



ЕГИПЕТ И СОПРЕДЕЛЬНЫЕ СТРАНЫ

EGYPT AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Электронный журнал / Online Journal

Выпуск 3, 2016

Issue 3, 2016

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THE NINTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE “TEXTILES FROM THE NILE VALLEY” (28–29 NOVEMBER 2015)

The Ninth International Conference of specialists in Egyptian textiles “Textiles from the Nile Valley” took place on 28th–29th November 2015 in Antwerp. It has been organised by the *Textiles from the Nile Valley Group*, an independent group of scholars, who study Ancient Egyptian, Late Antique and Early Islamic textiles kept in museum collections and found at archaeological sites all over Egypt. The meetings of specialists in Egyptian textiles take place every two years and have different topics within the general subject of history of Egyptian textiles in the 1st millennium AD. Textile find-spots in Egypt were the main topic of the ninth meeting.

More than 100 specialists from different museums situated all over the world and archaeological missions working in Egypt participated in the conference. Several topics were discussed during the meeting, e.g. dating of archaeological and museums’ textiles, studies of textiles kept in museum collections, conservation and restoration of textiles, weaving and sewing techniques of Late Antiquity, iconography of “Coptic” and Early Islamic textile objects.

Two presentations were devoted to dyeing and mordanting of Egyptian textiles. Antoine de Moor, Dominique Bénazeth, Chris Verhecken-Lammens, Mark Van Strydonck, Mathieu Boudin, Ina Vanden Berghe and Căcilia Fluck presented the results of study of 15 textiles dyed with Indian lac (11 textiles come from Katoen Natie collection (Antwerp), three from Louvre Museum (Paris) and one from Victoria and Albert Museum (London)) that had been radiocarbon dated. According to the scholars Indian lac as a dyestuff was not used in Egypt before the Islamic conquest, and, therefore, presence of it in “Late Coptic” textiles can serve as a dating method. Ines Bogensperger studied written sources dealing with alum, an essential for textile dyeing resource, which had been obtained in oases. The author pointed out the importance of such kind of researches because it is generally known that dyeing of fibres, yarns and fabrics had become an essential step in the production. However, application of dyestuff alone is not enough, and in order to get several colors, mainly reds and yellows, to set the dye or to obtain

a specific hue the fibres require to be mordanted. Metallic salts like iron and alum were the major mordants used in Antiquity in the textile industry.

Since textile find-spots in Egypt were the main topic of the conference, vast majority of papers were devoted to archaeological textiles found in course of excavations. Kristin South talked about usage of basket-weave linen in burials of a Late Roman and Early Christian necropolis of Fag el-Gamus on the eastern edge of Fayum. The author studied textiles from 43 sets of human remains from burials that had been excavated in 2010 and 2013. The study showed that an overwhelming quantity of them included basket-weave linen as part of the burial kit. The basket-weave sheets were used as intermediate layers usually situated between an outer and an innermost sheets, while plain-weave linen were never placed directly next to the body.

Alexandra Plesa described the work that had been undertaken to identify, record and date survived artefacts from tombs of the Late Antique and Early Islamic periods at Matmar and Mostagedda. These tombs were excavated in the beginning of 20th century by a British archaeologist Guy Brunton. The finds were briefly described in a few monographs and then were shipped to museums across the world without proper documentation and photos. The recent research was conducted on approximately 270 artefacts stored in nine collections in Great Britain and Germany. Stylistic analysis of the objects showed that these artefacts had been produced one or two centuries later that it had initially been assumed. This fact has proven the existence of a considerable Christian community that used Christian symbolism in burial context.

A paper presented by Frances Pritchard was devoted to textile finds from Wadi Sarga, a 6th–8th century monastic site in the Middle Egypt excavated in 1913–1914, and to a recent work on these textile objects. This paper provided a survey of the textiles and placed them in the archaeological context of the site.

Elena Tolmacheva focused in her paper on description of archeological textiles that had been found by the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the RAS during excavations at the Deir al-Banat necropolis. During seasons of 2006–2014 more than 2000 objects of textile were studied. Analysis showed existence of different types of textiles dated to the Roman, Late Antique and Medieval periods. Bandages and funeral shrouds constitute a majority of Roman artefacts. Late Antique textiles include coarse funeral shrouds, tunics, garments, caps, shawls, hangings and other household textiles. Olga Orfinskaya and Elena Tolmacheva also focused on the textile material from the Deir al-Banat necropolis (grave 213). Finds from the grave, namely coarse funeral shrouds, tunics, pillow-cases, a towel (or a scarf) and an enigmatic x-item placed under the pillow of the deceased, together with other artefacts found at the necropolis proves that a special branch of textile production existed at Deir al-Banat area in the Late Antique period.

Textiles from Deir el-Bachit, one of the largest monasteries on the Theban West bank that had functioned from the 6th until at least the 9th century, were discussed in Sabrina Tatz' presentation. According to the author, more than 500 textile fragments from the main monastery were examined during the campaigns of 2012, 2013 and 2014. Poor condition of the majority of fragments did not allow scholars to identify functions of these textiles. Therefore, a classification of textiles that was developed by these scholars rests upon materials, thickness of these textiles and a binding system that had been used during their production. Ongoing studies showed a great diversity of products made of different fabrics, from fine to coarse. This fact proves that weaving craft at that area was highly developed.

Fleur Letellier-Willemin presented a study of chequered tabbies from El-Deir. The aim of the paper was to give this textile pattern its place in history of Egyptian patterns in the oasis, to determine chequered tabbies' place amongst other archaeological artefacts.

