

NO. 16

THE GROUP OF EGYPTO-ARABIC EMBROIDERIES OF THE ELSBERG COLLECTION

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IT IS hardly to be believed that studying a few pieces of embroidery excavated in Egypt would lead inevitably to a research into the most brilliant period of Mohammedan history. This is however a fact when one makes a careful analysis of the style and technique of the pieces in the collection of Mr. H. A. Elsberg. The question of dating the pieces is the first to arise, and this question brings with it many more to be solved. Some of them can be, others cannot, for one has to deal with periods in which history and legend are often mingled.

Most of the examples shown are embroidered in silk and this in itself helps to prove their date, though many other factors enter. It will be remembered that the making of silk tapestry and embroidery began in Egypt with the arrival of the Arabs in the seventh century, though silk weaving began earlier. History records that Parthian traders brought plain woven silks to Egypt from China in the first four centuries of the Christian era, and from these woven silks the first silk threads for re-weaving were obtained, but some raw silk must have been imported even before silk culture began during the reign of Justinian.

The first attempt at Mohammedan conquest came in the seventh century, and the completeness of this conquest was immediately apparent. The Arab rule in Egypt can be divided into several periods, beginning when the capital of the Caliphate was at Damascus (661-750); next, when Egypt was virtually ruled from Bagdad (750-968). In both cases the governors were almost independent rulers.

In 969, the Fatimites conquered lower Egypt and held control until 1171. They were followed by the Ayubites (1171-1252).

After them came the Mamelukes, who remained in power until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

This brief glance at the periods of Mohammedan rule in Egypt shows how strong the hand of the Arabs must have lain on the land and how much credit is to be given to them for their inspiration to any form of art, and yet Mohammedan art in itself remains a problem, for, as A. F. Kendrick says¹ "It is an art of many lands, fused, though not perfectly, by the conquest of the Arabs, extending in the course of a single century after the death of the Prophet over wide regions in Western and Central Asia, over Egypt and the whole of the North African coast, and across the Mediterranean into Sicily and Spain."

The group of embroideries in this collection shows that in the early periods the workers under the Arabs probably used wool as well as silk, but their real skill is shown in the extremely fine tapestries and embroideries in silk and linen, which often bear Kufic inscriptions of great historic and philological value. An effort has been made to point out all that could be safely assumed as to the period of the fabrics, based on the technique of the stitchery and the type of ornament employed; the chief interest in the group however is due to the fact that these pieces not only confirm popular tradition, but add as well an interesting chapter in the history of Mohammedan Art.

Among them, an outstanding group of five pieces requires and deserves special attention. They are from the Fayoum, and while the others are woven and embroidered in silk on linen, these five pieces are on black or purple wool gauze. As far as is known, they are the first pieces of this character brought to light² unless certain pieces in the Kaiser Friederich Museum illustrated and described in the Kühnel catalogue are also the same.

In their designs the Coptic influence is not apparent, though one has an impression of such tradition. But a marked Sassanian influence can

¹Catalogue of Muhammedan Textiles of the Medieval Period.

²Kühnel, E., *Islamische Stoffe aus Ägyptischen Gräbern*, Berlin, 1927.

Nos. 3187, 1034 (Tafel 40)

Nos. 3149, 1039 (Tafel 20)

be recognized in each one of them, as for example, piece No. 3, i.e., the one with a crudely drawn horseman. It is needless to recall how often this motif is met with in Sassanian designs. This applies as well to the surprising border, with its frieze of elephants (No. 4). In both, the borders contain the small round figures known as Sassanian beads.

When it comes to the scarf, No. 5, with its border of birds, one cannot help thinking of the famous low-relief at Taq-i-Bustan. In these birds we have the same bold design, the squat shape and short legs, and the small apparently floating scarf. None of the parts of the design have any relation to the well known Coptic duck, and the floating scarf is probably a brief indication of what originally was a wavy Sassanian ribbon.

Some day, more may be known of the history of such pieces.

The first attack of the Arabs against Egypt was made toward the end of the year 639, shortly after they had overthrown the Sassanian dynasty of Persia. They reached the Nile, some sixty miles above, (south of) what is now known as Cairo. From there they crossed into the Fayoum, and as they remained there for some time, it is quite possible that the Sassanian influence came into the Fayoum with them. It is known that, even in olden times, the Fayoum was noted for its manufactures of wool and woollen cloths, and this may explain the fact that the pieces excavated there are on a woollen gauze ground.

The Mohammedan influence must have been immediately felt in the Fayoum, which had become Christian later than other parts of Egypt, and this may partly explain why there is no Christian (Coptic) influence in these pieces. The fact that the inscription on No. 1 is apparently in a Greek Coptic dialect does not necessarily imply that the workmanship is that of the Copts, for it is possible that the Egyptian dialect used by the weavers employed by the Moslems was written in Greek characters.

