



Funerary textiles from the medieval cemetery of Naqlun

Author(s): Barbara Czaja-Szewczak

Source: *PAM 20 (Research 2008)*, 413-420

ISSN 1234-5415 (Print), ISSN 2083-537X (Online)

ISBN 978-83-235-0821-2

Published: Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW),
Warsaw University Press (WUP)

www.pcma.uw.edu.pl - www.wuw.pl

FUNERARY TEXTILES FROM THE MEDIEVAL CEMETERY OF NAQLUN

Barbara Czaja-Szewczak

Wilanów Palace Museum

Abstract: The paper considers burial textiles from a Fatimid and Ayyubid cemetery in Naqlun in terms of the information they can provide for costumology studies as well as a reconstruction of burial customs. The textiles include coffin and body shrouds (including some with painted decoration and others with signatures in ink), pillows and tunics, the latter of a type specifically made for burial purposes.

Keywords: Naqlun, Cemetery A, Fatimid, Ayyubid, textiles, shrouds, burial clothes

In 1999 continued exploration of the early medieval monastic compound on kom A in Naqlun, carried out by Włodzimierz Godlewski and his team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, uncovered an extensive burial ground (Godlewski 2005). The date of the graves spanned a period from Fatimid through Ayyubid to Mamluk times. Grave inventories included textiles of specific, attributable function, constituting for the most part important material for research on iconography, technology, costumology and burial customs. Moreover, the inscriptions in Arabic and Coptic noted on some

textiles contributed to a more precise dating of some of the items.

Basically, the textiles from the medieval Naqlun cemetery are divided into typically funerary pieces, like coffin shrouds, body shrouds, pillows and specifically burial tunics, and the regular dress textiles which the deceased wore in life, that is, tunics, shawls, caps, bonnets, headbands, turbans, trousers and short pants, belts. Even in fragmentary condition, these textiles often provide important information. The category of textiles dealt with in this paper are the pieces prepared specifically for use during the obsequies.

SHROUDS

An integral part of every burial in cemetery A in Naqlun, linen shrouds were used both on coffins [*Fig. 1*, top] and as wrapping for the body deposited in a coffin, on a bier or

straight in the ground. Coffin shrouds were decorated with crosses painted originally in red and now faded to an orange-yellow color. To judge by the patterns of crosses

on these shrouds, the actual application of painted motifs occurred after the textile was in place on the coffin. Sometimes the shroud covered the sides of the box in addition to the top.

As always, there are examples of coffin-shroud decoration that go beyond the standard patterns. Such is, for example, the shroud on top of the coffin lid from

grave T.300 [*Fig. 1*, bottom], on which the design at the head-end consists of a cut-out rosette accompanied by painted signs of the cross.

Some of these coffin shrouds bear colorful bands of decoration embroidered with silk thread. Similar decoration embroidered in silk in exactly the same technique as the coffin shrouds and making



Fig. 1. Linen coffin shrouds, plain weave: Nd.04.100-T.305.2, top, and Nd.02.172.1-T.300 (Photo W. Godlewski, top, and T. Szmagier, PCMA archives)

use of similar ornaments [Fig. 2] can be found on body shrouds.

One such fragmentarily preserved body shroud with banded decoration was discovered in grave T.388 (Nd.04.367). The ornament looks like either a drawing pattern for unfinished embroidery, which is more likely, or an impression left by embroidery threads that have eroded away. In the latter case, however, one would expect fragments of silk threads to be preserved even residually among the linen fibers of the weave. Moreover, banded decoration on shrouds was surely reproduced extensively and there is every reason to assume that pattern-books existed and were in use.

Painted and embroidered coffin shrouds were produced exclusively for burial purposes. They were all made of a characteristic undyed fabric woven of unspun linen fibers. Any sewing that was required was done with the simplest basting stitches. Some body shrouds were impregnated, most likely with wax, on one side. This was presumably intended as a way of dealing with rapid body decomposition common in the Egyptian climate. For the same reason aromatic plants were placed as bouquets on top of the corpses or under the head, or were used as pillow filling.

The size of these body shrouds was sufficient for a thorough wrapping of the

bodies. They were made of two pieces of fabric from 60 cm to 90 cm wide, sewn together along one of the longer edges. Linen threads were applied in a basting stitch. Excess fabric at the head and feet was folded over or tied with string. In some cases, the corpses were wrapped in the shroud and additionally tied with linen string in a pattern forming decorative diamond-shaped netting.

