



Notes on Two Children's Tunics in the Coptic Museum, Cairo

Mervat Maher Amin*

Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, October 6 University, Egypt.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Textiles are civilizational treasures and dresses are forms of cultural heritage, because of closing a visual means of communicating thoughts and values. Coptic textiles were constructed using the skilled weaving techniques of the Pharaonic era. The textiles had developed during Egyptian history, which was influenced by different cultures such as Greek, Roman, pagan, Christian, and later, Islamic. Around the fourth century, Egyptian weaving technology advanced greatly, and Coptic textiles are thought to have appeared at this time. Coptic textiles were used to make a tunic, a simple straight-sided gown without sleeves worn by men, women, and children. It was woven in a combination of linen plain weave and woollen tapestry weave for a tunic. In the Coptic Museum Cairo, there are two children's tunics, the child's tunic no. 10213 is exhibited in room no. 11, and the child's tunic no.12670 is stored in the storeroom of the Coptic Museum. The child's tunic is made from linen, wool, and with sewn tapestry bands, without sleeves, 32 length x 29 width cm, was found in the Christian tombs in Fayoum, while the other is made of linen, and its provenance is not known. The museum data does not include an accurate description of the fragments of the children's tunics. The purpose of this study of to describe the children's tunics, and comparative study with dating tunics. In addition, the tunics and its weaving technology will be explained, and this will help understand the originality of Coptic textiles.

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1. Introduction

Ancient Egyptians were aware of the fabrics. During the Dynastic Era (3100 BC–300 BC), Egyptian textiles were largely made of linen, although wool was not unknown. (Cotton and silk were introduced only later). There were three primary categories of linen: royal or fine linen, thin cloth, and smooth cloth (DeYoung, 2014; Jones, 2008; Vogelsang-Eastwood, 1992).

Textiles are the most unique Coptic Art product. There are a large number of textiles discovered in Egypt that date from the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Periods (Gabra, 1993, p. 45-46). Coptic textiles were unearthed from burials in the upper river of the Nile and as most of them were discovered in the wraps of the dead and the burial finds, it is found that there existed specific motifs and weaving technologies according to eras (Pleșa, 2017; Jungim, 2011; Kendrick, 1922). However,

* Contact Mervat Maher Amin at: mervetmaher@gmail.com

excavations of such graves at major sites such as Antonopoulos (Shiek Abada in El- Minya Province) where there are a lot of Coptic textiles were unearthed from the tombs of the Roman Period. There are also Coptic Textiles that appeared in different sites such as Akhmim, and Fayoum in the 19th and early 20th centuries were more like treasure hunts than systematic scientific works. Thousands of Coptic fabrics were discovered in illegal digs and sold as treasures. Since aesthetic characteristics alone can be used to date most of them, it's very difficult to date them exactly (Gabra, 1993).

2. Literature reviews

2.1. Coptic textile

Coptic textiles are a source of information about the social classes, daily life, beliefs, cultures, and customs of the people who produced them. The originality of the weaving technology and the artistic beauty of the weaving motifs make the textiles comparable to the modern ones. Coptic textiles are thought to have appeared during the 4th century AD. Most Egyptian Coptic tapestries were constructed between the 4th and 10th centuries, particularly in the 5th and 7th. The originality of the weaving method and the artistic beauty of the weaving motifs make the textiles comparable to modern ones, and most of them were ornaments weaved into or seamed to tunics (Ferrari and Gallo, 2016).

The main dyes were derived from plant, animal and mineral sources, the principal dyes being alkanet (red): woad, indigo, kermes and sunberry (blue); saffron, pomegranate and weld (yellow); leaves of the iris plant, berries of the buckthorn plant (green); and minerals such as iron (black). Purple dye was obtained from shellfish. The woven decoration was achieved by varying warp or weft to create details. Loop and tapestry weaving techniques were also used to create decorative effects (Mossakowska-Gaubert, 2017).

Among the various types of textiles known are complete garments such as tunic ornaments (vertical tapestry band or clavi roundels, and panels). The major fibres which were used for making textiles were linen and wool, although cotton was occasionally used. Silk, mostly imported, played an important role in the textiles industry (Kendrick, 1922; Michael, 2011; Harris, 2012; Kamal, and Mansour, 2017).

2.2. Weaving Technology

The weaving technology of Coptic textiles used in tunics is firstly a combination of linen plain clothes and woollen tapestry. After most part of a tunic is woven with flax yarns, four threads of flax warp or a few threads according to designs are combined to form one ply and then tapestry weave is carried out with dyed wool fibres which were used for decorations like neckline or skirt edge second, warp of frontal side of the textile was woven in linen and weft was done in tapestry weave according to motifs with diverse, coloured wool fibres (Hoskins, 2004).

