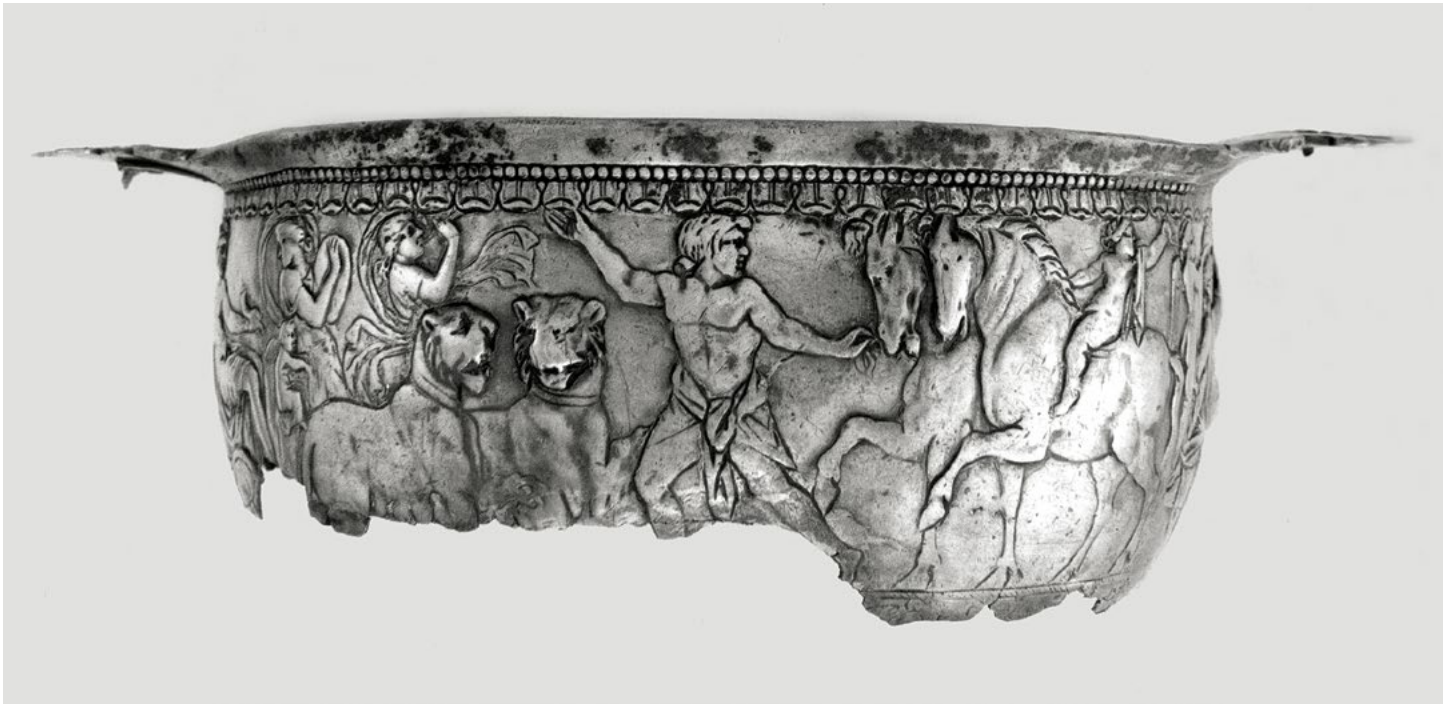
Spoon

Constantinople or Asia Minor, 6th-7th century

Silver

L. 26.5 cm (10⁷/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1937.42)



Vivid depictions of gods, goddesses, and aristocratic pastimes on late antique and Byzantine silver tableware allowed the owner to show off his education steeped in the classical past. Such imagery was likely intended to also provoke discussion among fellow diners.

The objects presented here are meant to evoke a late antique table setting and show the range of imagery that might have featured on elite flatware and tableware. For example, the bowl depicting a Dionysiac procession shows the raucous ceremonies associated with the god of wine. Hunt imagery on the plate, in contrast, referred to elite pastimes and was meant to suggest a sense of cosmic order in which the strong dominated the weak. When we consider that such mythological and aristocratic imagery finds overlaps in textiles and floor mosaics, we might understand these depictions as working together as part of elite visual culture and reinforcing class and status across the late antique Mediterranean.

The spoon included in the exhibition is one of eight presumed to have served as a set. Spoons were commonly used in late antique dining, with each guest using his or her own utensil. Although this spoon features a palmette, others in the set intriguingly bear Greek inscriptions naming Apostles and Evangelists. It remains an open question whether this detail reflects the Christian identity of the spoons' owner or an overlap in liturgical and non-liturgical use. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

BZ.1947.12

Ross 1962, pp. 3-4, cat. no. 4, pl. 2-3; Cambridge, MA 2003, p. 181, cat. no. 97; Bühl 2008, pp. 50-51.

BZ.1947.13

Ross 1962, pp. 5-7, cat. no. 6, pl. 6-7.

BZ.1937.42

Ross 1962, pp. 17-19, cat. no. 13, pl. 17.

21

Hanging with Figures in Arcades

Egypt, 6th–8th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

103 × 148.2 cm (58³/₈ × 40⁹/₁₆ in.)

The Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund
(46.128a-b)

This fragment features two rows of elaborately dressed figures set in a colonnade. The remains of its outer border survive on all four sides, with the most elaborate framing elements featuring stylized floral motifs in a rich spectrum of colors. This fabric relates to other textiles, including a fragment from Dumbarton Oaks (cat. no. 22), which feature similarly prominent borders and directionally situated figures set in jeweled arcades. The figures, with their offerings and gestures, may represent personifications of the seasons or months of the year. A sixth-century floor mosaic at the Monastery of Our Lady in Beth She'an (Scythopolis), Palestine, for example, features well-dressed figures in similar garb, identified in Greek inscriptions as months and bearing emblems of seasonal bounties. EDW

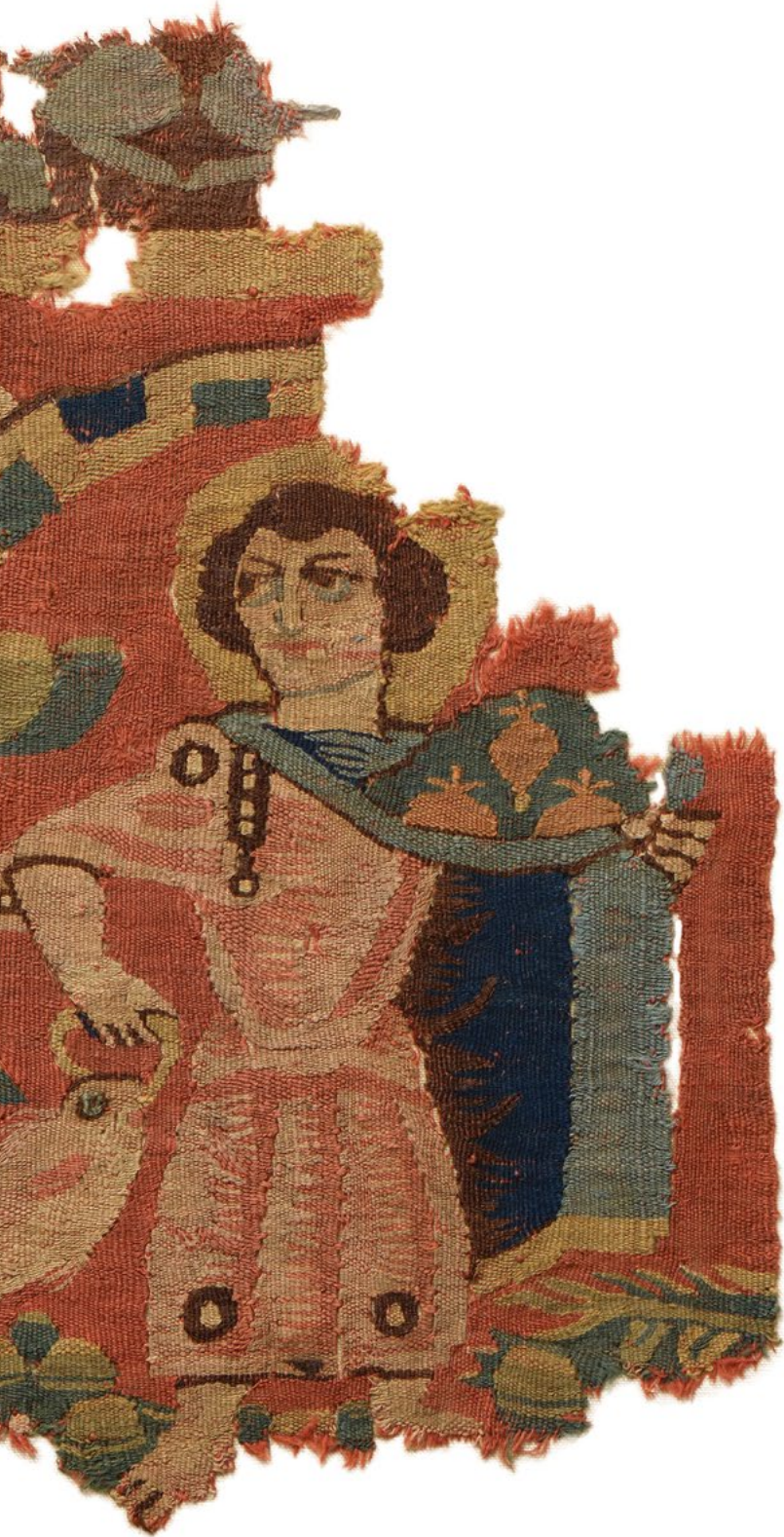
SELECTED REFERENCES

New York 2012, pp. 166–67, cat. no. 108; New York 2016, p. 23,
cat. no. 57, fig. 1.12a,b.









22

Fragment of a Hanging with Two Figures in Arcades

Egypt, 6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

42.0 × 63.2 cm (16⁹/₁₆ × 24⁷/₈ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC
(BZ.1970.43)

This fragment represents the top left corner of what was once a larger hanging: two sides of the border are preserved, as are details from the central field, which features two haloed men facing each other beneath an arcaded colonnade. The richly adorned figures hold baskets, boxes, rings (or tools), and fruit, and they wear colorful, luxurious garb evoking the togas typical of Mediterranean-style dress and the fitted tunics worn in the Persianate sphere.

In technique and style, the fragment relates to several other examples, including one in Brooklyn (cat. no. 21). The large size of these pieces suggests that they were used as furnishing textiles. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

New York 2012, pp. 167–68, cat. no. 109; New York 2016, pp. 108–9, cat. no. 58, fig. 2-3.4; Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1970.43.

23

Fragment of a Hanging

Egypt, 5th–6th century

Supplementary weft-loop pile and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

136.5 × 88.3 cm (53¾ × 34¾ in.)

The Art Institute of Chicago, Grace R. Smith Textile Endowment (1982.1578)

This fragmentary furnishing preserves a nearly complete depiction of a standing male figure set beneath a partially preserved arch supported by two columns. The weavers have taken great care to detail the man's tunic, including decorative elements at the sleeves, knees, and shoulders, as well as a prominent belted tuck. The figure may represent a servant, since similarly sized examples in weft-loop pile portray male figures holding candlesticks, utensils, and serving bowls. The nearly life-sized proportions of the individuals and their arrangements beneath arched passages invite imaginative guesses about these works' original contexts and uses. One wonders if they served as screens or visual stand-ins to hide the real servants working outside visitors' view. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

Mayer Thurman 1984, pp. 53–54, fig. 1; Chicago 1992, pp. 10–11, 143.



ΕΣΤΙ ΑΠΟΛΥΟΛΒΟΣ



Sacred Imagery

ELIZABETH DOSPĚL WILLIAMS

AT SOME TIME IN THE FIFTH OR SIXTH CENTURY, a certain archdeacon Elias took pen to papyrus to record an “inventory of the sacred treasures and other implements” of the Church of Apa Psaius in a hamlet known as Ibion, in the Fayyūm, Egypt (fig. 8).¹ The small church was fitted with all the precious furnishings necessary for liturgy, including patens (small plates), lamps and stands, a basin, books, and other implements in wood, silver, and bronze. Textiles of many sorts pervade this short list, outnumbering all the other groups of furnishings by far. For example, listed below precious silver chalices and a paten are two hangings, followed by a large and a small iron rod. Their listing amidst valuable items in precious metal suggests that the textiles counted among the church’s most-prized items. Slightly further on—following a list of accoutrements for the altar—are twenty-three linen table cloths, five woolen clothes, six door curtains (plus one more specified as old), a woolen curtain, and a coverlet. Lastly, set amidst more durable furniture at the very end of the inventory are a pair of leather cushions and a “triple-woven cloth”—perhaps a complex weave intended as upholstery.

Inventories like the papyrus from Ibion are invaluable in what they tell us about the objects held in churches in the early medieval Eastern Mediterranean. Their precise terminology—so specific, at times, that scholars struggle to translate the words—points to weaving techniques, materials, and even functionality. Such humble documentary texts stand alongside literary, philosophical, and theological texts, which tend to speak about textiles in metaphorical terms: Paul the Silentiary’s sixth-century account of the interior of the imperial Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, for example, emphasizes the effects of light coming through luxurious curtains in the cavernous space. Indeed, this range of textual accounts makes it clear that textiles were critical to the liturgy itself and to the congregation’s experience of the space. Visual depictions, too, help us imagine textiles in churches: the spectacular sixth-century wall paintings of the Red Monastery in Sohag represent curtains in niches and along the bottom register of the apse (fig. 9).