Occasionally, the edges of the shrouds were sewn together to avoid unwrapping during the funerary ceremony. In one case even a forgotten metal needle was found stuck in the fabric of a body shroud (Nd.04.018 from grave T.341). It was probably left there by whoever had prepared the corpse for burial. The needle in fact looks very modern and only under high magnification can one observe faint traces of where the metal was joined to form the eye.

A small group of shrouds consisted of finely spun, quality linen fabrics richly decorated with silk in tapestry weave technique [Fig. 3, top]. Their presence in burials was presumably secondary, for they were textiles of everyday use, worn ordinarily as shawls.

One coffin shroud (Nd.02.267) from grave T.315 proved completely atypical. It was made of wool and its edges were



Fig. 2. Silk thread embroidery on a plain-weave linen body shroud Nd.04.055.1 (T.350)
(Photo W. Godlewski, PCMA archives)

decorated with color stripes. Only fragments of it have survived. It must have been a warm everyday shawl that ended up covering the coffin instead of the regular shrouds used for such purposes.

Regardless of whether a shroud was intentionally made as coffin wrapping or

was adapted to the purpose, the fact remains that the decoration on some of these textiles consisted of inscriptions [Fig. 3, bottom] in the Arabic language or mock inscriptions. These lines of lettering were considered as an ornamental motif; those that could be read mostly bore pious devices.



Fig. 3. Two examples of silk decoration on linen shawls Nd.04.052-T.348 (top) and Nd.99.411-T.127. Linen, plain weave; silk, tapestry weave (Photos W. Godlewski, T. Szmagier, PCMA archives)

Another type of inscription, which has nothing to do with decoration as such, are signatures written in ink (Nd.00.091 from grave T.139 [Fig. 4]; Nd.04.032). They appear in corners and by the long edges of various shrouds (for example, shroud Nd.04.032). These signatures could have been the names of the manufactures who made textiles for burial purposes. Only a few signatures of this kind have been noted in the assemblage from the medieval cemetery at Naqlun.



Fig. 4. Signature on shroud Nd.00.091-T.139.
Linen, plain weave (Photo T. Szmagier)

PILLOWS

Typical grave furnishings included linen pillows placed under the head of the corpse [Fig. 5], although these were hardly as common as the shrouds. They were

encountered in approximately 10% of the examined burials. The filling of these pillows consisted of leaves and twigs of aromatic plants, such as myrtle.



Fig. 5. Pillow Nd.04.034-T.304. Linen, plain weave
(Photo W. Godlewski)

Most pillows were made of plain linen with no decoration (Nd.02.322.1, Nd.04.034.3-T.304); a few had silk embroidery [Fig. 6] or brocaded (woven silk thread) ornament.

The pillows were rectangular or square in shape as a rule. They were made of one, two or seldom three pieces of fabric, quite carelessly basted together with linen thread. After filling, the opening was either left open, basted together or tied up (Nd.02.271.1).

In some burials, the pillow was replaced in its function of headrest by pieces of textiles of entirely different function, fastidiously folded and placed under the head (e.g. Nd.00.099). These fragments are usually too small for identification of their original shape and character. Sometimes they were used to baste together a pillow hastily (e.g. Nd.99.308), but in these cases the shape of the pillow often depended on the available textile. On the other hand, these adapted pillows are the ones with the

richest decoration executed either in silk tapestry weave (Nd.99.409-T.127) (Czaja-Szewczak 2000) or embroidery. And it is only on these textiles that inscriptions in Arabic and mock inscriptions occur.



Fig. 6. *Silk-embroidered pillow Nd.02.109.04-T.281, linen, plain weave*
(Photo T. Szmagier)

TUNICS

Considering tunics found in the medieval burials, it is entirely justifiable at this stage of the research to divide the recorded examples into tunics used in everyday life, often exhibiting much wear and tear (Czaja-Szewczak 2005), and specifically burial tunics (Czaja-Szewczak 2003), found in tombs of men and women alike. These tunics appear to have been prepared exclusively for burial purposes. They are typically very big (although not every one of them), up to 163 cm in length and very wide, up to 185 cm in the sleeveless type which is commonly referred to as 'bag-shaped'. The sleeves on the sleeved type

can reach even 80 cm in length. Taking just these numbers into consideration, there can be no doubt that these tunics were never worn in life. Moreover, both types had a very simple cut with no effort whatsoever to fit it to the figure and size of the owner.

