

Case Study 5

Potentially connected silk textiles from Egypt in two European collections, the National Museum of Denmark and the Art and History Museum in Brussels

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL PUZZLES
IN A MUSEUM**

Egyptian Fabrics from the 1st Millennium AD
at the National Museum of Denmark
(Online Exhibition)



Case study 5 Potentially connected silk textiles from Egypt in two European collections, the National Museum of Denmark and the Art and History Museum in Brussels

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The National Museum of Denmark (NMD) and the Art & History Museum in Brussels each hold a fragment of silk fabric (figs. 1 and 2) which seem to have connections with regard to their provenance, function, iconography and weaving technology.

Both textiles are samite weaves and have a cream coloured decoration on a purple-brown background. They belong to a large group of so-called "Akhmim silks", which were often registered in museum collections as coming from Akhmim. They are usually bicoloured, with a light pattern on a dark background. Radiocarbon dating conducted on ten "Akhmim silks" with a floral motif has revealed that they could be dated between 650 and 948 AD (95% probability), with an emphasis on the period of 687-828 A.D.

The fragment Inv. 3670_10 in the National Museum of Denmark (**Catalogue No. 9**) depicts a lion looking backwards. He has a large round eye. Above his back and next to his head, a plant motif is partially preserved. Beneath the lion is a horizontal line. The fragment has a border of heart-shaped petals on both sides.

The fabric Inv. ACO.Tx.3 in the Art & History Museum in Brussels is an *orbiculus* (roundel) depicting two



1. Silk fragment with lion, NMD, Inv. 3670_10
Photo: Søren Greve © NMD

2. Silk fragment with two crowned figures, Art & History Museum, Brussels, Inv. ACO.Tx.3
© Royal Museums of Art & History, Brussels



crowned figures in mirror image, with large round eyes, mid-length hair, and wearing long tunics. At the hem of the tunic is a border with diamond-shaped motifs. A mantle cloth is draped over the chest and shoulders. They seem to wear earrings and a necklace with three pendants, the middle one being larger. They are holding branches, maybe palm fronds. Above them is an inscription, which is no longer legible due to damage. The border of the roundel consists of hearts, the pointed end of which always terminates in twin curved twigs with little leaves. There is also a small leaf inside each heart. There is a cross at the four cardinal points of the border.

A connection with regard to provenance?

Both silk textiles have a provenance going back to the archaeologist-collector-dealer Robert Forrer. The fragment in the National Museum of Denmark was bought from him in 1891 and is registered as coming from Akhmim-Panopolis.

The roundel in the Brussels Art & History Museum is one of the 202 "Coptic" textiles donated in 1900 or 1901 by Isabella Errera and was registered as coming from Akhmim. In her catalogue *Collection d'anciennes étoffes égyptiennes* of 1916 (Cat. 189), she indicates that the roundel was bought by her from Stanislas Baron in Paris. In total, she describes 164 Egyptian textiles as being bought by her from Baron and twice she mentions 1896 as a date of purchase. Quite a lot of these textiles seem to come from the collection of Robert Forrer, as 33 identical or very similar textiles are published in his *Römische und byzantinische Seiden-Textilien aus dem Gräberfelde von Akhmim-Panopolis* of 1891, and 12 identical or

very similar textiles are published in his *Die Gräber und Textilfunde von Akhmim-Panopolis*, also of 1891. Furthermore, the fact that Stanislas Baron bought textiles from Robert Forrer is confirmed in Forrer's Notizbuch, which is kept in the archives of the Archaeological Museum of Strasbourg. In this notebook, Stanislas Baron is mentioned four times as a buyer of textiles, three times in 1892 for a total of 370 woollen and 100 silk fragments, and once in 1895 for one silk textile. (More about Forrer's Notizbuch, see **Case study 3**).

As Robert Forrer excavated in Egypt from March 1894 until January 1895, the textiles bought by Baron in 1892 must come from the "lots" that Forrer acquired before his journey to Egypt. In the introduction of his publication *Die Gräber- und Textilfunde von Akhmim-Panopolis* (1891b), Forrer writes that the textiles he purchased were bought from antiquities dealers in Cairo who themselves were supplied by agents who collected and purchased the fabrics from local sources in Akhmim. It was probably the dealers who provided him with the information about the provenance of the fabrics in Akhmim, information about which we should remain cautious. (For more on the question of the provenance of "Forrer's textiles", see **Case studies 3 and 4**).