Tunics were the most popular burial dresses. Tunics were woven together to form one piece. It only needed to be folded in half at the shoulders, slit at the neck, and seamed up the sides and down the sleeve, once it came off the loom (DeYoung, 2014; Dauterman, 2003). This technique started in the 5th century AD. when a three-piece tunic was sewn together. Sleeveless tunics were also woven in one piece (Mossakowska-Gaubert, 2017). In the 6th and 7th centuries AD, these tunics with long sleeves were sewn in several pieces (Ferrari and Gallo, 2016).

2.3. Tunic 1

The Coptic Museum possesses a fine collection of textiles, but the holdings do not include many examples of early textiles from the 3rd and 4th centuries. But there are two Children's tunics (Figure.1, a and b and Figure 2, a and b), the child's tunic (Figure.1, a and b) no. 10213 is exhibited in room no. 11, and the child's tunic (Figure.2, a and b) no.12670 is stored in the storeroom of the museum

2.3.1 Description

Figure 1, a and b

This is a child's tunic with tapestry woven ornaments in coloured wools and undyed linen thread on linen warps. It is decorated with leaves of plants and geometrical motifs, the same design is repeated on the back of the garment. It is made out of linen and wool (Hoskins, 1986; Hoskins. 2004; Kendrick, 1922), it is a simple straight-sided gown without sleeves. It was found in Christian tombs in Fayoum. This tunic consisted of two separated pieces, it is measured (29cm length x 26 cm width) (Thompson, 1971). It was cut in a T- shape like most Egyptian tunics, forming an almost straight-sided body. A T-shaped tunic is a flat garment without any dart. Rectangular clothes are folded in

half at the shoulder line and then its neckline is cut in T-shape. It is sewn from the armholes down to the skirt's edge). When weaving the tunic, the weavers made a slit for a neckline or sew the two rectangularly woven fabrics with holes for the neck and arms left. It was worn instantly without tailoring. The garment is unique because it shows the entire fabric which was woven without considering cut-out or tucked-in parts in tailoring) (Jungim, 2011), and this style of the tunic resembles the tunic which was found in Brooklyn Museum (Figure 3) (Brooklyn Museum. No. 41.523-PS2).

The method of weaving technology of Coptic textiles used in tunics is firstly a combination of linen plain clothes and woollen tapestry. After most part of a tunic is woven with flax yarns, four threads of flax warp or a few threads according to designs are combined to one ply and then tapestry weave is carried out with dyed wool fibres for decorations like neckline or skirt edge. Second, warp of frontal side of the textile was woven in linen and weft was done in tapestry weave according to motifs with diverse, coloured wool fibres (Jungim, 2011).

Decoration from below the neck of a tunic, tapestry woven throughout in coloured wools, and it was woven on a red ground, it consisted of blue warp with different colours of small squares and geometrical motives and Irises plant (Figure 4) Textile fragment, which found Metropolitan Museum no. 90.5.649 (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444128>). Access on 27/6/2021)

2.3.2. Colour

The Copt added motifs instead of colours on the simple fabrics by mixing wool and linen. When it comes to colours in textiles, from the late 5th to the early 6th centuries, garment ornaments were mostly monochromatic. Only after the 6th century, did a variety of hues begin to be used due to the Byzantine influence. In most early pieces, red violet was used for rectangular decorations on the white or natural coloured ground fabrics and purple, on the edge. These colours were extracted from a variety of crustaceans like shellfish and lichens. Dip dyeing for numerous colours, blocks, and resisting with wax or mud were used as methods of dyeing. Deep blue as well as vivid red, orange, and purple were used in the textiles. Besides, the weavers used primary polychromatic colours such as navy blue, black and purple and dim single colours of purple or brown designs and background. The colours

found on the textiles were produced from nature. Red was created from plant sources like *Rubia tinctorum* (Thompson, 1971). On the other side, they used colours in several ways, the most basic use of colour was in monochrome geometric designs (the use of dyed yarn and a natural yarn), usually purple and white. Coptic weavers used many colours for stylistic ornamentation, where the intensity of the colours also increased. Common Coptic colours include black, red, brown, yellow, white, purple, green, and orange, with small portions of coral and blue (De Moor et al. 2010)

This tunic was dyed bright colours such as white, red, blue, green, yellow, and black palmette. This tunic with tapestry decoration of geometric motifs, Irises Plants, and human figures (?), and dancers (the same design is repeated on the back of the garment. The colours found on the tunic were produced from nature. Red was created from plant sources like *Rubia tinctorum* (Jungim, 2011). Blue is made by combining Indigo and woad. Green was spawned by over dyeing indigo or woad with saffron yellow. Alum, ferric salt, and copper salt were used as a mordant to set in the colours and dyes. The dyes used in the tunic allow us to trace back the dates of the textiles. It is possible to infer the more diverse colours used, the later they were manufactured (Jungim, 2011).