Rich and suggestive resources though such visual and textual evidence may be, it is remarkably difficult (and sometimes even impossible) to connect specific textual terms or visual depictions to surviving textile fragments. Determining what textiles appeared in late antique shrines or churches proves therefore very challenging and remains largely speculative.² Iconography presents one of the few indicators of religious function, but even this is an unreliable measure, since textiles with religious imagery were certainly used at home, and textiles devoid

Detail of cat. no. 29
Hanging with a Depiction
of Hestia Polyolbus

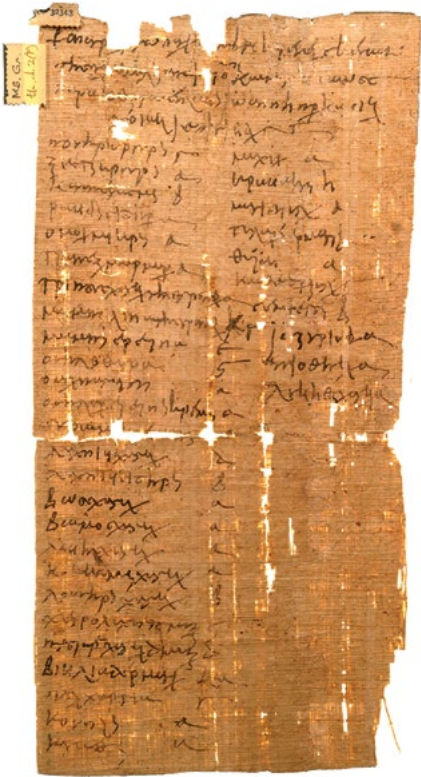


FIG. 8 Church inventory from Ibion, Egypt; papyrus, 5th or 6th century, 29.2 × 14.6 cm. The Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Gr. th. d. 2 (P).



FIG. 9 Apse with painted textile hangings; 6th century. Red Monastery, Sohag.

of any overt confessional figuration were very likely brought into service in the liturgy. A tapestry in the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, for example, that measures over four and a half meters long and is almost three meters tall, depicts the Virgin, angels, and saints set amidst ornamented columns; crosses along its borders drive home its decidedly Christian message (fig. 10).³ With its iconic figures detached from any running narrative within an architectural framework, this piece seems a cousin of the Dionysus hanging in Riggisberg as discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 6). This comparison raises questions about the Geneva hanging's use and context: where would such a large, overtly religious work have ever

hung? If in a church, what was its effect when viewed against wall paintings or within built architecture? One can imagine the visually powerful effect of placing a textile depicting brightly colored, life-size holy figures in a church filled with congregants. If it hung in a private home, what was the purpose of such emphatically Christian imagery in a domestic setting? Perhaps the intention was to provoke learned discussion, in a kind of Christianized *paideia*.

The case of the Hestia Polyolbus tapestry is an especially instructive one in showing the blurriness of "sacred" and "secular" categories, as well as the difficulties of defining what counted as religious space and religious iconography (cat. no. 29). For many



FIG. 10 Hanging with the Virgin, angels, and saints; wool and linen, ca. 8th century, 285 × 455 cm. Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, AD 4447.

years, the fragment's arch shape led scholars to posit that the piece was meant for frontal viewing, from faraway, in a niche setting. But technical analyses have shown that the arch shape above Hestia's head could not have been the outer edge of the textile. Instead, the piece intersected with a surrounding fabric field (now lost), which must have been cut away at the time the piece was sold on the art market in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. This technical observation forces us to reconsider Hestia's original setting and possible use. Perhaps the tapestry featured instead in the atrium or rooms of a private home—a location that seems more fitting, given Hestia's association with the hearth. The wall paintings of the Virgin and Child in the atrium of a private house at Kom el-Dikka suggest that dichotomous categorizations of private and public, sacred and secular, Christian and pagan were not as strict in the late antique world as they tend to be understood today (figs. 11 and 12).

Many large-format textiles, however, do depict overtly religious scenes, perhaps because such hangings became more popular as Christianity took root in Egypt and religious practices became more defined. The fabrics' range in quality and technique may suggest that they were made in many workshops, deployed in different contexts, or sought after by a wide-ranging clientele of differing means. The humbler end of this spectrum is represented by a plain weave and tapestry hanging at the Cleveland Museum of Art, depicting three individuals with hands raised in a gesture of prayer, who are set between two columns and an arch (fig. 13).⁴ Christian symbols abound in this weaving; they include the alpha and omega (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, references to Christ's position at the beginning and end of time) and two renderings of the chi-rho monogram of Christ's name in Greek. Finally (and most intriguingly), a red ankh-cross is set above the Ichthus acronym proclaiming Christ as the Son of God and Savior. The largest single motif at the very



FIG. 11 Reconstruction of a wall painting of the Virgin, from House D, Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria; first half of the 6th century. Drawing by Marek Puzkarski after Halina Lewak.

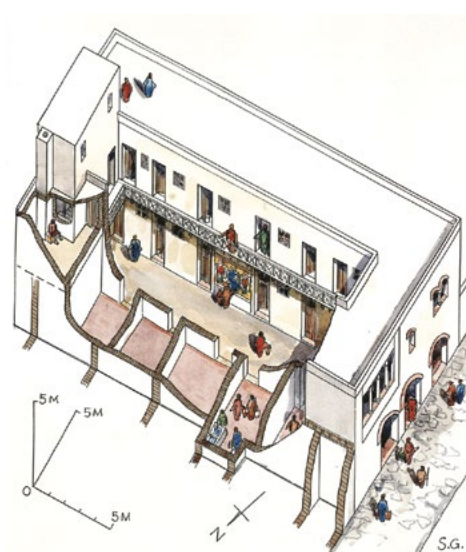


FIG. 12 Axonometric reconstruction of House D, Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria; ca. 5th–7th century. After S. Gibson, in McKenzie 2007, fig. 374.



FIG. 13 Hanging with Christian imagery; wool and linen, 6th century, 110.5 × 76.8 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1982.73.



FIG. 14 Fragment of a hanging with ankh crosses; wool and linen, 4th-5th century, 178 × 46 cm. The Field Museum, Chicago, 173932.



FIG. 15 Hanging depicting Elias and worshippers; wool and linen, C-14-dated 370-543, 309 × 344 cm. Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, 2439 & 2638.



FIG. 16 Hanging with biblical scenes; linen, 6th century, 104.1 × 97.8 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1951.400.

center of the fabric, this symbol drew together the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for life (the ankh) and the Christian cross.

We often find Old and New Testament scenes and symbols on pieces woven in weft-loop pile, a technique where short tufts of wool weft are pulled through a plain-woven fabric that serves as the foundation for the design. This approach results in pixelated, slightly squarish figures. Because enormous amounts of weft threads are needed to create the design, the fabric is weightier, more structured, and provides better insulation.⁵ For example, the fragment of a monumental hanging at the Field Museum, Chicago, features the remains of a now-garbled inscription in either Coptic or Greek, an architectural arcade, and a field of ankh-crosses arranged in diagonal rows, but no figural representations (fig. 14).⁶ At almost two meters tall even in its current, incomplete state, the hanging almost certainly was intended for a monumental space, possibly a church.

In contrast to that piece's monumentality and ornamental repetition, another weft-loop hanging, now at the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, aims for narrative precision: Old Testament scenes, including the ascension of Elijah, scenes from the life of Moses, and the Sacrifice of Abraham, are set within registers framed by architectural features (fig. 15).⁷ Here, the technique, style, and visual composition work together to aid legibility: weft-loop pile adds stiffness to the fabric, block-like pile patches create clearly defined

figures, and registers make it easy to read the imagery even from a distance.

In addition to tapestry weave and weft-loop pile, religious imagery appears also in textiles woven in plain weave and decorated in resist-dye, a technique where designs are drawn directly on the fabric before the entire fabric (usually of linen, but sometimes of cotton) is plunged into a dye (indigo, in many cases). Only a small percentage of textiles from late antique Egypt use this technique. Indeed, there is some indication that such textiles should be associated with imports from India, arrived in Egypt through Red Sea trade networks.⁸ Of surviving examples of furnishing textiles in resist-dye technique found in Egypt, however, many are rendered in large-format and feature registers with scenes from the Old and New Testament; some even include registers with geographical landmarks of shrines.⁹ Many are of enormous dimensions: a highly fragmentary piece now in Cleveland, for example, measures 104.1 × 97.8 cm. It features three rows with Nativity scenes, narrative scenes of Christ miracles, and Old Testament stories featuring Jonah and Moses (fig. 16).¹⁰ While fabrics with Old and New Testament scenes represent the best studied of these large-format hangings in resist dye, other surviving examples held in museum collections feature iconography that could be associated with ancient mythology (including many fragments with scenes from the life of Dionysus).¹¹ A fabric of the



FIG. 17 Goddess with cornucopia, and other scenes; excavated at Ming-feng, Niya, China, cotton, ca. 3rd to early 4th century, 45 × 86 cm. After Rhie 1999, plate IX.

same technique excavated in Niya, China, features human figures, one identified as a goddess figure or a Tyche (fig. 17).¹² More remains to be discovered about the uses of these resist-dyed textiles, particularly to determine if they had a religious or cultic use, and to understand the close associations with Asian textiles, especially from India (cat. no. 28).

The most spectacular examples of textiles with Christian iconography are undoubtedly tapestry-woven fabrics in large format, like those fragments depicting the popular warrior saint Theodore (cat. no. 26). The precise function and setting of such pieces are unclear, but their high quality and focus on specific saintly figures suggest they were intended not for frequent liturgical use but rather as special devotional items. Few achieve the impressive visual impact of a large textile depicting the Virgin (cat. no. 30). At center, the Virgin sits atop a gem-studded throne with Christ in her lap; she is flanked by angels, who are positioned as if standing behind her. By including columns on either side of the central figures, the composition demonstrates a clear concern about spatiality and framing; we look through an architectural structure to behold the static, hierarchical representation of these divine beings. And yet, the garland of the frame leaves us to understand the whole composition as a static image for contemplation rather than as a window to a world beyond the fabric. This stands in stark contrast to the types of architectural renderings in the secular hangings discussed in the first chapter, which invite viewers to imagine the spatial effects of architecture and act almost as ephemeral architecture on their own. It seems instead that the Cleveland hanging was intended to represent non-space, or perhaps a space operating outside human time.

Thinking about the spiritual aspects of late antique textiles raises many questions about the metaphorical meanings embedded in cloth. This pushes our interpretative frame well past documentary texts or archaeological evidence, since these sources are mostly silent on function and use. After all, we cannot know for sure whether any of the fabrics described in this essay or shown in the pages of this catalogue correspond to the textiles inventoried on that humble papyrus inventory from Irbid. Instead, we might attempt to see late antique textiles with religious imagery in the way that contemporary viewers did—as artifacts densely loaded with associative meanings. This helps us consider the power that textiles had in instructing the faithful on biblical narratives, in focusing devotional prayer to the saints, and in mediating between the mundane world and the divine.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Published as P.Grenf. 2.111 or MS. Gr. th. d. 2 (P). Discussed in Caseau 2008, pp. 574-76. Greek text at litpap.info/ddbdp/p.grenf;2;11http1. Accessed July 11, 2019.
- 2 Fluck 2018.
- 3 Geneva, Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, AD 4447 in Martiniani-Reber 1991, p. 68, color plate.
- 4 The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1982.73; www.clevelandart.org/art/1982.73. Accessed June 26, 2019.
- 5 Colburn 2019.
- 6 The Field Museum, 173932. This piece is unpublished. I thank William Parkinson, Curator of Anthropology, for allowing me access to study it.
- 7 Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, inv. no. 2439, in Schrenk 2004, pp. 47-50, cat. no. 7.
- 8 For recent excavated finds in Berenike, see Wild and Wild 2005.
- 9 Schrenk 2002.
- 10 The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1951.400; www.clevelandart.org/art/1951.400. Accessed June 26, 2019.
- 11 A study on biblical scenes on resist-dyed textiles appears in Illgen 1968.
- 12 Found in Tomb 59MNM 001. Published in Rhie, 1999, pp. 364-66, pl. 11.



24

Curtain with Erotes, Animals, and Geometric Motifs

Egypt, 4th-5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

342.9 × 195.6 cm (135 × 77 in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1950 (71.118)

The spread of Christianity may explain the ambiguous design choices in this textile. The composition includes vibrantly colored and detailed bands with figural and geometric decoration. The portrait medallions and lively erotes suggest a pagan or mythological subject, supplemented by vegetation and wildlife to add an impression of abundance. Other bands contain geometric motifs reminiscent of architectural ceiling decorations. The colorful, luxurious, and realistic presentation owes to the use of an array of vibrantly dyed wool-weft yarns. The gradation of color produces a naturalistic, three-dimensional effect, mimicking light and shadow, also found in contemporary mosaics and wall paintings. It was undoubtedly produced in a workshop. The design is laid out with precision, the wool weft and warp yarns are very fine, and the craftsmanship is quite extraordinary.

This sumptuous textile was fashioned to display wealth and influence within the home and displays an enduring appreciation for ancient imagery. sbk

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, pp. 21, 31, cat. no. 1, pl. 1; Rutschowskaya 1990, pp. 38-39.





25

Hanging with a Figure Holding a Basket

Egypt, 4th–5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

50 × 42 cm (19¹¹/₁₆ × 16⁹/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1927 (71.10)

Does this image present a woman or a man? Could this person be Dionysus or his follower with a thyrsus (a wand or staff of giant fennel covered with ivy vines and leaves and topped with a pine cone)? Is it a representation of one of the four seasons, holding a basket with the fruits of that season? Or is it a Christian saint? Most likely a part of a much larger hanging, this fragment could have belonged to sacred and secular realm alike. If made for the sacral sphere, it was one of those representations that reflected the fluid religious landscape of the early medieval Eastern Mediterranean, where many ancient mythological iconographies were adapted or adopted for Christianity, giving followers a comfortable transition from one to another belief system.

The superb workmanship indicates that the hanging was no ordinary piece of textile. The gradation of color produces a naturalistic three-dimensional effect. It might have been part of a larger hanging that showed figures either separated by rectangular columns or standing between pillars or inside an archway of a colonnade. The result must have been a sumptuous textile fashioned for either secular or sacred purposes within a wealthy home. Such advertisements of wealth not only demonstrated piety but also reinforced political power and influence within a society. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCE

Washington, DC 1982, p. 23, cat. no. 3, pl. 3.



26

Fragments of a Hanging with Saint Theodore and Inscription

Egypt, 6th–7th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

37 × 48 cm (14⁹/₁₆ × 18⁷/₈ in.); 32 × 44 cm (12⁵/₈ × 17⁵/₁₆ in.)