A connection with regard to function(?)

Medallions such as the Brussels ACO. Tx.3 were part of tunic decorations and were sewn on at the level of the shoulders and/or at the level of the knees. A completely preserved linen tunic with sewn-on silk decoration is held in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (Inv. 820-1903, fig. 3). As is

visible in the picture, *orbiculi* (roundels) formed "sets" of decoration, together with *clavi* (shoulder bands) and *manicae* (sleeve bands). In the case of the tunic from the V&A, the differently shaped decorations on the tunic have an identical border design and feature similar motifs in the central fields.

Are there any indications that the Brussels roundel and the Copenhagen "lion fragment" were also part of such a set of tunic decorations?

In the first decades of the 20th century some scholars had already made a

connection between the Brussels roundel Inv. ACO.Tx.3, which was published in Forrer's *Römische und Byzantinische Seiden-Textilien* (1891a, pl. III.3), and *clavi* with *sigilla* (small pendant roundels) kept in other collections.

According to Otto von Falke (1913, p. 46, fig. 63), for instance, the Brussels roundel belonged to two *clavi* which were then "in der Stoffsammlung Krefeld" (now Deutsches Textilmuseum Krefeld), but which are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fletcher Fund, 1946, Inv. 46.156.18 b & c, fig. 4).



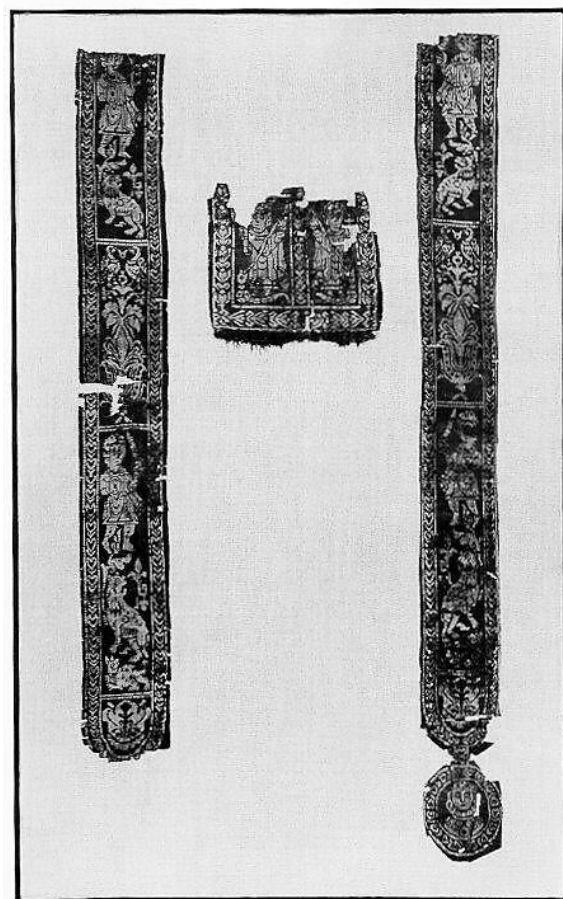
3. Complete linen tunic with silk decorations, Victoria & Albert Museum, Inv. 820-1903 © V&A, Open access data.

In particular, the crowned bust on the *sigillum* of one of the *clavi* looks very similar to the upper body of the two figures on the roundel. The *clavi* have a narrow border with a sequence of heart-shaped petal forms similar to the "lion fragment" in the NMD, and present three scenes separated by double stripes. The depictions are from bottom to top:

- youth (hunter or warrior) holding a sword and a shield, and beneath him is a lion overwhelming a cheetah or a hare (?);
- conventional "tree" or plant motif with two birds face-to-face on top holding an object between them in their beaks;
- youth (hunter or warrior) holding a sword and shield and with a lion below. The lion is the same as the one on the NMD fragment (Inv. 3670_10).

Since the same lion and same kind of border occur on the "lion fragment" in the NMD and on the *clavi* kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we can assume that the fragment in Copenhagen was part of such a *clavus* with *sigillum* (examples are held in other museums). Although the borders with heart-shaped petals are not entirely the same on the Brussels *orbiculus* and the fragments of *clavi*, the crowned bust in the *sigillum* is very reminiscent of the two figures represented in the roundel. Thus, it could be possible that these kinds of *orbiculi* (of which similar examples also exist in other museum collections) and *clavi* with *sigillum* once formed sets of tunic decorations.