This tunic has a blue warp and wefts threads that create a grid all over the surface. The entire surface is divided into small squares by blue warp and wefts threads. Each row has a different motif inside these squares: only the colour change. Six different colours are used for the brocading wefts of which the dark red colour is obtained from an insect dyestuff (The typical motifs in Coptic arts include human figures, geometric shapes (Squares and circles), images of nature (plants, animals, birds, etc.), as well as the Christian saints mixed with Egyptian and Roman mythological figures and symbols. The creativity in decoration designs with Coptic symbols. International Journal of Human Ecology, 12(1), 101-113). the raw circles found on the chest like the raw of circles were found on the textile fragment, Metropolitan Museum no. 90.5.649 (Figure.4) (Textile fragment, Metropolitan Museum no. 90.5.649. Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444128>). Access on 27/6/2021).

2.3.3. Two bands or (Two stripes)

Two bands of the tunic are made from a linen tunic, wool woven in colours on a red ground, they decorated with plants, geometrical motives, and human figures (?) and its end with a roundel which contains a figure of a dancer. There is an inner border of scale ornament and an outer one with a row of minute trefoils. These two bands are similar to the fragment of the decorated band found in *The Coptic Tapestry Albums and the Archaeologist of Antinoé*, Albert Gayet (Figure 5). Portion of a decorated tapestry band (Hoskins, 2004; Du Bourget 1964, Nos E134, F46,60,63-65, 68,70, G30,97,99; Kesser 1960, No.30, no.26, and the style of the circle (Shurinova 1967, No.188; Thompson, 1971, 36-37).

2.3.4. Motifs

The motifs which appeared on the tunic were not limited to one scene, but they reflected the contact with diverse cultures according to the periods: geometric patterns, an animal figure, and the human figure in the 6th and 7th centuries. These motifs expressed the dualistic expressions of Christianity and Islam, which were interpreted as virtue and evil, and craftsmen exhibited this dualism in the motifs by quoting Greek mythology, which was prominent due to the Hellenistic influence. The motifs are mechanically reproduced rather than by a weaver's hand, and the patterns are distinguished by more regular and less random repeating elements¹.

The motif of this tunic is similar to motifs which found on the garment in Brooklyn Museum. No. 41.523_PS2 (Figure 3). The style of the child's

tunic 1 is Similar to garments which were worn throughout the Byzantine and early Islamic period in Egypt in the 6th century (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/51792>; Thompson, 1971).

Size: Warp: S (spun Z-plied Medium) undyed linen. Wefts: S (Medium purple mixed with a little undyed wool. 3 tapestries, slit and dovetailed. Wefts: S (loose) undyed linen (as in faces): S (loose) purplish red, dark brown mixture: S (Medium to tight, red, black, yellow, bleached, green, light blue wools. I tapestry weave, slit, soak, dovetailed, and interlocked. Tapestry weave throughout, 10 warps per cm: 40 weft outline bands at the neckline (reinforced tapestry). Applied fringe at hems, sides of tunic remain open and are overcast with heavily twisted wool. The treatment of the neckline is described above.

2.4. Tunic 2

figure 2, a and b

This tunic No.10670 is made of linen. Its provenance is unknown. It is stored in the storeroom of Coptic Museum. Its size 65cm length x 52 cm width). This tunic assumed to be worn in the 4th-5th century, has wide shoulders, and smaller sleeve openings².

This is a white plain weaving linen garment like most Egyptian tunics, forming an almost straight-sided body, the front 4 cm longer than the back, with an opening slit at the front hem edge. Gores has been inserted in the side seams of the skirt allowing the garment a better shape and fit. This reflects the development of tailoring in the Coptic century in Egypt (Hoskins, 2004)

¹ The motifs which presented on Coptic textiles of ancient Egypt divided into two periods. The first period started from (the 3rd to 7th Centuries) with Graeco-Roman and Islamic elements. The motifs were diverse ranging from natural motifs, which are ancient Egyptian basic decorations, to Hellenistic influence and to simple Christian symbols. The textiles produced in the period of 3rd and 4th centuries took on diverse themes including Greek mythologies, natural motifs, ancient traditional, geometrical patterns, portraits, and human figures. Yet, it is unusual that feathers, decorated lotus, or Egyptian letters, which Egyptians used typically as motifs, were not detected in the textiles. The motifs of the early period are stripes and circles that are assumed to come from Rome, and gods and goddesses from Greek mythologies appear on the textiles along with flower patterns. On the textiles produced before the 5th

century Christian crosses were found or simply designed Christian images, T-shaped motifs appeared as hieroglyphic figures. In the 5th and 6th centuries, the prime time of Coptic textiles, as Egypt was under the rule of Byzantine. Byzantine influence, human figures, or supernatural motifs rather than landscape ones were mostly used in spite of the strong influence of Christianity in this period. (Jungim, 2011).