None of the five Fayoum pieces have been dated earlier than the 9th century, though it is possible that they are earlier, for all of Egypt was actually in the possession of the Arabs in 640. It is true that Alexandria was not surrendered to them by treaty until November, 641, with the provision that they were to occupy the city by the end of September, 642. During this wait they occupied their time by building Fostat, which brings us down to the other pieces of the exhibition, which were all excavated there. It may be pertinent to say here that after all, Fostat

is nothing more than Old Cairo, as on the seizure of Egypt by the Fatimites, they constructed their new city next to and partly on the same ground as the old.

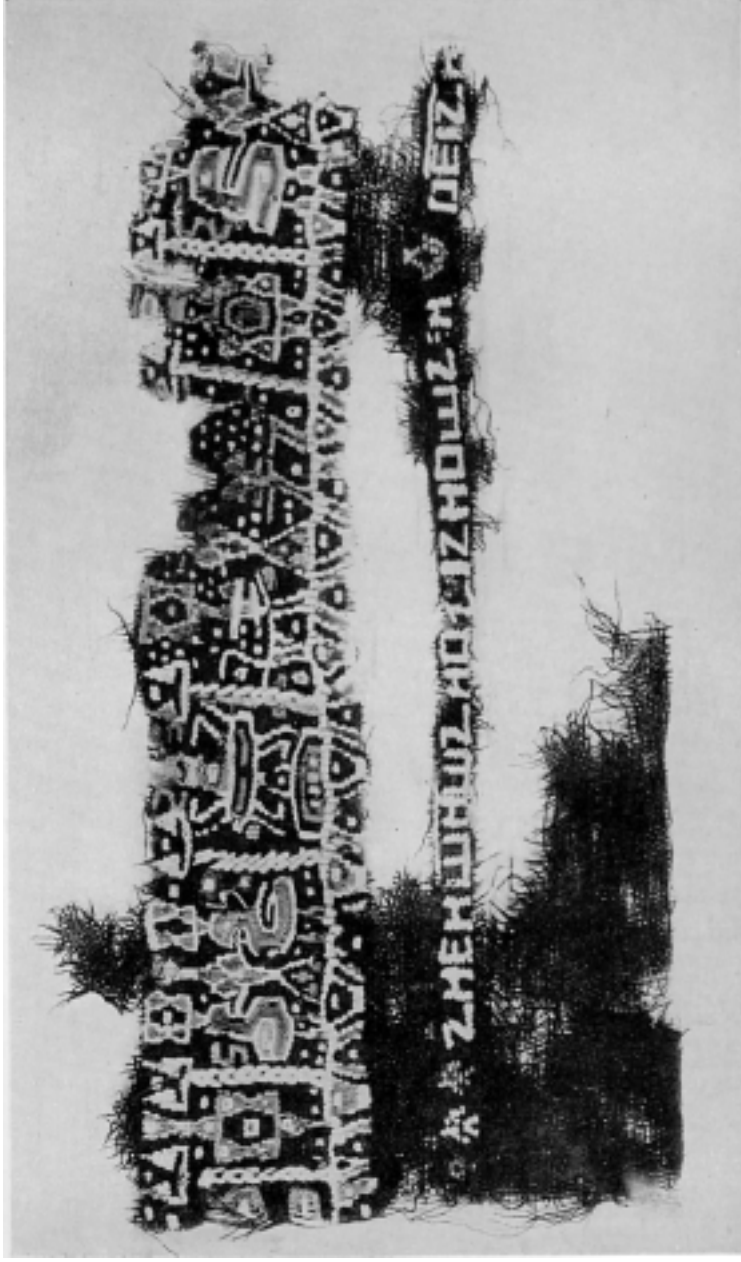
The stitches used in this group of embroideries have been studied with care, and an effort has been made to re-construct some of them, especially those that do not seem to have been analyzed in previous studies.

Especially in No. 7, which shows a fine Kufic inscription, it is entertaining to work out the idea of its particular stitch. In order to make the writing as neat as possible, at least in the long stems of the letters, a basic line was necessary and a clever hand found the way, as is shown in the illustration attached. In order to allow the needle to play a new part with skill and variety, very often one or more weft threads were drawn out of the linen ground. (Fig. No. 7-A.)

These embroideries are the ancestors of those produced in the Greek Islands, in the 16th and 17th centuries, where no doubt a similar tradition was kept up, and most of the stitches are still used to this very day in the Near East and in the Greek Islands. (For proof of this, see Miss Pesel's work, "Stitches of Near Eastern Embroideries.")

The dating of some of the pieces of this exhibition is open to discussion, though a reasonable effort has been made to avoid being vague. On others, the date is reasonably certain to be correct, especially where the name of a Caliph absolutely determines the period, or where comparison with other pieces and research by scholars has fixed the date.

A careful and full description and photographs of all the pieces will be found in the catalogue, which follows. In the preparation of it and of this article, the help of Mr. Elsberg was of inestimable value.



NO. 1