The only paper on Ancient Egyptian textiles was presented by Nadine Meier. She spoke about the New Kingdom tapestry weaving that had been recently discovered by the University of Basel *King's Valley Project* aimed at studying of undecorated tombs in a lateral valley leading to KV 34 (Thutmose III). The author of this paper presented two fragments of the tapestry with the cartouche of Ramses III decorated with a blessing for Ramses III, protected by a bird spreading its wings. The tapestry is executed in colours of red, blue and brown on a white ground. This piece of textile is the only evidence for this technique in the New Kingdom after 18th Dynasty.

A large group of papers was devoted to a study of different museum collections. Maximilien Durand presented a study of four remarkable pieces of garment from Antinopolis and Qurnat Mar'i that were kept in the Textile Museum in Lyon. Three of them were found in 1898 during Albert Gayet's excavations in Antinopolis. They appear to be major elements of costume of the Byzantine period. Two “riding-coats” are made of cashmere wool, dyed with kermes and decorated with strips of silk. The third piece is a complete gaiter also made of cashmere wool, dyed with kermes and cochineal. And the fourth piece, a fine woolen monastic hood, was found in 1971–1975 in Thebes, in the St. Mark monastery in Qurnat Mar'i, in a monk's grave.

Gisela Helmecke talked about medieval woolen caps. Anna Harrison and Ruiha Smalley devoted their presentation to conservation of textiles from Sudan and Jordan that were kept in the British Museum. They paid particular attention to caps found on heads of mummies discovered near the Fourth Nile Cataract. Also the authors of this paper talked about a conservation strategy used at the British Museum. This strategy is based on balance between ethical considerations and the need for accessibility of items, either during their storage or on display.

The questions of creation and functioning of an online database of dated textiles were discussed in a presentation made by Sabine Schrenk and Katharina Neuser-Turczynski. Elizabeth Dospel Williams talked about textiles from the Field Museum in Chicago. She presented a selection of the most exciting textiles from the museum, specially focusing on furnishing. These nearly complete fabrics offer invaluable clues to production and functions of furnishing textiles in Late Antique Egypt.

Unpublished textiles from the British Museum became subject of Amandine Mérat's paper. The Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan of the British Museum houses more than 500 Roman, Late Antique and Early Islamic Egyptian textiles, the great majority of which are unpublished. The collection was mostly acquired through excavations, purchase and as gifts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nevertheless, only recently it became a subject of a systematic audit, documentation and re-housing.

A new collection of Egyptian textiles in Mariemont was presented by Arnaud Quertinmont. The collection consists of more than 200 Egyptian textiles (including two whole tunics, a small cap and many fragments) dating to Late Antiquity. Laura Rodriguez Peinado, Ana Cabrera and Luis Turell devoted their paper to ancient textiles kept in Spanish museums. The authors described textile collections displayed in a new Design Museum of Barcelona and at a temporary exhibition in the Monastery of Montserrat as study cases showing how results of a research may throw new light on these textiles.

Olga Osharina presented a paper on typology and evolution of portrait images, personifications and allegories depicted on Late Antique textiles from the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Usually such images were arranged within medallions or sleeve ribbons and were used as decoration of tunics. A female waist-figure in the centre of a medallion usually personifies fertility and health. A male waist-figure ensures well-being, luck and protection. Images of allegories and personifications decorating front panels and sleeves of tunics functioned as symbols of protection and salvation.

Several papers were devoted to a study of textile techniques. Barbara Köstner presented a study of Roman nalbinding socks from Egypt. Fabienne Médard and Carol James talked about a sprang technique. The authors presented a modern reproduction of a red hairnet that had decorated a mummy's head and was kept in the Guimet Museum in Lyon. It is a stunning piece of sprang lace with a complex set of patterns. A graphic representation for diverse "stitches" in sprang lace was developed. According to the authors, this system can be translated into written pattern, similar to a knitting pattern, containing sufficient details to facilitate replication efforts. The system can also be used to record, compare and contrast diverse patterns.

Martina Eichinger-Wurth presented an unpublished child's tunic (6th–8th century AD) that had formerly belonged to Theodor Graf. Now it is kept in a collection of "Coptic" textiles in one of Vienna's fashion-schools. The fabric's structure and its quality were examined with help of a digital microscope able to work with from 30 to 250-fold magnification. Four samples taken for fiber analysis proved that the child's tunic mainly consists of flax with gussets made of cotton and elements of braid ultimately composed of differently colored silk.

Petra Linscheid talked about re-usage of tapestry panels in Early Byzantine Egypt. These panels had been originally woven into fabric, and later they were cut out for re-usage after the cloth had been worn out. The paper's author discussed possible identification of these re-used bands, squares and roundels, which is connected to the grouping of the warp threads and to the seam allowance. The re-usage of tapestry panels was contemplated in a broader context of textile-recycling in the 1st millennium AD.

Tineke Rooiackers presented a paper about mysterious short, loosely spun, red wool threads woven into a main fabric. Previously these threads were considered as weaver's markings that had been used to define a beginning of a main section of a tunic or a neck-slit. However, additional textual and material evidences suggest that the red threads had a magical meaning.

Chris Verhecken-Lammens and Anne Kwaspen talked about different kinds and finishing techniques of neck openings of Late Antique tunics. The authors prepared an exhibition at Katoen Natie Gallery, where the conference took place. The samples of textiles from the gallery were shown during an exposition.

In 2017 the organisers of the conference are going to present a volume of proceedings. The next conference "Textiles from the Nile Valley" is also scheduled for 2017.

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