

INSTITUT DES CULTURES MÉDITERRANÉENNES ET ORIENTALES
DE L'ACADÉMIE POLONAISE DES SCIENCES

ÉTUDES et TRAVAUX

XXVI

2013

ELŻBIETA JASTRZĘBOWSKA

*Mythological and Biblical Heroes of Christians
in Egypt*

The collection of the National Museum in Warsaw has a fragment of an Egyptian tunic preserving two bands of decoration typical of the front of ancient dress of this kind, which was worn commonly by men and women throughout the ancient world.¹ These delicate and perishable items have been preserved in the greatest number and best condition in Egypt, naturally owing to the favorable climatic conditions. Moreover, Egypt – from the Pharaonic period through Late Antiquity and later – was the main producer of textiles exported from the banks of the Nile to all of the ancient and medieval world. Today museum stores around the world are full of hundreds of textiles of this kind, excavated from the sands (usually tombs) in the Nile Valley, but for the most part without known precise provenience and chronology. They are referred to, somewhat incorrectly when speaking of antiquity, as Coptic textiles. A few dozen textiles also found their way into Polish collections. I have chosen only two iconographic subjects from the great trove of topic research and equally great amount of literature on the subject of Egyptian textiles. Their comparison merits attention, enough to make this contribution worthy of a researcher who has linked his entire professional life with ancient Egypt. An additional reason standing behind this choice is the fact that both examples of textiles with the motifs discussed here come from Polish collections.

The other fragment, apart from the said tunic from the Warsaw collection, is a smaller fragment of a tunic sleeve in the possession of the Archaeological Museum in Kraków.² In both cases we are dealing with a similar type of white linen textile decorated with applied *clavi*, woven of different color wool. The Warsaw piece (90.5 x 63cm) has two *clavi* running from the shoulders of the tunic on either side of the neck opening, straight down presumably to the lost bottom hem of the dress. The two parallel bands are much shorter on the Kraków fragment (which is 28 x 27cm), although of unequal length, and originally constituted the adornment of a tunic sleeve cuff (**Fig. 1**).³ Series of round medallions can be found on the *clavi* of the Warsaw tunic (eleven on the right *clavus* and nine on the left one) with singular male figures, identified by K. Urbaniak-Walczak as Heracles, one of the most famous heroes in Greek mythology.⁴

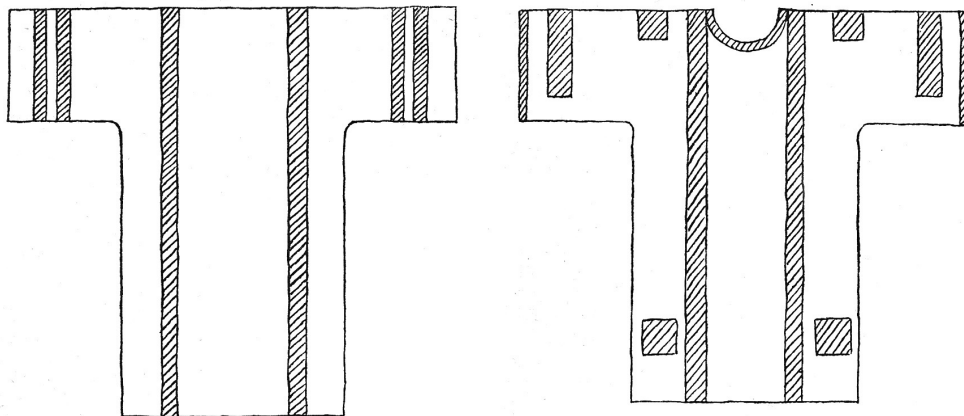
The two *clavi* on the Kraków fragment of a tunic sleeve (**Fig. 2**) are not only different in size, but also bear different decoration. The shorter one features two black squares with red and yellow medallions with human heads in the center. The longer *clavus* presents two figural scenes inside red rectangles. According to K. Babraj, the top field contains an

¹ Reg. No. 199443 MN – Wystawa ‘Sztuka koptyjska’, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warszawa 1984 [= Wystawa], pp. 42–43, 123, No. 173; K. URBANIAK-WALCZAK, I. PANNENKO, Spätantike Textilien aus Ägypten in der Sammlung des Nationalmuseums in Warschau. Eine ausgewählte Gruppe aus der Textilsammlung, Warszawa 2003 [= Spätantike Textilien], p. 14.

² Reg. No. MAK/AS/2244 – K. BABRAJ, H. SZYMAŃSKA, Bogowie Starożytnego Egiptu. The Gods of Ancient Egypt, Muzeum Archeologiczne w Krakowie, Kraków 2000 [= Bogowie], pp. 206–208, No. 133; R. PILLINGER, Gewandfragment mit menschlichen Figuren und anderen Darstellungen im Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Wien. Versuche einer ikonographischen Deutung, *MCA* 8, 2002, p. 26, Fig. 8.