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller (1939.112.1 & .2)

The popularity of soldier saints soared in the late antique and medieval periods, as the faithful flocked to the protective powers of saints like George, Mercurius, and Theodore in a period of widespread warfare and general cultural upheaval. Because these saints were almost universally depicted as holding military accoutrements and riding horseback, their iconographic representations often overlapped, making it sometimes difficult to tell one from another. The figure in this fragment dons the heavy cloak (*chlamys*) and scraggly beard associated with soldiers. A fragmentary Greek inscription at the bottom of one names St. Theodore. The remains of a ghostly arm behind the figure's left shoulder suggest that the fabric once portrayed several saintly figures—a configuration in keeping with late antique representations of multiple holy warriors together. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

New York 1979, pp. 549–50, cat. no. 494; Providence 1989, p. 215, cat. no. 128.





27

Fragment of a Head

Egypt, 5th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

23 × 18 cm (9¹/₁₆ × 7¹/₁₆ in.)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles
Potter Kling Fund (1976.743)

This skillful weaving portrays the head of a man in three-quarter view. Special care has been lavished on his curly hair and the tendril-like ends of his beard; the weavers have introduced shades of pink and beige to suggest plump cheeks and to outline the bridge of his nose. The fragmentary state of this textile makes it difficult to guess the figure's identity. His large eyes, curly hair, facial hair, and remnants of what may be a yellow halo may indicate that he was a military saint, of the type seen in the depiction of St. Theodore in a furnishing textile at the Harvard Art Museum (cat. no. 26). However, mythological figures were also often depicted with halos, as in the renderings of Dionysus and his retinue in hangings at the Abegg-Stiftung (fig. 6). Overlaps in iconographic conventions point to the often-ambiguous line separating Christian representations from pagan ones in the time of profound religious changes in late antiquity. EDW

Unpublished



Hanging Decorated with Crosses and Floral Motifs

Egypt, 5th-7th century

Plain weave and resist-dyeing, cotton

270 × 131 cm (106⁵/₁₆ × 51⁹/₁₆ in.)

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of

The Hagop Kevorkian Foundation in memory of Hagop Kevorkian

(1975.41.31)

Large-format resist-dyed hangings from late antique Egypt are rare. The few surviving examples tend to depict figural scenes, such as representations of mythological figures like Dionysus and Artemis or Old and New Testament stories (fig. 16).

The present textile, in contrast, is non-figural, with a strong emphasis on the representation of the cross. It features four medallions filled with crosses at the inner corners, and a larger central medallion with a cross accompanied by small cross-shaped blossoms. The surrounding central field is filled with scalloped designs recalling stemmed flowers set in arcades. The unusual technique of this piece (both resist-dyed and painted), the color scheme (reds, blues, and tans), and the material (cotton) are usually associated with Indian import textiles found in Egyptian burials of the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. This textile, however, has most recently been carbon-dated to the late antique period, roughly the fifth to seventh centuries. More research is therefore needed to determine whether the piece was woven or dyed in Egypt or in India, and whether the lack of figural iconography reflects concerns about the legitimacy of image worship that pervaded Christian theological debate in precisely these centuries. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

Brooklyn 1941, p. 83, cat. no. 263; Harvard Art Museums 2016.

29

Hanging with a Depiction of Hestia Polyolbus

Egypt, 6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

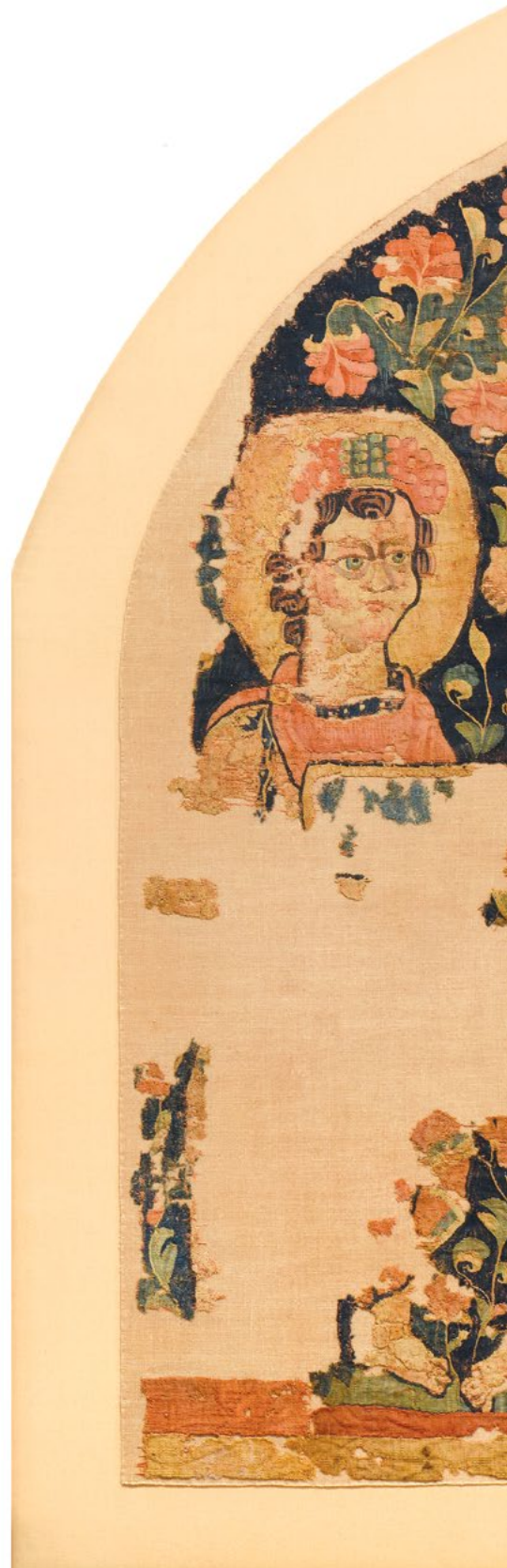
114.5 × 138.0 cm (45¹/₁₆ × 54⁵/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1929.1)

This textile depicts Hestia Polyolbus, the mythological guardian of the hearth. For many years, this textile was assumed to have hung in an arched space or niche, and to have been viewed frontally, and perhaps used ceremonially. Technical analyses, however, have shown that the arch shape above Hestia's head could not have been the outer edge of the textile, and that the piece instead intersected with a surrounding fabric field, now lost, quite possibly cut away at the time the piece was sold on the art market, in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. This technical observation forces us to reconsider Hestia's original setting and possible use. Perhaps the tapestry featured instead in the atrium or rooms of a private home, a location that seems more fitting, given Hestia's association with the hearth. The weaving's similarity to tapestry weavings with Christian themes points to common production of these textiles, as weavers accommodated a range of religious beliefs. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

Friedländer 1945, pp. 1-26, color frontispiece; Cambridge, MA
2003, pp. 163-64, fig. 15; Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019,
BZ.1929.1.







Hanging (Icon) with Depiction of the Virgin and Child

Egypt, 6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

178.7 × 110.5 cm (70⁵/₁₆ × 43¹/₂ in.)

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund
(1967.144)

Seated on a high-backed jeweled throne with footstool, the Virgin holds the Christ child on her lap. Archangels Michael and Gabriel stand at either side of the elaborate throne. The scene is flanked by two columns with capitals in the form of acanthus leaves. They support a thin lintel with a Greek inscription identifying the figures. The area above the lintel is reserved for two angels grasping the divine light (mandorla) enclosing enthroned Christ. The border contains medallions of twelve apostles with their names inscribed in Greek among the foliage, as well as flowers and fruit motifs.

This hanging is a rare surviving example of a large-scale textile with explicitly Christian imagery. And what is more, it was likely intended to be a monumental icon. Abbot Adomnan of Iona (c. 624–704) mentions woven icons among the miraculous works shown to pilgrims in Jerusalem; he especially describes a linen cloth “said to have been woven by Saint Mary and is for this reason preserved in a church and venerated by the whole population. Pictures of the twelve apostles are woven into it, and there is also a portrait of the Lord.” *SBK*

SELECTED REFERENCES

Shepherd 1969; New York 1979, pp. 532–53, cat. no. 477, color pl. 14;
Klein 2007, pp. 70–73, cat. no. 18.



Comfort at Home

SUMRU BELGER KRODY

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY and throughout most of the twentieth century, studies of late antique and early medieval textiles focused on questions related to iconographic and stylistic development, with the goal of establishing chronology. The early approach is understandable, considering that most of the textiles that entered public and private collections during that period came without any contextual information, such as can be gleaned from excavation records.

Owing to recent excavations done with modern methods and thanks to the improvement of carbon-14 dating, we are now able to better contextualize the textiles. This research has started to generate new information instrumental in establishing dates and provenance of these textiles; as a result, it has clarified connections between regional and chronological characteristics. New data and technology also give rise to studies focused on textile structures and techniques as they relate to textiles' functions.

It is helpful to understand that some essential realities of our everyday lives today—such as desire for shelter and comfort—are not much different from the experience of people in late antique and early medieval Egypt. The ancients, too, had jobs to carry out, religious duties to perform, and they needed shelter and insulation from the elements. Humble archaeological finds from settlements like Karanis in Egypt give a glimpse of ordinary people's lives (fig. 18).¹ Like us, they surrounded themselves with things, among which textiles took a center stage (cat. nos. 37-42). Textiles created environments that were physically, sensually, and spiritually comfortable.

In domestic settings (both private and public rooms of private houses), textiles served a wide range of functions: to partition rooms, temporarily close arcades, decorate walls, or block openings. They served as curtains, wall hangings, blankets, spreads, bed covers, cushion covers, and towels. With their soft material and texture, covers provided comfortable surfaces to sit or recline on, while hangings offered insulation in cooler weather and protection from the harsh mid-summer sun. Textiles' designs had the power to protect households and individuals spiritually, and their religious iconography could remind individuals of their sacred duties.

While the fragmentary nature of most surviving textiles makes it difficult to guess their original functions, close study of materials and techniques employed can help with determining whether a textile is a furnishing or part of dress.

Linen and sheep's wool dominate among the textiles surviving from late antique and early medieval Egypt. Wool had begun to be used extensively in Egypt after the third century BCE.

Detail of cat. no. 32
Fragment of a Hanging or Cover



FIG. 18 Excavation photo of a line of 4th-century houses in Karanis, 1924–1935. Kelsey Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 5.1928.

Most of the time, it was employed to weave the decorative parts of textiles. The linen yarns were used for the undecorated parts of the textile and to create pure white accents and outlines within colorful wool decorative parts.

Combining two very different yarns (wool and linen) in a single textile presented a challenge to ancient weavers. But they insisted on using them together, as evidenced by numerous surviving examples. Their insistence in using wool was probably due to the color that wool yarns brought to the weaving. Wool fibers take dyes better, hence a greater variety and more saturated colors of dyed wool textiles (figs. 19 and 20). If used exclusively, the material characteristics of the wool fibers produced fabric that was thicker and warmer, and to a certain extent water-proof.²

In contrast, silk and cotton were luxury fibers that needed to be imported. Textiles made entirely or mostly of silk were considered high-end, luxury fabric used only by the highest strata of society. Silk fabrics generally survive as small highlights on larger textiles—mostly as garment trims or details.

Regardless of the type of fiber, the production of yarn was immensely time- and labor-consuming. Depending on the size of the textile, it might have taken longer to prepare the fibers than to weave the textile. Egyptian spinners of the period tended to produce yarns twisted or spun in the S direction.³ This characteristic is often used to determine Egyptian provenance and to date textiles to late antiquity and early Middle Ages.

Considering the figurative and narrative scenes of many surviving textiles, it was essential to have diverse colors and hues to produce such rich designs. Dyestuffs included madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) and woad (*Isatis tinctoria*), followed by indigo (*Indigo argentea* or *Indigofera coerulea*) and Persian berry (*Rhamnus infectoria* L.). There are some textiles with traces of insect lac dye (*Laccifer lacca*), but those textiles have been attributed sometime between the last quarter of the seventh century and the last quarter of the ninth century. This indicates the later arrival of lac dye, most likely during the post-Arab conquest. Some dye analyses conducted on late antique and early medieval textiles revealed even brazilwood and Armenian cochineal, but those dyestuffs appear on clearly non-locally produced textiles or yarns.⁴

Mordants have a major impact on the variation of color and hues achieved through dyeing.⁵ A dyestuff such as madder can give any variation in color from deep red to dark brown, based on the mordant and steps used in the dyeing process. Alum, followed by iron and copper, are most frequently detected mordants on the surviving textiles. Dyers were able to achieve an enormous range of colors with these mordants.⁶

To create new textile colors, spinners would occasionally ply two different color yarns together (fig. 21). The juxtaposition of certain color pairs was also used to give different hues to the same color.

The immense variety of weaving structures and decorative techniques observed among the surviving examples provide a



FIG. 19 Detail, cat. no. 27.



FIG. 20 Detail, cat. no. 25.



FIG. 21 Detail, cat. no. 3.

glimpse of the range of options available to weavers when planning how to weave a textile. In many examples, close examination of the textiles clearly indicates that the structure chosen for the given textile was based on its end function, such as a cover for a cold winter day, a hanging celebrating a religious occasion, or a garment.

Many Egyptian textiles of this period are based on plain weave. Weavers were able to achieve a great variety of effects using this simple structure and its variations. In plain weave, both vertical warp and horizontal weft yarns go over one yarn and then under the next. All weaving traditions include plain weave, which is easy to produce on different types of looms. The large tapestry-woven hangings and covers almost definitely were woven on upright, or vertical, looms, where the weaver sat in front of a vertically stretched set of warp yarns (fig. 22).⁷ In the Eastern Mediterranean, weavers appeared to favor the upright loom. By varying the color, materials, thickness, and density of the yarns, they produced textiles with diverse appearances. Plain-woven textiles can look very different, depending on how densely the warp and weft are spaced. To change colors and create patterns, either weft yarns or warp yarns, or both, may be discontinuous, turning back at the edges of each design area. In addition to all the ways patterns can be woven into a plain-woven textile, textiles with this structure can also serve as a base for other types of patterning, such as embroidery, appliqué, or resist dyeing.