Under the same inventory number, 46.156.18 a, another textile fragment with the same kind of border



4. Fragments of two *clavi* and a sleeve band, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Inv. 46.156.18 a, b, c © Metropolitan Museum of Art, Open access data

decoration with heart-shaped petals is registered in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 4, in the middle). It is a fragment of a sleeve decoration that, together with both *clavi*, was very probably part of a tunic decoration set. A complete sleeve band of the same kind is held in the Musée historique des Tissus of Lyon (Inv. 910.III.1 (29.254), fig. 5).

This sleeve band is decorated with eight rectangular fields arranged around a vertical and a horizontal mirror axis. The four fields at the extremities are decorated with a figure with, (once again, big round eyes, dressed in a long tunic and a mantle

cloth, holding a cross and piercing a fabulous snake-like animal with legs (maybe a basilisk?). In the four inner rectangles, a hare is taken by a bird of prey.

Particularly the same kind of border, and also similarities in the rendering of the eyes and mantle cloth of the figures could indicate that this kind of sleeve band was also part of tunic decoration sets, along with *orbiculi* with two crowned figures holding branches, the *clavi* presenting, among other things, armed youths and lions, and with *sigilla* representing crowned busts.



5. *Manica* (sleeve band), Le musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs, Lyon, Inv. 910.III.1 (29.254) Photo: Pierre Verrier © Musée des Tissus

A connection with regard to iconography(?)

The two crowned figures depicted in the roundel have been considered as Imperial Byzantine figures due to their rich (imperial?) garments and insignia (Forrer 1891a, Lechitskaya 2007, Osharina 2020). The palm branches may symbolise triumph: triumph in war or perhaps also the triumph of Christianity (Lechitskaya 2007).

The figure piercing a fabulous animal on the sleeve band recalls images of Christ trampling the asp or basilisk, referring to Psalm 91, 13, and symbolising the triumph of Christ and Good over Evil. These Christian images in their turn inspired imperial iconography with the emperor trampling the defeated enemy or piercing a snake (Martiniani-Reber 1986).

The iconographic elements in all these tunic decorations seem to have a common theme: crowned, maybe imperial figures holding palm (?) branches on the roundels, a hunter with a lion attacking a hare or a cheetah on the *clavi*, the figure with the cross piercing a fabulous animal, and the bird of prey who takes the hare on the sleeve bands. They all seem to point to the theme of triumph or victory; victory in war, victory of Good over Evil and/or victory of Christianity over paganism. However, further iconographic research remains necessary. For instance, we could question whether the crowned figures might not also be personifications of power or fortune, and whether the figure piercing a fabulous animal might not also be inspired by a mythological figure, such as Heracles, who conquered different kinds of beasts.

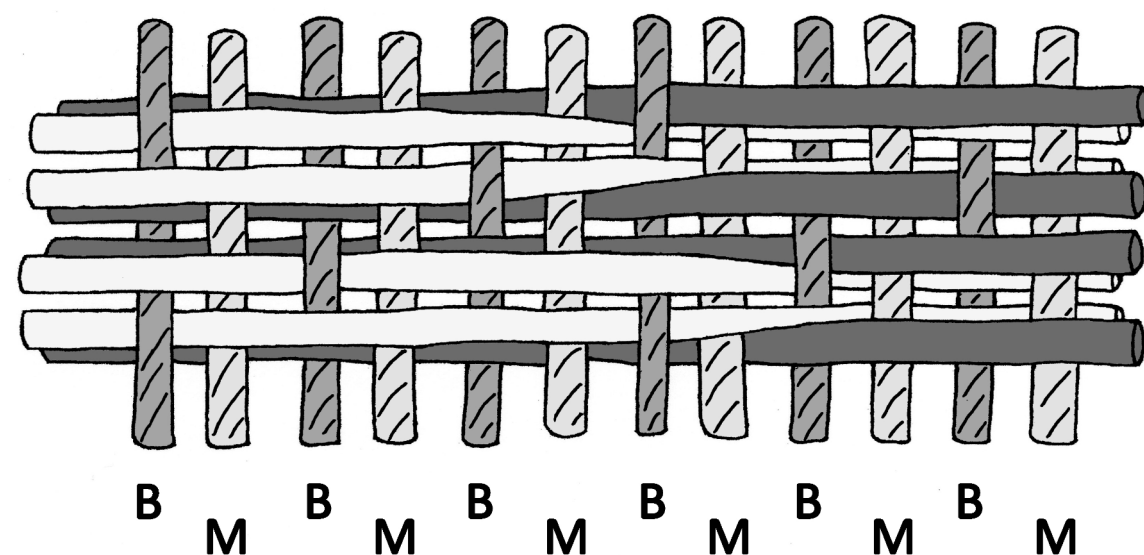
A connection with regard to material and technical features(?)