² In the 5th century, the entire tunic was woven in tapestry with wool fibers and ornaments and stripes in silk decorated the tunics. Most of the tunics were woven simply by shuttle work and tapestry bands, vertical decorations, or netting embellishes them, which were also found in the garments made of Peruvian tapestry

The weaving technology of Coptic textiles used in a tunic is first of linen plain. Child's tunic was the most popular burial dresses for death. Tunics were woven together to form one piece. It only needed to be folded in half at the shoulders, slit at the neck, and seamed up the sides and down the sleeve once it came off the loom (De Young., 2014).

No decoration is presented on this tunic, this is because most of the Coptic textiles were unearthed in the tomb furnishings and their colours did not fade even though they were interred over a long period of time, meaning that the reliability of dyeing technologies in the Greco-Roman era was handed down to Coptic textiles. For this reason, it is very difficult to date this tunic

3. Conclusion

The Coptic Museum in Cairo possesses a fine collection of Coptic textiles, but the holdings do not include many examples of early textiles from the 3rd and 4th centuries. Moreover, many of the textiles are still in the storeroom undescribed or labelled. The child's tunic 1 which is exhibited in Room 11 is made out of linen with decorated wool tapestry band ornament lines of the band look like embroidery, but they were woven with other parts at the same time, not added to the textile separately. The geometrical, and plant motifs are simple due to the technique used. It contained coloured repeated geometrical motifs, plants, figures, and dancers. The comparative study showed that the textile is similar to textile fragment no. 90.5.649. which is exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum, and No. 41.523-PS2 in Brooklyn Museum. The band of tunic 1 is similar to the fragment of the decorated band in *The Coptic Tapestry Albums and the Archaeologist of Antinoé*, Albert Gayet for author Nancy Hoskins.

The distinguished point of the tunic is not only the weaving technologies using different kinds of materials but also beautifully dyed colours. In this period, they were not more colourful than Syrian, Byzantine, or Persian, and apparently, they were not sophisticated in technical aspects, and were mainly made of linen or wool.

The second child's tunic 2 is stored at the storeroom of the Coptic Museum. It is made of linen with remains of red cross, is damaged and in a very bad condition for this reason it is very difficult for dated it.

These two children's tunic in workmanship and style gives us a most impressive idea of the Coptic

art, and both fragments are very important as they are the only children's tunics that exist now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo.

Coptic textiles of ancient Egypt is closely related to Egyptian history and societal development. Coptic textiles are based on the Christian faith but influenced of Hellenism, Roman Byzantine, Iranian Sassanid, Syria and later Islam, which allowed the artisans to create unique textiles. the motifs presented on tunic 1 reflected the Byzantine effect and showed dualism between Christianity and Islam.

One of the weaving technologies of the tunic1 is combined linen plain weave and wool tapestry. The other is tapestry weave in the motifs that uses linen warp threads on the frontal fabrics and diversely coloured wool weft threads. Not only the perfection of the weaving technologies and the beauty of the colours are revealed, but also the diversity of textures resulting from techniques such as weaving, and motifs. This research indicates that Coptic textiles of ancient Egypt should not be limited to the relics of the past but can also provide a new figurative possibility to modern textiles and fashion designs and momentum for the growth of today's weaving culture.

The way of displaying the child's tunic 1 in the Coptic Museum is not clear, and this tunic is taken in two numbers. While the second one should be displayed in the Coptic Museum.

These children's tunics were the most dresses of the death. These traditional dresses are used till now in the festivals and baptisms in the churches and after their death. We can say this is considered traditional wear and it is a cultural heritage, and the style of these children's tunics is represented by the garment decorations of the late Copts.

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Figures

Figure 1, a and b

Child's tunic, No. 10213, a: face, b: back, Coptic Museum, Cairo. Photo ©Mervat Maher



a



b

Figure 2.

Child's tunic Nos.10670 (Face and Back).
Coptic Museum, Cairo. Photo©, Mervat Maher



a. face



b. back

Figure 3.

Brooklyn Museum. No. 41.523-PS2 © <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/51792> Access on: 23/6/2021



Figure 4.

Textile fragment, Metropolitan Museum no. 90.5.649.

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444128>. Access on: 27/6/2021



Figure 5

Portion of decorated band