Large decorative curtains as well as smaller covers decorated with narrative images with secular and sacred themes were created using a specific textile technique known as slit-tapestry weave, which is one of the oldest continually used methods of creating textiles with vibrant designs (cat. nos. 1, 2, 8-13, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, and 28).⁸ For millennia, many cultures around the world have been using the technique to create colorful textiles of infinite variety and

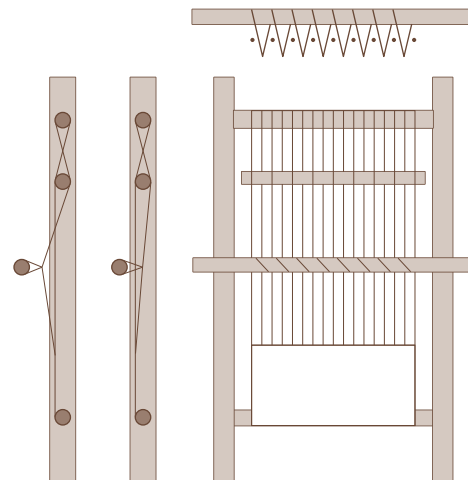


FIG. 22 Diagram of a Roman vertical loom; 1st-2nd century. After Carroll 1988, fig. 9.

purpose, from diverse materials: from silk to wool to linen. While tapestry weave lends itself to variety, it resulted from the simplest textile structure—plain weave.

Tapestry weave produces a textile structure in which a horizontal set of yarns (weft) is interlaced, often in an under-one-over-one order, with a vertical set of yarns (warp) that are tightly stretched on a loom.⁹ Tapestry weave differs from other types of plain weave in that the weft yarns both create the fabric and are also solely responsible for the creation of colorful designs.

Two features characterize the tapestry weave. First, the weft yarns are not interlaced completely across the entire width of the textile. They are woven back and forth only where their corresponding color is desired or needed in the creation of the design. Second, the weft yarns are so tightly packed together during weaving that they completely cover the warp yarns, regardless of their thickness,

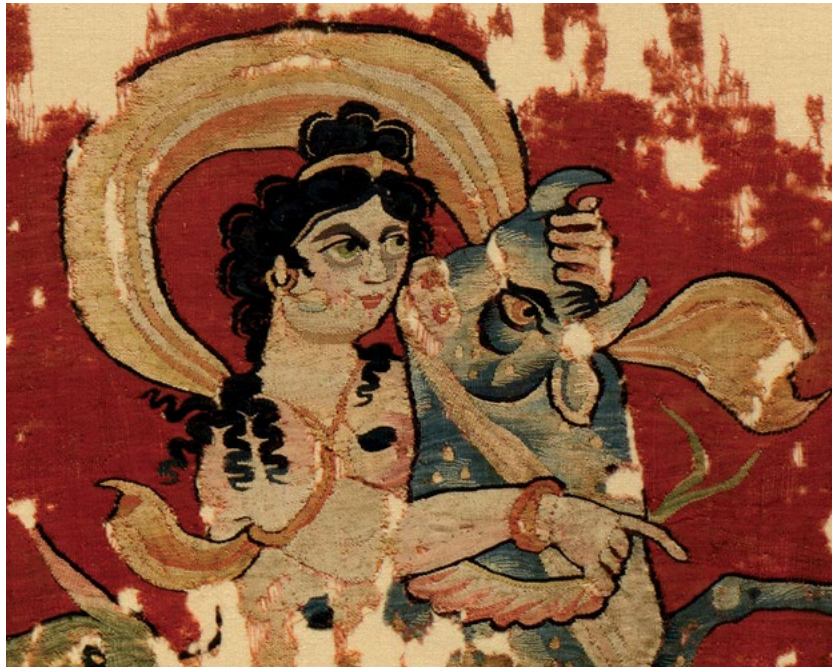


FIG. 23 Detail, cat. no. 12.



FIG. 24 Detail, cat. no. 43.



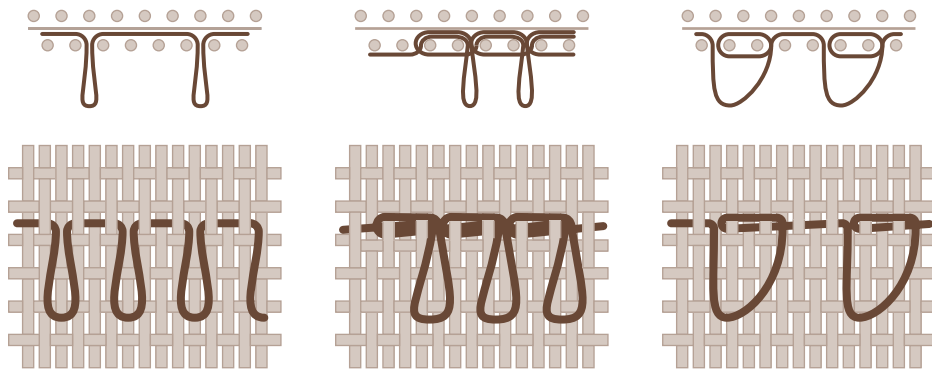
FIG. 25 Detail, cat. no. 52.



FIG. 26 Detail, cat. no. 24.



FIG. 27 Detail, cat. no. 15.



FIGS. 28-30 From left, diagram of a simple loop, a slip loop, and a wrapped loop. After Verhecken-Lammens 2009, figs. 3-5.

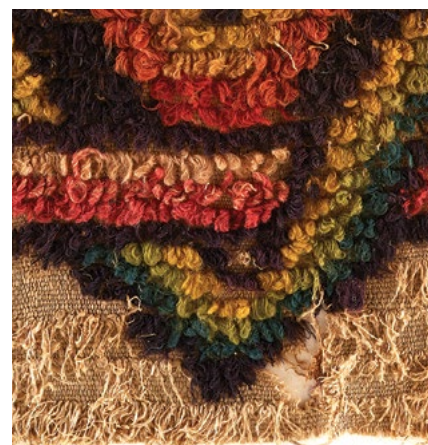


FIG. 31 Detail, cat. no. 34.

meaning that only the weft yarns are visible in the finished textile. There are different types of tapestry weave defined by the structural interface where two colors of weft yarns meet.¹⁰ The late antique weavers preferred the technique where two color areas meet vertically, with each weft yarn turning around the last individual warp yarn at the edge of its color area, thus creating a vertical opening between the two colors called a slit.

Although slit-tapestry weave is an inherently limiting technique for creating curvilinear forms, the weavers overcame the limitations with gusto. By using very finely spun wool yarns and compacting the weft yarns at various angles, they were able to create life-like, three-dimensional images (fig. 23). Tapestry weave dictated a certain sequence when weaving the design. Motifs ending in a point or designs that tapered were woven first in the sequence, and then their surroundings were filled in with other weft yarns. A weaver wove a motif by using his/her fingers to pull forward every other warp yarn in the designated color area and using small shuttles or needles to interlace the weft yarn.¹¹

Design selection was, for the most part, dictated by the client. Finds of inked and painted cartoons on papyrus indicate that there likely was a repertoire of designs from which a customer could choose.¹² These designs appear on surviving textiles, though not at a 1:1 ratio. This suggests that the cartoons may have served as a general guide. It would also explain the differences in interpretation and execution of similar designs (cat. nos. 12, 13, 29, 50).¹³

While large hangings with their narrative imagery are woven using solely tapestry weave (cat. nos. 1, 2, 8-13, 21, 22, 24, 29, 30, 46-48, 50), many other textiles combine linen plain-woven and wool tapestry-woven areas (cat. nos. 3-5 and 15). Utilizing yarns made from two very different materials—wool and linen—and applying two different, although related, weaving techniques—plain weave

and tapestry weave—in a single textile must have created a challenge for ancient weavers. Yet the surviving textiles show that the weavers easily overcame the difficulties and found many ingenious ways to work with the material (fig. 24). Since the tapestry areas of a textile woven mostly of plain weave required widely spaced warp yarns to permit the packing of the heavier and softer wool weft yarns, ways to create such spacing had to be invented. The common solution was to combine or group two or three warp yarns into one or to drop or skip over some of the warp yarns during the weaving in tapestry-woven area and then pick up after that section was finished.¹⁴

Less frequently, weavers would distort the vertical direction of the warp yarns. It is still unclear how they were able to do this, but the telltale sign of this method—looped tufts of warp yarns in curve—is visible on the reverse of a few textiles (fig. 25). The warp yarns before these looped tufts are in their original, vertical direction, but they distorted almost to horizontal position after the tufts.

Many tapestry-woven hangings with narrative scenes depend heavily on the so-called eccentric weft—yarns laid in curves or obliquely in the weave.¹⁵ These non-horizontal weft yarns allowed weavers to render curved lines or fill in the areas of weaving to create a straight weaving edge. These curved-weft yarns were used extensively in small color areas by altering the density with which weft yarns were packed (fig. 26). With eccentric-weft yarns, the weaver could add contours to the design, overcoming linear limitations typically imposed by the weaving technique. The weaver appears to employ eccentric-weft yarns consciously to infuse the dynamic qualities and enhanced realism.

Other late antique textiles exhibit designs drawn delicately using thin linen yarns on solid-color wool tapestry-woven areas. This method can be observed on surviving textiles from the fourth to the ninth centuries. It was a quick way of producing intricate designs on



FIG. 32 Detail, Sacrifice of Abel and Melchizedek; wall mosaic, 6th century. Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna.

small surfaces. Often referred to as “flying thread” or “flying shuttle,” these supplementary-weft yarns were woven at the same time as the otherwise solid-color tapestry-woven background. The thin undyed linen yarns were carried on spools or needles and wrapped around warp yarns (fig. 27). They often passed obliquely over the weft yarns to create a network pattern in silhouette, all carefully counted out (cat. no. 15).¹⁶

The warmest, softest, and most comfortable textiles in Egyptian households were undeniably textiles with tufts or pile. They were the ideal covers for couches, chairs, pillows, cushions, and beds. They served as perfect blankets on a cold night or hangings to prevent cold drafts.

Many surviving textiles from Egypt showcase the exclusive use of supplementary-weft yarns to create tufts or pile. Supplementary-weft yarns were introduced after every few passes of structural- or foundational-weft yarns that create the fabric. Then the supplementary-weft yarns were pulled to the front face of the fabric (between adjacent warp yarns) and left as loops (figs. 28–31). The even length of loops might indicate the use of a device, a rod, to regulate the size of the loops by wrapping supplemental yarns around it. If a rod were used, the loops would have been short or very long, creating a shaggy appearance. Looped pile is held in place by the tightness of the weft yarns in the foundation weave above and below the row of loops.

Supplementary weft-loop pile was used in two different modes. In the first, weft loops created the background on which tapestry-

woven design areas were inserted (cat. nos. 32 and 33). The main warp and weft yarns and supplementary weft-loop pile of these textiles were always made of linen yarns; tapestry-woven areas were wool weft and linen warp. The layout of the tapestry-woven design areas and the size of the finished textile often give an indication of the function of the textile (fig. 32).¹⁷ In the furnishing textiles, pile could be on the front, accompanied by tapestry-woven decorative areas, or on the back, as seen on the ones with more complex weave structures.

In the second mode, the method of creating supplementary weft loops was used for different aesthetic and, to a certain extent, functional purposes (cat. nos. 23, 34–36). In these textiles, colored supplementary weft loops create the design, and the fiber used for the supplementary weft-loop pile is wool, not linen. Although this technique is less precise in drawing than tapestry weave, it still is capable of subtle color gradations and impressionistic effects. The colored wool-pile yarns were woven only where needed, in a principle like tapestry weave—yarns did not travel from selvedge to selvedge. This style of loop pile was woven in two different design layouts. In the first, the colorful loop-pile areas (generally geometric designs) appear as isolated ornaments on plain-woven background, similar to the function that tapestry-woven inserts play in the large hangings and covers. These textiles were most likely used in the same way as the ones with linen loop pile: as covers, cushions, curtains, or hangings. Others exhibit figural imagery and tell stories, and the design is therefore directional. These textiles might have been used

for decorative purposes rather than to create comfortable furnishings. They might have created magnificent backdrops in sacred and secular spaces alike.

The method of decorating fabric by resist dyeing was in use in the Eastern Mediterranean, even though not many examples survive. This might be due to their lower chance of survival; or perhaps resist dyeing was not used as widely as tapestry weave to decorate textiles. The majority of yarns in late antique and early medieval textiles were dyed before the weaving was begun; in resist dyeing, the cloth was woven first and then dyed. Dyers either immersed the fabric in dye baths or painted on it, using a variety of barriers beforehand to keep parts of the fabric dye-free. The resist used in late antiquity was probably a mixture of wax and resin on linen ground fabric.¹⁸

Close study and analyses of resist-dyed textiles often reveal astonishing results, such as the large hanging decorated with crosses and floral motifs, now in Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Harvard Art Museums (cat. no. 28). Radiocarbon and polarized-light analyses of the textile revealed that it was created between the fifth and the seventh centuries (much earlier than assumed) and that it was made of cotton, a material atypical for the place and time.¹⁹

Until the early medieval period, cotton yarns and cotton fabrics, some already dyed, were likely imported from India, but there is a strong possibility that textiles were made with imported cotton yarns and then dyed in Egypt. It appears that there was a shift in the pattern of trade from the late antique period to the early medieval period. The large quantities of cotton resist-dyed fabrics found at Egyptian sites like Fayyūm were imported from India already dyed, indicating increased trade relations and shifts in manufacturing patterns.