Both the NMD silk with the lion and the Brussels silk medallion with mirrored figures are worked in weft-faced compound twill, also called samite.

For the warp threads both pieces employ cream coloured, z-twisted silk yarn, while the weft threads are cream coloured and purple-brown coloured silk threads without visible torsion. So far no analysis of dyestuffs has been carried out on the two examples. The warp and weft count of both pieces is similar, with 36 warp threads (18 sets of warp threads) and 76-80 weft

threads (36-40 passes) per cm. Nevertheless, these features can be easily reproduced and therefore cannot stand as proof of connection. It is necessary to go deeper into the structure of these textiles to see their possible connection.

With the technique of weft-faced compound twill it is possible to weave fabrics in two or more colours with a pattern that is mechanically repeated over the full width of the fabric (Fig. 6). The binding is in twill, and in every binding shed two wefts in contrasting colours are inserted. An additional set of warp threads (main warp) is manipulated to push the one or the



6: Structure of the samite NMD Inv. 3670_10. B = binding warp thread, M = main warp thread; 1,2 = weft threads of different colour
© Barbara Thomas

other colour to the upper surface of the fabric. Due to this technique the rear side shows the same pattern, but in inversed colours.

The set of main warp threads has a finite width, determined by the setup of the loom. This single pattern is repeated several times in the width of the fabric mechanically. This is clearly visible in the Brussels medallion with two crowned figures (Art & History Museum Brussels, Inv. ACO.Tx.3). The *orbiculus* has a vertical mirror axis; the two figures are facing each other. All features of the pattern from the first half are mirrored exactly in the second half. Thus, we can conclude that the individual set of main warp threads is repeated in a mirrored way. The *clavus* at the NMD, however, has no mirror axis. So how can they be technically connected? It is, therefore, once again necessary to look at parallels. The two *clavi* at the MET (Fig. 4, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Inv. 46.156.18 b, c) give a first clue: the pattern of the two pieces is indeed mirrored along a vertical axis; the warriors and lions on the left *clavus* are facing right, while the warriors and lions on the right *clavus* are facing left. As the seam allowance of these pieces has been stretched out in the current mounting, one can even observe that the vertical cutting lines in between the two pieces matches exactly. So, these *clavi* have most certainly been cut from one piece of fabric that also had a vertical mirror axis.

With this information it is possible to compare the width of our two pieces: the Brussels medallion - featuring two mirrored pattern repeats - is 12 cm wide, while the Copenhagen *clavus* piece - featuring only one pattern repeat - is 6.3 cm wide. Even if not exactly, these measurements match quite well. As both pieces have seam

allowances and were moved and stretched during their use and handling after excavation, the count of main warp threads may give a more detailed hint, but this has yet to be carried out.

Conclusions

The similarities between the part of a *clavus* at the NMD and the medallion from Brussels with regard to provenance, function, iconography and technique are striking.

Technological analyses of comparable roundels, *clavi* and sleeve bands held in different collections could give more data, helping to determine whether or not they could have been part of sets of tunic decorations. An identical width of pattern repeat would be proof of the pieces being woven in an identical loom setup.

When this comes together with the similarities in material and in pattern design shown above, we might conclude that the differently shaped pieces may have been designed and woven in the same workshop context and possibly in the same batch, indicating the potential use as a set of decorations.

As for the iconography on these silk decorations, a more profound comparative study with images on other textiles and other media, such as coins and mosaics, and with contemporary texts is required to set the pieces in their historical context.

The tiny, yet splendid example of Late Roman to Early Byzantine silk weaving at the NMD, has connections in many collections worldwide, and it is definitively worth a second look.

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