The first to the two cuts that are apparent in the studied set consists of two rectangular pieces of fabric sewn together at the sides and fitted with broad and simple sleeves on either side (Nd.02.178-T.299 [Fig. 7, left] and Nd.02.173 from grave T.300). In these cases, little attention was paid to the rules of good tailoring with no gussets being let in, for example, to fit

the tunic to the shape of the body and to facilitate movement. The other cut of tunic had no sleeves. Two rectangular pieces of fabric were hastily sewn together at the sides (Nd.02.247-T.316 [Fig. 7, right] and Nd.02.327-T.323).

This brings us to another issue, namely, the hasty and careless finishing of these tunics. The side seams were basted together and both neck openings and bottom hem were left unfinished. The basting in itself practically excludes this garment from everyday use. Nothing that has been basted could be worn for long without coming apart at the seams.

The fabric used for these tunics was poor quality linen quite unlike what was used even for the plainest of everyday clothes. The linen fiber used in weaving was unspun, making the textile less elastic than usual. Moreover, the fabric was impregnated either whole or in part with a substance recalling wax, which not only

stiffened one side of the textile, but also gave it a shine. This kind of linen and the impregnation were fairly common in the case of both coffin and body shrouds, as discussed above. Another characteristic that the two categories of textiles appear to have in common is the banded silk embroidery with an inscription in Arabic (Helmecke 2005) or mock inscription occasionally interspersed among the bands of ornament.

Marks made with color silk thread have been noted on a number of tunics near seams in out-of-view places (Nd.02.173.01-T.300). As these marks cannot be considered as decoration by any stretch of the imagination, it is likely that they were made by the textile manufacturers.

If a corpse was being dressed in a burial tunic, the body was usually naked. The use of a burial tunic did not exclude, however, dressing the corpse in an ordinary everyday tunic, but in such cases the burial tunic was always the outer garment.

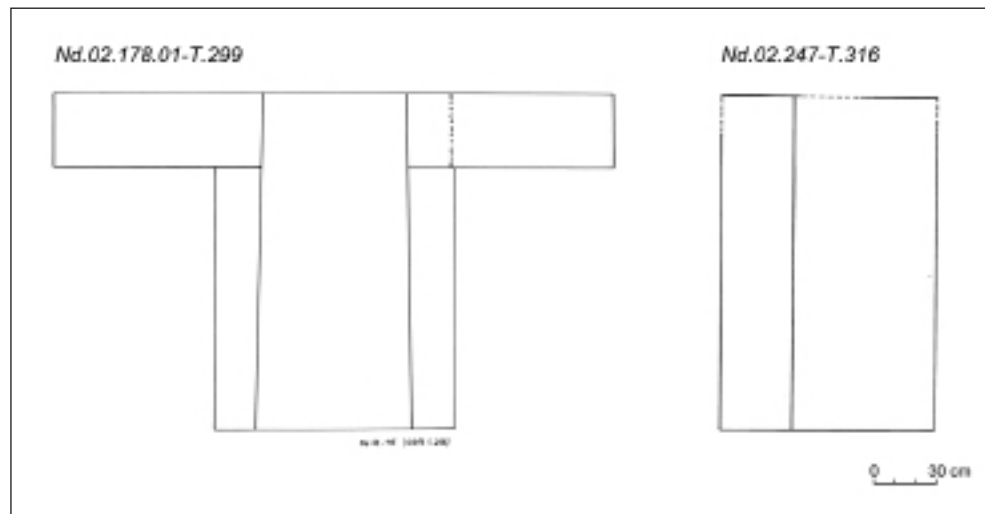


Fig. 7. Burial tunic with sleeves (left) and without. Linen, plain weave (Drawing B. Czaja-Szewczak)

RECAPITULATION

In recapitulation, the textiles originating from archaeological excavations in the medieval cemetery in Naqlun hold importance for costumology studies, as much as for a reconstruction of burial customs. Considering that most textiles in museum

collections are of unknown provenance and are on the whole imprecisely dated, the significance of the extensive Naqlun set for research on textiles of the 11th–14th century from Egypt can hardly be underestimated.

Barbara Czaja-Szewczak
Wilanów Palace Museum
02-958 Warsaw, Poland
ul. Stanisława Kostki Potockiego 10/16
e-mail: barbara_szewczak@onet.pl

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