We can conclude this brief overview of materials and techniques by stating that the diversity of surviving textiles found in Egypt is astounding. It attests to the rich and diverse textile traditions of Egypt and the wider region in the first millennium CE. This diversity manifests itself in materials, techniques, and functions. In the face of the changing religious and political landscape of Egypt, the endurance of so many weave structures and designs for at least half a millennium is a testament to the shared aesthetic of the Eastern Mediterranean.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Boak and Peterson 1931; Wilson 1933; Thomas 2001.
- 2 New York 2016, pp. 79–83; Rodríguez et al. 2013.
- 3 For a discussion about spinning, see Bellinger 1959 and Mackie 2015, p. 51.
- 4 For a detailed discussion about dyes and dyeing, see Carroll 1988, p. 33; Wouters 2009, pp. 182–85; Rodríguez et al. 2013, pp. 113–16. For more on dyes, see Cardon 2007.
- 5 Mordant is a chemical used on fabrics to bond a dye to a fiber by forming interaction between the mordant and the dye. This interaction can be either acidic or alkaline. The type of mordant used determines the resulting shade of the color and affects the fastness property of the dye. Protein fibers, including wool and silk, are highly receptive toward mordants and thus easier to dye with, unlike cellulosic fibers, cotton, and linen, which cannot absorb acids and bases with equal efficiency. There are three methods of mordanting: treating the fabric with the mordant and then dyeing, adding the mordant in the dye bath itself, and treating the dyed fabric with a mordant.
- 6 Rodríguez et al. 2013, p. 113
- 7 Other types of looms were also in evidence; the warp-weighted looms were used until about fifth century, based on textile findings that show extreme warp displacement. The horizontal looms appear to be in use starting from the fourth century. See Carroll 1988, pp. 34–44 for the discussion about ancient looms and the different working principles of vertical and horizontal treadle looms.
- 8 Good example is the group of large tapestry hangings belonging to the Abegg-Stiftung, published in Schrenk 2004, pp. 24–43 and 71–77, cat. nos. 1–5 and 16–8.
- 9 For in-depth discussion about tapestry weave, see Emery 1994, pp. 78–79; Collingwood 1968, pp. 141–61; and Seiler-Baldinger 1973, pp. 63–66.
- 10 For various ways color change is handled in tapestry weave, see Emery 1994, pp. 79–81; Collingwood 1968, pp. 151–56; and Seiler-Baldinger 1973, pp. 63–66.
- 11 The various ways weft insertion can be handled in tapestry weave are discussed in Collingwood 1968, p. 145–47.
- 12 Stauffer 2008.
- 13 Stauffer 2008; Wild and Dross-Krüpe 2017, pp. 310–12.
- 14 For the various ways this was achieved by the ancient weavers, see Carroll 1988, pp. 30–31; Pritchard 2006, p. 50; Schrenk 2004, pp. 489–91; Verhecken-Lammens 2013, pp. 141–44; and Wild and Dross-Krüpe 2017, pp. 310–12.
- 15 For the discussion of eccentric weft yarns, see Emery 1994, pp. 82–83 and Collingwood 1968, pp. 159.
- 16 See Verhecken-Lammens 2013, pp. 141–49; Bénazeth et al. 2015, pp. 22–39.
- 17 Simple weft loop-pile weave structure is used for garments as well. The garments had their pile on the inside, to create warmth.
- 18 Schrenk 2004, pp. 80–92, cat. nos. 19–21. For Indian block-printed textiles, see R. Barnes 1997.
- 19 See Harvard Art Museums 2016.



31

Cover with a Design of Human and Animal Figures

Egypt, 5th century

Complementary weft weave in plain weave interlacing and supplementary weft-loop pile, polychrome wool and undyed linen

238.6 × 132.7 cm (93¹⁵/₁₆ × 52¹/₄ in.)

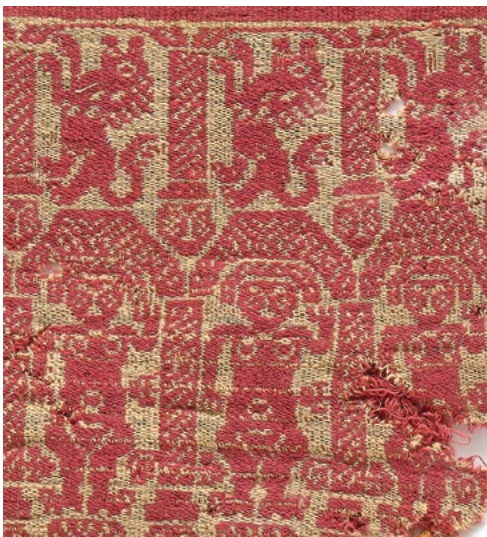
The Textile Museum, Washington, DC (1989.1.8)

The front side of this cover is decorated with alternating rows of women and men with one arm raised, each placed inside a colonnade. Only the top row is different, representing lions in a charging position. The back side features the loop pile. While the loops created a comfortable surface to recline upon, the smooth front surface would prevent any entanglement of clothing or jewelry. Given the directionality of decoration, the textile may have alternatively been a hanging, with the loops functioning as insulation.

This textile was woven on a loom more sophisticated than the tapestry looms, because it had many pattern heddle rods to control the warp functions. Such a process required an experienced weaver, who had to set the pattern on the loom before starting to weave, and the same set of motifs had to be repeated in a different order throughout. Though not as flexible as tapestry weave in creating grand narratives, the method was useful in creating intricate designs and sturdy textiles in a quick way. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCE

Washington 1982, p. 98, cat. no. 109.





32

Fragment of a Hanging or Cover

Egypt, 4th-7th century

Tapestry weave, plain weave, and supplementary weft-loop pile,
undyed linen and polychrome wool

58 × 51 cm (22⁷/₈ × 20¹/₈ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George
Hewitt Myers, 1941 (71.78)

Textiles with a looped-pile surface form a distinct group. While the pile in linen garments appears on the inside, these textiles feature it on the outside, either to create a comfortable surface for sitting or reclining or to cover the walls for insulation. Only their terminal use as burial shrouds is certain.

All looped-pile textiles have a linen plain-woven ground fabric where loops were introduced through supplementary weft yarns. In these two examples, the supplementary-loop pile covers the background, and decorative elements were created by tapestry weave. While the looped ground fabric gives a fur-like, three-dimensional effect, the decorative tapestry panel is flat, with colorful imagery. Decoration



is contained within a square format, with a strong central image framed with a border. The location of these squares on the complete textile is unclear, but surviving parallels suggest that they might have decorated the four corners of a rectangular or square textile. SBK

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THE TEXTILE MUSEUM, 71.78
 Bellinger 1955, figs. 18, 20; Washington, DC 1982, p. 37, cat. no. 14.
 DUMBARTON OAKS, BZ.2010.070
 New York 2016, p. 110, cat. no. 34, fig. 2-3.5; Bühl and Dospěl Williams
 2019, BZ.2010.070.

33

Fragment of a Hanging or Cover

Egypt, 5th-7th century

Tapestry weave, plain weave, and supplementary weft-loop pile,
 undyed linen and polychrome wool

48.0 × 45.0 cm (18⁷/₈ × 17¹/₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC
 (BZ.2010.070)



34

Fragment with Knot Design

Egypt, 4th–6th century

Plain weave and supplementary weft-loop pile,
polychrome wool and undyed linen

48.5 × 41.0 cm (19 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC,
acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1947
(71.110)

In this group of looped-pile textiles, supplementary weft loops create designs as if by a paint brush. The supplementary loops were created using wool yarns in various colors and many shades. These decorative loops use either simple looping or slip looping. Although less precise than tapestry weave, this technique is still capable of subtle color gradations and impressionistic effects.

Besides the geometric designs, many examples of this type of looped textiles feature figural imagery. The technique had a storytelling potential, and the present examples with figurative designs might have been part of large textiles that were used for decorative purposes rather than as comfortable furnishing fabrics.

The Textile Museum example presents two groups of looping (linen and wool) on a single textile. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

THE TEXTILE MUSEUM, 71.110

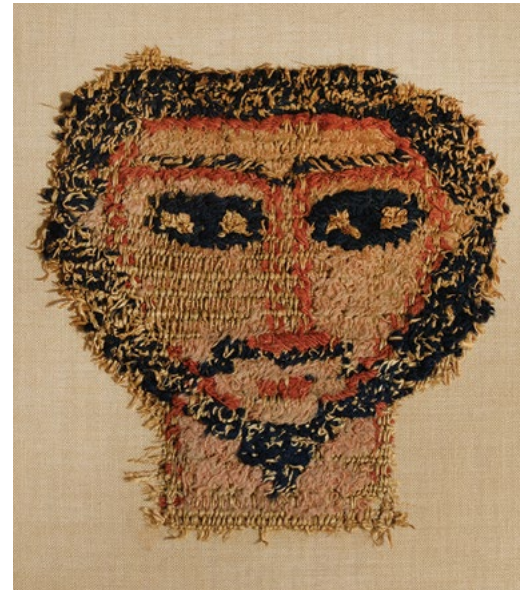
Unpublished

DUMBARTON OAKS, BZ.1953.2.101A-B

Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1953.2.101a-b.

DUMBARTON OAKS, BZ.1953.2.102

Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1953.2.102.



35

Fragment of a Hanging with Human Figure

Egypt, 4th–6th century

Plain weave and supplementary weft-loop pile,
polychrome wool and undyed linen

33.5 × 15.5 cm (13³/₁₆ × 6¹/₈ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1953.2.101a–b)

36

Fragment with Bearded Face

Egypt, 4th–6th century

Plain weave and supplementary weft-loop pile,
polychrome wool and undyed linen

14.0 × 13.5 cm (5¹/₂ × 5⁵/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1953.2.102)



37

Key

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 2nd-4th century

Wood

1.6 × 2.5 × 19.6 cm ($\frac{5}{8}$ × 1 × 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1.0228)

38

Key

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 3rd-5th century

Wood

9.7 × 2.5 × 17 cm ($3\frac{13}{16}$ × 1 × 6 $\frac{11}{16}$ in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (3866)



39

Spindle with Thread

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 3rd-4th century

Reed with cotton

L. 12.5 cm ($4\frac{15}{16}$ in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (3646)



The University of Michigan's excavations at Karanis in the Fayyūm unearthed some of the most valuable documentation for advancing our knowledge of day-to-day life in late antique Egypt. The finds included thousands of artifacts from the religious and domestic spheres, left behind by the town's citizenry when the settlement was abandoned. In addition to the usual architectural ruins, pottery, and textiles, excavators also uncovered window frames, small chests, writing desks, lamps, doors, seats, dining sets, baskets, fish nets, keys, glassware, and even brooms—all remnants of daily life, preserved for centuries in the sand. The objects on display here are only a small representation of these evocative discoveries, which offer us today an especially immediate connection to the homes of late antique Egyptians. Children's toys are rare survivors, few more charming than this toy horse with facial features and mane hand-drawn in ink and a tiny hole for threading a pull-string at its snout. Many houses at Karanis preserved evidence of domestic textile production—including spindle whorls, needles, spindles, and thread—some even child-sized, like the toy comb and tiny rag doll here. EDW



40

Horse with Wheels

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 4th century

Wood

11.5 × 1.6 × 15.5 cm (4½ × ⅝ × 6 in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (7652)



41

Toy Comb

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 2nd-4th century

Wood

1.1 × 7.1 × 5.3 cm (7/16 × 2¾ × 2 in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (7571)



42

Rag Doll

Egypt, excavated at Karanis, 2nd-4th century

Wool

7.5 × 6 × 1 cm (2¹⁵/₁₆ × 2³/₈ × 3/8 in.)

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2.6415)

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KELSEY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, 3646

Ann Arbor 1980, p. 25, cat. no. 30.

KELSEY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, 7652

Petrie 1927, p. 62, pl. LV, cat. no. 590.

KELSEY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, 7571

Urbana-Champaign 1989, p. 231, cat. no.

151; Petrie 1927, p. 62, Pl. LV, cat. no. 583.



Textile Aesthetics

ELIZABETH DOSPĚL WILLIAMS

BEYOND THEIR DECORATIVE, SYMBOLIC, AND UTILITARIAN FUNCTIONS, fabrics also served as intermediaries for the transmission of ornamental motifs among different media, especially in the late antique and medieval periods.¹ Widespread admiration for textiles' rarity, impressive craftsmanship, and visual opulence helps explain why their decorative elements were so frequently copied in other formats; textiles' infinitely repeatable designs and varied production methods, in turn, made them the perfect vehicles for the transfer of ornamental motifs from one medium to another.

The sharing of imagery and patterns among textiles and other media could be thought of as a multidirectional process. Late antique and medieval textiles drew inspiration for their patterns, colors, and imagery from other media and from the natural world. The geometric designs seen both in late antique floor mosaics and floor coverings attest to the close relationship between these media. The grid layout and cross-shaped rosettes of a floor mosaic excavated in Antioch (fig. 33), for example, recall the details and design rationale of late antique textiles (cat. nos. 6 and 49). Such mosaics are sometimes referred to as "carpet mosaics," precisely because they share their infinitely repeating central fields with textiles. It remains unclear whether mosaicists intended to emulate precious fabric floor coverings or whether weavers sought to copy the patterns from floor mosaics. Rather, we should think of the two media as mutually reinforcing each other as we imagine the visual effect of layers of textiles stacked over richly patterned floor surfaces.²

Overlaps in motifs and design between different media must also be contextualized as part of the period's aesthetics more broadly. Late antique audiences relished *trompe l'oeil* effects, especially those that appeared to make one medium look like another.³ We see this appreciation for visual and material trickery not only between textiles and other media—most notably architectural decoration, as in the Red Monastery (fig. 9)—but also between wool tapestry weave and silk compound weaves. A group of finely woven textiles from the early Islamic era, for example, feature symmetrically arranged floral medallions surrounding animals, flowers, and vegetal motifs against red grounds (cat. nos. 53 and 54). These visual qualities tie them closely to silks, such as a vibrant example now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 34), yet they are not woven in silk but rather in wool tapestry weave.⁴ Whereas silks are completed on drawlooms (where preset patterns are mechanically repeated and, as a result, emerge from the loom in mirrored designs), tapestry weave is created on a loom of preset warps, with each

Detail of cat. no. 48
Hanging with Depictions
of Horses and Lions



FIG. 33 Excavation photo of a 5th-century floor mosaic with trellis pattern; Antioch, Syria, 515.6 × 261.6 cm, 1938. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1938.75b.



FIG. 34 Textile with palmette blossoms; silk, 8th century, 22.5 × 29 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Textiles Arts Club, 1951.91.

medallion rendered independently by hand in the weft. This group of early Islamic textiles thus demonstrates extraordinary mastery of tapestry technique.

