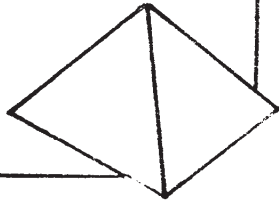


# ancient egyptian textiles



## TEXTILES FROM ABU SEIFFEIN

by Cherilyn Nelson

One of the sites from which textiles were recovered in the winter of 1981 was the churchyard of Abu Seiffein, a walled enclosure in the northeastern part of Akhmim. The oldest parts of the present Coptic church there probably date to the 16th or 17th century. The churchyard had contained a cemetery which was abandoned at the end of the 19th century. Part of it was disturbed when the Bishop of Akhmim attempted to build a house on the site in 1952. His attempt was abandoned when it became evident the site was too unstable to support a structure.

Below the disturbed top layer was the cemetery which provided information on recent Coptic burial customs. The dead were placed in mud brick chambers without floors; some bodies were interred slightly below the level of the walls, while the remainder were piled within them. A vault would have been built by each family to bury relatives.

The coffins were of two types. One was a wicker-like frame in which the body was placed, then covered with a cloth and tied with a rope. The frame was made from the rachis or center stem of the date palm leaf. The other type was a wooden box which had been nailed shut. Occasionally a body with no evidence of a coffin was located. All bodies were buried facing east.

Generally the bodies were not wrapped as ancient mummies would have been but rather were covered with several layers of clothing. A plain woven shroud was placed directly on the body and several layers of clothing over that. The body was then wrapped and tied with a narrow cloth band which was knotted over the chest.

The textiles found in the coffins varied from coarse off-white plain weaves to woven blue and pink striped and checked fabrics which appeared to have been used as shawls. A large number of the checked and striped fabrics were recovered, some directly from bodies and some from the coffins where they had been used as packing around the body. Mary Broderick, in her book, A Handbook for Travellers in Lower and Upper Egypt, published in 1896, referred to the checked shawls "so often worn by the Nile boatmen". None of these were apparent in the dress of the current Akhmim inhabitants. How long the shawls were used as clothing and when they ceased to be used is as yet an unanswered question.

A few of the dead were clothed with sheer fabric that covered the heads and bodies to the knee region. Mrs. Basta, wife of the caretaker of the churchyard, identified the garment as a shâla. According to Karl Baedeker in the 1914 book, Egypt and the Sudan. Handbook for Travelers, long shâla were worn by poorer classes for important or state occasions.

As the textiles were retrieved, they were wrapped in acid-free tissue paper and placed either in cardboard boxes or cotton bags which were transported to Sohag, a town across the Nile River. There preliminary fabric and yarn structure determination was completed as well as cataloging.

At the end of the excavation the textiles were packed in crates and trucked to the Islamic Museum in Cairo where they were examined by curators. The more significant pieces were kept by the Egyptian government for their museums with the remainder being returned to the University of Minnesota for further study.

The University of Minnesota Akhmim project was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Items for the Guild newsletter, The Minnesota Weaver, should be submitted to the Guild office by the first of each month.