Textiles were also important vectors for the introduction of motifs from other geographical regions to Egypt. A group of large-format, tapestry-woven textiles whose imagery can be associated with Persia presents a particularly compelling example of cross-cultural exchange (cat. nos. 13, 47-50).⁵ Many feature imagery drawn from Sasanian art and architectural decoration, such as winged motifs (cat. no. 46) and animals placed back-to-back in basket capitals. Although their imagery and overall designs reflect Persian traditions, several hangings of this type were found in Antinoë (Antinoöpolis), a site in Egypt whose burials have preserved thousands of items of late antique dress and furnishings. One possible explanation is that this group of Sasanian-style tapestries reflects the international popularity of luxury silks imported to Egypt from Persia; indeed, many Sasanian silks were also found in Antinoë, including fragments of garments (figs. 35 and 36). That several of the tapestry-woven textiles feature inked inscriptions in Greek (cat. no. 47) offers a tantalizing detail to suggest they were made in the Eastern Mediterranean rather than Sasanian Persia (figs. 37 and 38). Such fabrics may therefore represent the efforts of Egyptian weavers to replicate the distinctive repetitive patterns of highly admired Persian silks for a local market. These examples attest to the international scope of the early medieval textile trade, as well as the mechanisms through which tastes for certain ornamental motifs traveled long distances through the medium of portable, valuable textiles.



FIG. 35 Textile with parrots and plants, from Antinoöpolis; silk, 6th century, 39 × 62 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, E29212.

ENDNOTES

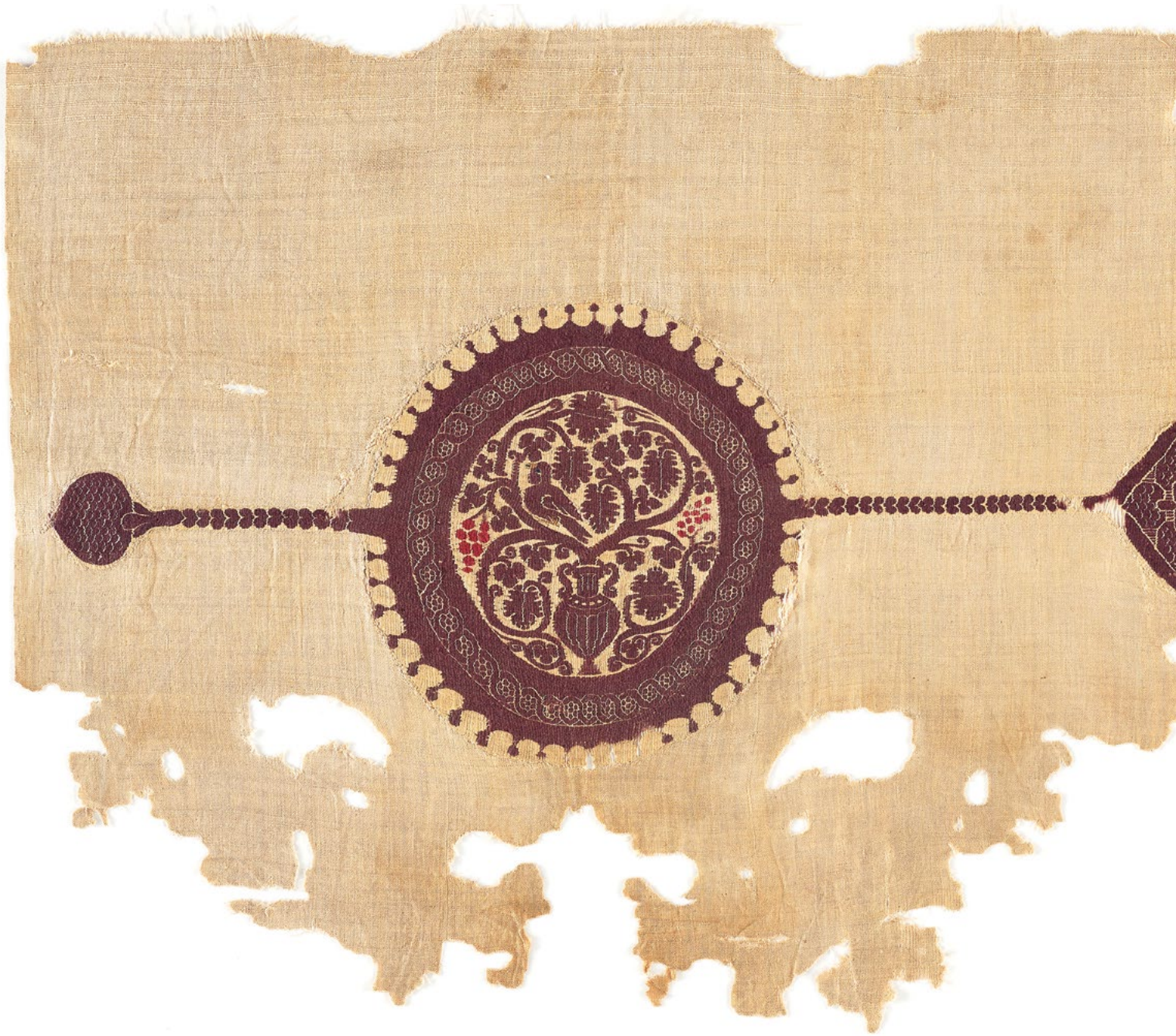
- 1 Blessing 2018.
- 2 For discussion about the relationship between textiles and floor mosaics, see Swift 2009, pp. 42, 70-74.
- 3 Dospěl Williams 2018.
- 4 The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1951.91; www.clevelandart.org/art/1951.91. Accessed June 27, 2019.
- 5 Bénazeth and Dal-Pra 1995.



FIG. 36 Textile with panthers and palmettes, from Antinoöpolis; silk, mid-6th century, 19 × 28.5 cm. Gustavianum, Uppsala University Museum, VM 2752.



FIGS. 38 AND 39 Details, cat. no. 47.



43

Fragment of a Textile with Vessels Sprouting Vines

Egypt, 4th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

141.0 × 25.5 cm (55½ × 10 in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1950 (71.119)



Vases with plants are a common motif on late antique textiles. Sometimes, these appear as a small repeating design; at other times, such as on the present example, they are large and prominent. Birds often inhabit the plant. Occasionally, human figures or quadrupeds appear among the branches. The vines often bear ripe grape clusters woven in vivid red yarns. All these representations have classical Greek and Roman antecedents as symbols of life or nature's abundance, but in late antique Egypt, they acquired a new, biblical meaning associated with the tree of life.

The fragment may have belonged to a cover or curtain with identical decoration at its other end. The delicate patterns and details were worked in extremely fine linen threads over a ground of plain tapestry weave—a technique known as flying-shuttle, flying-needle, or flying-thread brocading (as in cat. no. 50). SBK

SELECTED REFERENCE

Washington, DC 1982, p. 73, cat. no. 68.

Doorpost with Grapevine Emerging from a Chalice

Egypt, excavated in the Monastery of St. Jeremiah,
Saqqāra, 6th–7th century

Limestone

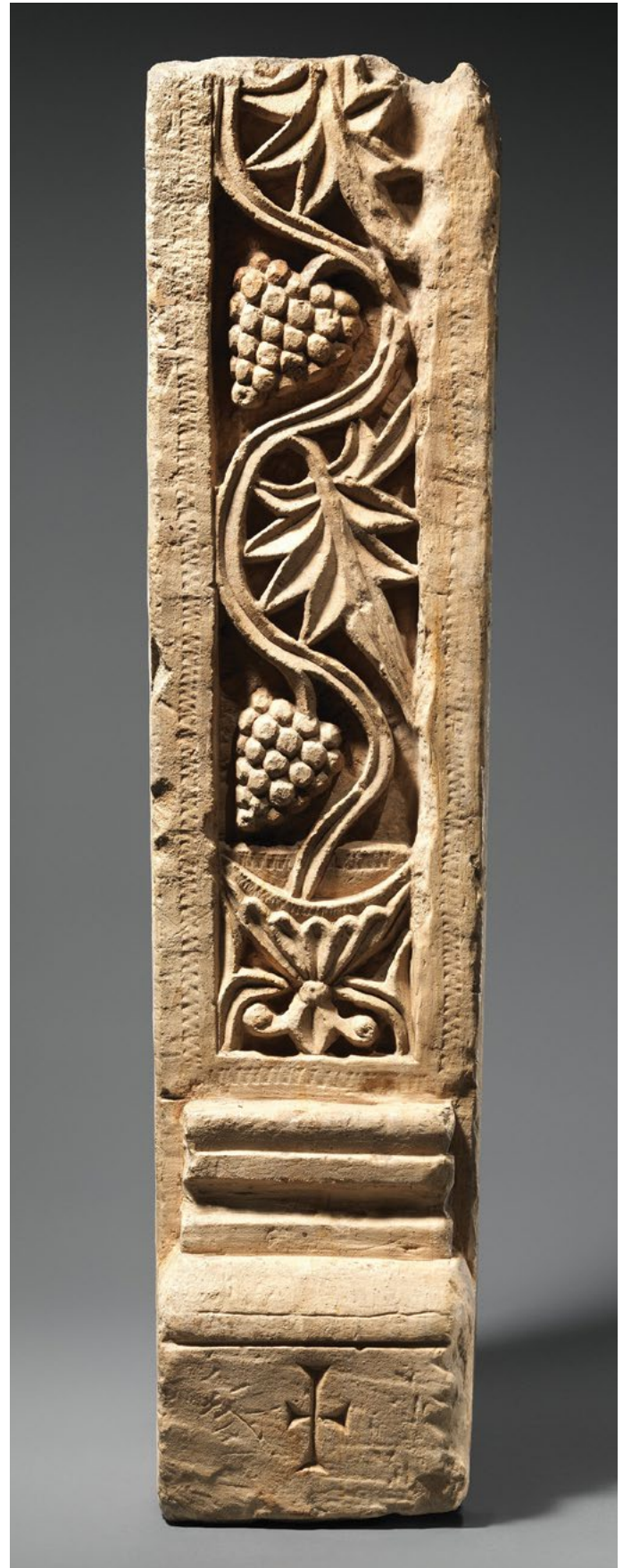
65 × 15 × 17.5 cm (25⁹/₁₆ × 5⁷/₈ × 6⁷/₈ in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund,
1910 (10.175.83)

Textiles abound with representations of vine scrolls emerging from vases, amphorae, and other vessels (see, for example, cat. no. 43). Sinuous vines, abundant grapes, and elegant leaves undoubtedly offered weavers and viewers a certain aesthetic delight, and the vine itself carried strong symbolic associations with growth, fertility, and prosperity, even in its pre-Christian contexts. Not surprisingly, the same motifs appear in other media as well, notably in architectural decor. Here, an elegant vine emerges from a ribbed chalice or amphora, a nod to this very ancient iconography. The artist has expertly carved deep channels into the limestone to create a stark, rhythmical relief to the vine, grapes, and leaves. The inclusion of a small cross at the base fits the column's original setting in a small monastery chapel at Saqqāra. The column's delicate width and attenuated proportions may point to its use as a decorative rather than structural feature, possibly as part of an arcade or window treatment. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCE

Quibell 1908, p. 68, pl. 62, fig. 3.





45

Wall Panel with Pomegranates in Palmettes

Mesopotamia, excavated in Ctesiphon, 6th century
Stucco

31.8 × 30.5 × 2.25 cm (12½ × 12 × 7⁄8 in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1932 (32.150.21)

46

Wall Panel with Wings and a Pahlavi Device Encircled by Pearls

Mesopotamia, excavated in Ctesiphon, 6th century
Stucco

39 × 41.3 × 2.25 cm (15³⁄₈ × 16¼ × 7⁄₈ in.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1932 (32.150.48)



Only a small number of surviving silk fragments can be definitively associated with Sasanian production (see figs. 35 and 36). These examples tend to share similar aesthetic qualities, including a taste for densely packed designs and unusual iconographic features. The most distinctive iconographies include winged motifs (associated with Sasanian divine rulership) and large medallions with pearl borders (possibly adapted from Chinese silks). Both design elements appear in these two stucco reliefs, which were found in the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. Their design logic—such as the repetition of motifs and the reliance on iconographic conventions drawn from luxury fabrics—points to the interchange of motifs between textiles and architectural decoration. Although it might seem a simple case of emulation, the movement of ornamental pattern from textiles to architecture in fact required artists to consider how best to adapt imagery in one medium or another; this demanded attention to visual similarities as artists considered the possibilities and limitations of their materials in emulating silk motifs in stucco form. EDW

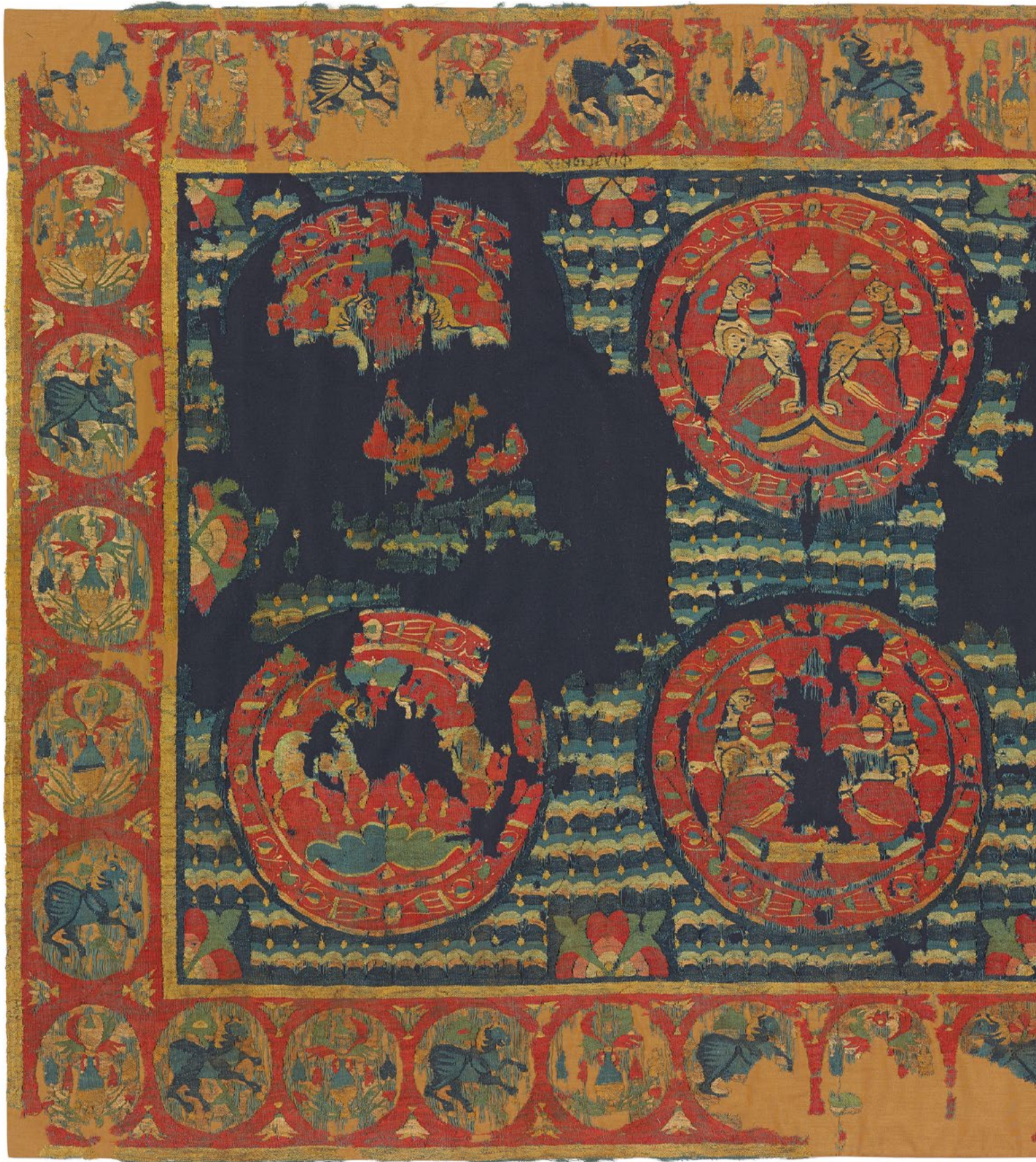
SELECTED REFERENCES

32.150.21

Dimand 1937, pp. 314–15, fig. 33; Kröger 1982, p. 67, fig. 32, pl. 21/3.

32.150.48

Kröger 1982, pp. 51–54, cat. no. 52, fig. 23, pl. 14/3.





47

**Hanging with Pairs of Panthers and Horses
in Roundels**

Eastern Mediterranean, 4th–6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed
linen

152.0 × 107.4 cm (59⁷/₈ × 42⁵/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired
by George Hewitt Myers, 1932 (71.51A & B)

The orientation of this hanging forces the assumption that it was meant for viewing from a specific direction. Although related to other hangings probably from Egypt, its design shows more eastern, possibly Sasanian origins.

Each of the four outside roundels feature two facing horses; the two central roundels have two big cats (panthers?) sitting back to back and turning their heads to each other. The surrounding border contains horses and palmettes in roundels. The design is a mixture of artistic influences. While the animals and palmettes in the border might be Sasanian Persian, the animals in the roundels show a more Byzantine preference in arrangement. The background of the central roundels reminds us of the wave design underneath the boats in the Textile Museum Nereid hanging (cat. no. 13), indicating thus the weaver's preference for stock design elements with the freedom in combining them with new motifs. sbk

SELECTED REFERENCES

Washington, DC 1982, p. 41, cat. no. 19; Bénazeth
and Dal-Prà 1995, p. 37, fig. 13.

48

Hanging with Depictions of Horses and Lions

Eastern Mediterranean, 6th–7th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

167.0 × 80.0 cm (65¾ × 31½ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1939.13)

The central field of this hanging features a dense pattern of horses and lions set in baskets and vines. The surviving right edge depicts roundels with horses and riders, alternating with ferocious panthers and lions. The exotic animals and the appearance of similar motifs in Persian architectural decoration have led scholars to associate this textile with production in the Sasanian world. The mirrored pattern also relates the hanging closely to silks woven on drawlooms that allowed for mechanically repeated motifs. In contrast, however, this weaving is done in tapestry, meaning that each unit needed to be repeated by hand. It points to an aesthetic preference for mirroring and repetition in a range of media and weaving processes, presumably out of admiration for and in emulation of luxury silks. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

Kitzinger 1946; Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1939.13.





49

Hanging with Lattice Pattern

Eastern Mediterranean, 4th–6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

121.9 × 71.1 cm (48 × 28 in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1931 (71.33)

Rich in design elements, the lattice of this hanging is populated with flowers and human faces, reminiscent of the Textile Museum hanging with a garden archway (cat. no. 2). The border of alternating palmettes and human faces finds parallels in the Textile Museum hanging with horses and grooms (cat. no. 50) and a hanging in the Abegg-Stiftung collection (acc. no. 2191) that is dated to the fourth to fifth century, too. These three pieces are contemporaries, reflecting the different working styles and abilities of their weavers. Or the present hanging might have been woven in a different period, displaying thus a variation in design type. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Kitzinger 1946, pl. 45; Washington, DC 1982, p. 40, cat. no. 18.

50

Hanging with Horses and Grooms

Eastern Mediterranean, 4th–6th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

99.0 × 119.4 cm (39 × 47 in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1928 (71.14)

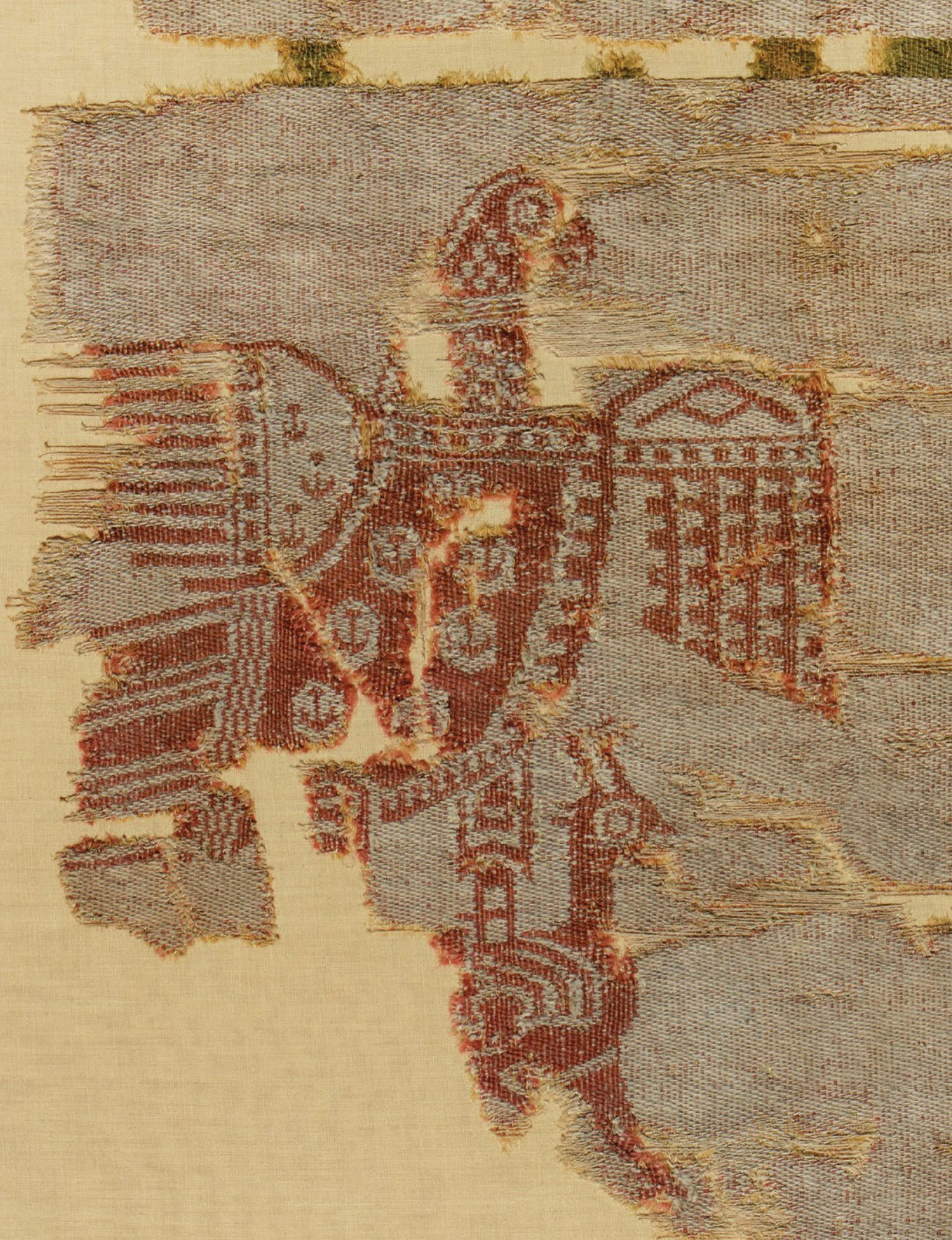
The busy border design of this textile is reminiscent of the Textile Museum hanging with lattice pattern featuring panthers and horses (cat. no. 47), but the flowers and faces are rather stylized. Most likely the upper left corner of a wall hanging, this fragment preserves three registers showing saddled horses lead by grooms (warriors), set against stylized leafy trees on a red ground. When complete, it probably had a right border and another register of horses and grooms followed by the bottom border. Grooms, who hold a single horse with their left hand, bear swords in their right hands. One groom in the top register and one in the bottom register hold two horses. The grooms wear blue or yellow close-fitting robes with a decorated front opening and a buckled belt. They also wear tight pants (or leggings) and shoes. Long, tailored robes and fitted pants were often associated with Persians in the Greco-Roman world. Was this hanging produced east from Egypt or for a customer who demanded eastern imagery? SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

Kitzinger 1946, pl. 46; Washington, DC 1982, p. 39, cat. no. 17.







Continuity and Change

SUMRU BELGER KRODY

THE SEVENTH AND THE EIGHTH CENTURIES saw the end of the Sasanian Empire, the reshaping of the Byzantine Empire, and the rapid military and political expansion of the Arabs under the impetus of the new religion, Islam.

The expansion of Islam from Arabia into Byzantine territories in Syria, Egypt, and North Africa, and into Sasanian territories in Iraq and Iran was bewilderingly rapid. In 641, Egypt fell under the control of the armies of Islam. In 651, the Arab armies conquered Iran, bringing the Sasanian Empire to an end. By 700, the lands spanning the whole of North Africa, Mesopotamia, Iran, and most of central Asia up to the Oxus River—today's Amu Darya in Uzbekistan—were under this single military and political control.

This development resulted in a diverse group of cultures and myriad artistic traditions coming under one controlling power. People and their goods moved from one region to another with considerable ease, allowing ideas and tastes to be transferred far and wide. Among the goods that were traded, textiles reigned supreme. They were valuable, lightweight, and convertible to currency anywhere in the world.

The period following the Arab conquests was a time of both change and continuity for this vast region. On the side of change, we need to consider the advent of Islam, a new religion with a distinct world view. Connecting North African cultures with Iranian and central Asian cultures brought new materials and ideas to the former Byzantine world. The change of aesthetics and technology in this period can be very clearly followed through the development of textiles. Silk textiles from central Asia and Iran began to arrive in greater quantities. Consumers wanted the color and sophistication they saw on new textiles coming from further east. Some of the textiles found in Egypt illustrate material diversity with an increased use of cotton and wool, as well as silk.

New aesthetic and material demands changed loom technology and introduced new weave structures. Until about this time, the Eastern Mediterranean world knew only simple tapestry looms, sometimes with the addition of multiple heddles to create complementary weft weaves in plain interlacing. More complex weave structures, such as those on textiles coming from the east, required more technically advanced looms (cat. nos. 55–58). We can observe transition from vertical looms to horizontal-treadle looms, from fixed-heddle looms to compound-harness looms.¹ The decorative techniques diversified to include embroidery and resist-dyeing.

Detail of cat. no. 58
Fragment with Two Eagles

Consequently, weavers in the early Middle Ages were capable of creating more complex weave structures. Complex or compound weaves (e.g., complementary weft weave in plain weave interlacing or in twill weave interlacing, like cat. no. 7) introduced extra sets of warp and weft yarns that work interdependently to facilitate the simultaneous creation of the fabric and its design.² This complex set-up allows for speedy weaving while introducing more colors, without muddling the design with the color of yarns floating on the reverse.³ Used in combination with strong fibers, this structure creates sturdy textiles faster than the tapestry-woven textiles can be produced, and it offers extremely diverse design possibilities.

Many surviving furnishing textiles woven with wool yarns exhibit this weave structure and highly developed patterning technique. More complex sets of yarn functions seen in these weave structures required a more complicated loom set-up—likely a large number of pattern heddle rods to control the warp functions.⁴ Undoubtedly, such set-ups required experienced weavers. The pattern had to be set on the loom before the weaving had begun, and the same set of motifs had to be repeated in a different order throughout, as seen in the Textile Museum cover (cat. no. 31). This method was not as flexible as tapestry weave in creating grand narratives, but it was useful in producing intricate designs and sturdy textiles in a quick way.⁵ The supplementary weft-loop pile on the reverse of the fabric created a cushiony soft fabric. Thick decorative covers made in this way were probably used for beds and couches.⁶

Several cotton and wool textiles in the Textile Museum and Dumbarton Oaks (cat. nos. 55–58) have weft-faced compound weave in twill interlacing with inner warps.⁷ Their function is difficult to determine due to their fragmentary condition. They exhibit designs that are infinitely repeating and directional (cat. no. 55). Some of these repeating designs are also large-scale (cat. nos. 56–58). These characteristics might indicate their function as furnishing textiles.

In the early Islamic period, there was also a change in how designs were conceptualized. Even though the established weaving techniques, such as tapestry weave, were still used in the Eastern Mediterranean, the arrangement of designs became more sophisticated. The aesthetic of this period veered toward repeating designs enclosed in medallions or in lattices (cat. nos. 9, 21, and 47–50). There were also many motifs that hailed from the former Sasanian lands of central Asia and Iran. Popular motifs included the pearl roundels surrounding medallions, rams with large horns, birds with fluttering ribbons and jeweled necklaces, and symmetrical

hunting compositions. It appears that the Sasanian iconography of kingship, royal hunting, and battle appealed to the Islamic and Christian societies of the early medieval period, as the imagery expressed the triumph of good over evil. The melding of Eastern Mediterranean and Persian visual traditions is perhaps best seen in the facade of Mshatta, an Umayyad-era palace in today's Jordan (fig. 39). There an early Islamic aesthetic combined classical and Sasanian decorative elements.

The people who lived in early Islamic Eastern Mediterranean shared a single culture and aesthetic while professing a variety of religious beliefs. Consequently, many early Islamic textiles and other artistic output retained the well-established aesthetics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Nothing better represents this phenomenon than two textiles in the Textile Museum and Dumbarton Oaks Museum collections (cat. nos. 53 and 54). They were woven in the well-known technique of tapestry weave. Their designs closely align with the Sasanian design vocabulary. However, one of them bears an inscription that reads "(Commander of the) Faithful, Ma(rwān). This has been ordered..." The name was probably referring to the Umayyad caliph Marwān II (r. 744–750).

We may posit that the new order and expanded horizons created a world more immersed in textiles and textile aesthetics than ever before. Textiles played a role in every facet of life for everyone; for ruler or peasant, merchant or cleric, rich or poor. Textiles served many purely functional roles and were used at every level of society and in every phase of human existence.

Textiles reflected cultural values and codes of behavior, but they were also actual physical tools of the medieval social system. For example, the number of terms used for various types of textiles in literature from the early medieval period is a good indication of the centrality of textiles in people's lives. Eastern Mediterranean societies distinguished very precisely between individual types of fabric, between one type of curtain and another. The costliness of the fabric—judged through its material and technique—or its rarity testified to the sheer wealth of the owner. With the spread of Islam, a new set of behavioral patterns concerning sitting and reclining was established that eliminated some of the rigid furnishings, such as chairs, tables, and beds. The new society filled this gap with textiles; instead of reclining on a coach covered with a spread, people now sat on large cushions. The social rank of a guest was indicated by the placement and quality and quantity of the mats or cushions provided, especially in relation to other persons present.⁸



FIG. 39 Mshatta facade; 743-744, Amman, Jordan. Pergamonmuseum, Berlin.



FIG. 40 Theophilus and the soldier's widow, from the Madrid Skylitzes; mid-12th century. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, MS Vitr. 26-2, fol. 46rb.



FIG. 41 Muhammad at the Ka'ba, from the *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh* (Compendium of the Chronicles), by Rashīd al-Dīn; copied in Tabriz, Iran, 714 AH/1314 CE. Edinburgh University Library, Or.Ms. 20, f. 45r.

There were also cultural overlaps in the way that textiles expressed power in the Byzantine and Islamic courts. Both Islamic caliphs and Byzantine emperors shared the same desire to be unapproachable due to their elevated place in society, inherited most likely from the Sasanian practice. This concept manifested itself through the presence of curtains that hung between the caliph or emperor and their audiences (fig. 40). Textiles were an essential part of the ensemble of objects that shaped the ruler's public image, creating a well-defined area around the ruler, while presenting him regally to his audience and maintaining his dignity and authority.

There is no better example of centrality of textiles in the early Islamic world than the *kiswah*, the cloth that covers the most holy site, the Ka'ba in Mecca. A textile played a significant role in the establishment of the Ka'ba allowing representatives of different tribes to carry the single foundation stone to the site where Ka'ba was constructed (fig. 41). Although it is draped in black today, the

earliest descriptions of the site dating to the twelfth century mention colorful silk fabric with inscription and images of a colonnade.⁹ It is interesting to note that there was an image of a colonnade on the textile, an architectural facade, illustrated on the fabric, blurring the lines between stone architecture and fabric architecture, just like the representations of architecture on late antique textiles (cat. nos. 1, 2, 4, 8).

When we consider textiles in early Islamic society, we see that the designs, materials, and functions of fabric exhibit many continuities with the past, while also reflecting the development of new aesthetic and spiritual traditions. This is because textiles fulfill basic human needs to clothe the body, define living spaces, and accompany religious rituals. In this sense, textiles reflected the values and workings of early medieval society, even in a period of widespread cultural change.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Lamb 2005, pp. 61-97 for vertical looms, and pp. 98-156 for pit looms and more complex looms.
- 2 These weave structures are often referred to as *taquete* (for plain weave interlacing) or *samit* or *samitum* (for twill interlacing). For further discussion, see Lyon 1963, p. 58; Becker 1987, pp. 81-129; Emery 1994, pp. 150-60; Copenhagen 1993, pp. 78-81; Mackie 2015, p. 51.
- 3 See Becker 1987, pp. 81-118; Burnham 1980, p. 180; Emery 1994, pp. 150-60; Copenhagen 1993, pp. 78-81; Mackie 2015, p. 51; Schrenk 2004, pp. 141-45, cat. nos. 48-50 (weave structure).
- 4 Zilu looms from Meibod in Iran are often considered later examples of these looms. They exemplify what the ancient loom might have looked like, at least in its set-up. See Thompson and Granger-Taylor 1995-6 for zilu loom; Becker 1987, pp. 105-12 and Wild and Dross-Krüpe 2017, for the discussion of textiles with weft-faced compound weave structures.
- 5 Textiles with this weave structure may be the *polymita* of Greek documents, used for covering beds, couches and pillows. For more, see Wild and Dross-Krüpe 2017, p. 304-20. Wild and Dross-Krüpe indicate that in Roman Egypt, finds include *taquete* covers with feathers still adhering to them.
- 6 Becker 1987, pp. 82-104. Similar cover with additional tapestry inserts is Victoria and Albert Museum, acc. no. 243-1890, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O315901/cushion-cover-unknown>. Accessed February 7, 2019.
- 7 For more on *samit* or *samitum*, see Lyon 1963, p. 58; Becker 1987, pp. 81-129; Emery 1994, pp. 150-60; Copenhagen 1993, pp. 78-81; and Mackie 2015, p. 51.
- 8 See Golombek 1988, pp. 25-49, for detailed discussion of importance of textiles in this period. Stillman 2003 and Goitein 1999 are valuable resources on textiles and dress in medieval Islam and communities under Islamic rule.
- 9 Golombek 1988, p. 106.

51

Hanging Fragment with Two Horsemen

Egypt, 7th–8th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool and undyed linen

102.5 × 77.0 cm (40³/₈ × 30⁵/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Washington, DC (BZ.1943.8)

This fragment replicates the same patterns and design elements we would typically find in the corner of a tunic, but its enormous dimensions make it clear that it comes from a corner of a substantially sized furnishing. Indeed, a piece of nearly identical size, technical qualities, and iconography at the Israel Museum (925.70) confirms that both pieces were once the corners of a hanging. Such large-format hangings are rare survivals from late antiquity and could only have been used in enormous spaces. The sixth-century mosaics at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, for example, show large curtains suspended from hoops at the central entrance of the *palatium*, or the palace (fig. 3). Intriguingly, a similar piece at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (29.9.3) has been carbon-dated to the mid- to late-seventh century, suggesting that the production of large-scale textiles in Egypt continued even after the advent of Islam. EDW

SELECTED REFERENCES

Ball 2019; Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1943.8.







52

Cover

Egypt, 6th-7th century

Tapestry weave and plain weave, polychrome wool
236 × 151 cm (92¹⁵/₁₆ × 59⁷/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by
George Hewitt Myers, 1951 (72.186)

Furnishing textiles could serve several purposes during their lifetime. While their final use was to wrap a corpse for burial, in late antique and later wall paintings and mosaics from Egypt similar textiles are depicted as curtains and table covers.

This textile is almost entirely intact. Its overall composition of interlacing elements is impressive, although smaller design elements and details are hard to decipher. Riders on horseback, warriors with shields and raised arms, lions, and quadrupeds are scattered inside the tapestry-woven roundels and squares. All were well known in the late antique weavers' design vocabulary. SBK

Unpublished



53

Tiraz fragment

Iraq or Syria, 127-132 AH (744-749/50 CE)

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

49.0 × 12.5 cm (19⁵/₁₆ × 4¹⁵/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1947 (73.524)

54

Fragment with Floral Pattern

Iraq or Syria, first half of the 8th century

Tapestry weave, polychrome wool

32.0 × 17.0 cm (12⁵/₈ × 6¹¹/₁₆ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC (BZ.1945.1)

These two fragments are part of a rare group of early Islamic textiles. Their style—comparable to Umayyad period art—and an inscription on one of them date them to the first half of the eighth century. The words on the Textile Museum fragment read, “(Commander of the) Faithful Ma(rwān). This has been ordered...,” referring likely to the Umayyad caliph Marwān II (reigned 127-132 AH / 744-749/50 CE).

Like other textiles in the group, these fragments are composed of wool yarns woven in tapestry weave and are made of Z-spun yarns plied in the S direction. The Dumbarton Oaks fragment is one of the finest of this group in terms of quality of workmanship and fineness of material used.

While these two pieces are too fragmentary to discern any overall pattern, larger surviving examples show motifs organized in horizontal decorative bands. It is not very clear from the fragments whether the band surrounded four sides of a field or whether the composition was divided only into horizontal bands. Perhaps both patterning schemes were used. We may posit that fields with highly decorative roundels alternated with bands of simpler rosettes and scrolling tendrils with simple palmettes. SBK

SELECTED REFERENCES

DUMBARTON OAKS, BZ.1945.1

Dospěl Williams 2019; Bühl and Dospěl Williams 2019, BZ.1945.1.

THE TEXTILE MUSEUM, 73.524

Bellinger 1950-2, p. 5, pl. 1; Mackie 2015, p. 56, fig. 2.17.







55

Fragment with Small Medallions

Iraq or Syria, 7th–8th century

Complementary weft weave in twill weave
interlacing, polychrome wool and cotton

38.5 × 22.5 cm (15³/₁₆ × 8⁷/₈ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC,
acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1947
(73.555)

56

Fragment with Two Cranes

Iraq or Syria, 7th–8th century

Complementary weft weave in twill weave
interlacing, polychrome wool and cotton

44.5 × 51.5 cm (17¹/₂ × 20¹/₄ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and
Collection, Washington, DC (BZ.1933.43)

57

Fragment with Pegasus

Iraq or Syria, 7th–8th century

Complementary weft weave in twill weave interlacing, polychrome wool and cotton

30.5 × 23 cm (12 × 9¹/₁₆ in.)

The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1933 (73.385)



These four fragments (cat. nos. 55–58) are part of a well-defined group of textiles that share strong technical and stylistic features. The most prominent characteristics that tie this group together are their shared design aesthetics, structure, and materials. All the fragments have weft-faced compound weave in twill interlacing with inner warps, the so-called *samite* or *samitum*, showing complex yarn functions. More complex sets of yarn functions in weave structures require a more complicated loom set up, so this group of textiles was without a doubt woven on complex looms, perhaps an early drawloom.

Another characteristic of this group is the S-spun direction used for the yarns. Spinning in the S direction was generally found in the yarns of textiles produced in Egypt or in regions under the influence of Egyptian textile making, maybe somewhere in Syria or a location

between Syria and Egypt. The homogeneity of the structural and material characteristics of this group also points to a small production area and possibly a short span of production activity.

The color scheme is another consistent element of this group: a red wool ground on which the designs are delineated with white cotton yarns. In many photographs and displays, however, the well-preserved reverse (white cotton) of these textiles tend to be pictured. We may speculate on two possible explanations for why the red wool obverse has deteriorated. The red dyeing process might have introduced chemicals to the wool that made it brittle, causing a quick deterioration. Another possibility is that the obverse was more exposed to climate and human activities than the reverse, which was often in contact with walls, furniture, or other textiles and was thus protected.



58

Fragment with Two Eagles

Iraq or Syria, 7th–8th century
Complementary weft weave in twill
weave interlacing, polychrome wool
and cotton

46.5 × 46.0 cm (18⁵/₁₆ × 18¹/₈ in.)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library
and Collection, Washington, DC
(BZ.1936.43)

Except for three examples in the collections of the Dumbarton Oaks Museum, the Textile Museum, and the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, all the fragments in this group feature birds as the main design element. Pearl roundels most often frame these long-legged birds. Sometimes a single bird stands alone or two birds facing each other stand on either side of a tree. Occasionally, these birds carry fruit in their beaks, giving the impression that they have just plucked these fruits from the tree in the middle of the composition. In addition to the long-legged birds—which may be cranes, herons, or *houbara* bustards—the motif repertory of this group includes birds resembling cocks and ducks.

The fragmentary nature of the surviving examples makes it difficult to know how these textiles functioned in their environment. A few of them have elements that may indicate an end border, but even those

are too fragmentary to reveal a function. All the fragments have designs with clear up-and-down directionality, indicating a single point of view. These textiles were likely either hung or mounted on top of a piece of furniture; when displayed, the designs would have been seen right side up. sbk

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INTRODUCTION

Map, Edna Jamandre and Catherine Polik.

TEXTILES | ARCHITECTURE | SPACE

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PRIVATE SPECTACLE

Musée de la vigne et du vin, Château de Boudry: fig. 4; © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection: fig. 5; © Abegg-Stiftung, CH-3132 Riggisberg, 2015 (photo: Christoph von Viràg): fig. 6; © Abegg-Stiftung, CH-3132 Riggisberg, 2003 (photo: Christoph von Viràg): fig. 7.

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COMFORT AT HOME

Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan: fig. 18; after Carroll, *Looms of the Copts*: fig. 22; after Chris Verhecken-Lammens: fig. 28; after Chris Verhecken-Lammens: fig. 29; after Chris Verhecken-Lammens: fig. 30; Wikipedia commons, Roger Culos: fig. 32.

TEXTILE AESTHETICS

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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