³ K. WESSEL, L’art copte. L’art antique de la Basse-Epoque en Egypte, Recklinghausen 1963 [= L’art copte], Figs on p. 244.

⁴ URBANIAK-WALCZAK, PANNENKO, Spätantike Textilien, p. 14.



1. Decoration pattern on a tunic with *clavi* on the front and sleeves of the dress (after WESSEL, *L'art copte*, p. 244).

image of Joseph son of Jacob inside a well, his brother Reuben standing next to it. The lower rectangle bears an image of the Sacrifice of Abraham with a big Patriarch and small Isaac standing with a lamb above the altar.⁵ An analogous bottom scene on another *clavus* from a tunic now in Vienna was published by R. Pillinger, who identified the figure with Adam (the said Isaac) who is the guardian of animals and plants in paradise (fish, two little trees, two birds and one quadruped) and a much bigger Eve as ‘mother of the living’ (possibly Abraham).⁶ The latter interpretation seems today more appropriate,⁷ especially as R. Pillinger justified it with the testimony of the sources and cited a number of iconographic parallels, in which the said scene occurs usually in the neighborhood of a typical image of Adam and Eve next to the tree of Paradise and the snake.⁸ One could add that scenes of the Sacrifice of Abraham on Egyptian textiles were usually represented in a different manner than on the Kraków *clavus*, but there is no need to elaborate on this any further here.⁹ The scene from the upper rectangle is more enigmatic as it still fails to find parallels of any sort. In any case, it does not seem to be showing Joseph being pulled from the well by any of his brothers just before he was sold to the Ismaelites. The purported well is here higher, with bulging sides and the ‘masonry’ differs from that in analogous scenes on textiles depicting the youthful trials of Joseph.¹⁰ The figure leaning from the waist up out of the ‘well’ does not

⁵ BABRAJ, SZYMAŃSKA, *Bogowie*, pp. 206–207.

⁶ PILLINGER, *MCA* 8, 2002, pp. 25–26, Fig. 8.

⁷ Contrary to the author’s earlier publication, where the illustration was reproduced in mirror reflection by mistake, cf. E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Sztuka wczesnochrześcijańska*, Kraków 1988, p. 22, Fig. 166.

⁸ PILLINGER, *MCA* 8, 2002, pp. 25–26.

⁹ See: K. WESSEL, *Koptische Kunst. Christentum am Nil, 3.05–15.08.1963 Villa Hügel – Essen*, Essen 1964 [= *Koptische Kunst*], p. 336, No. 347.

¹⁰ See E. KITZINGER, *The Story of Joseph on a Coptic Tapestry*, *JWI* 1, 1937, pp. 266–268; *Koptische Kunst*, pp. 340–341, Nos 359, 361, Fig. XI; G. EGGER, *Frühchristliche und koptische Kunst. Ausstellung in der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Wien 11.03. bis 3.05.1964*, Wien 1964 [= *Frühchristliche und koptische Kunst*],



2. Fragment of a Coptic textile from the Archaeological Museum in Kraków (Reg. No. MAK/AS/2244; Phot. T. Kalarus, MAK).

seem to be pulled out by anyone, but appears to be speaking, his hand raised as if in oration, whereas the nearby standing figure has its hands raised in prayer.¹¹ The purported well is difficult to identify, but it may well represent another building. The speaker on the other hand resembles Christ, as suggested by the remains of a cross around his head, although without a halo. In Late Antiquity, it was the Father who was represented most often in the form of Christ, even as He created the world or in other Old Testament episodes of the Lord's intervention in human lives. This is the case of the mosaic floor decoration in the nave of the Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore from the 440s¹² and the illumination in the Cotton Genesis, a manuscript from the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century.¹³ Narrative biblical cycles found on Coptic textiles show many resemblances with these

p. 200, No. 616, Fig. 126; p. 205, No. 633, Fig. VII; R. SHURINOVA, *Coptic Textiles*, Collection of Coptic Textiles State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow 1967, Nos 181–186, Fig. 98–100, 102; G. VIKAN, [in:] *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, New York 1979, pp. 460–462, No. 412; ID., *Joseph Iconography on Coptic Textiles*, *Gesta* 18/1, 1979, pp. 105–106, n. 4.

¹¹ See BABRAJ, SZYMAŃSKA, *Bogowie*, pp. 206, 208.

¹² See H. KARPP, *Die frühchristlichen und mittelalterlichen Mosaiken in Santa Maria Maggiore zu Rom*, Baden-Baden 1966, Pls 29, 71, 73, 103, 108, 110, 143, 147.

¹³ K. WEITZMANN, *Spätantike und frühchristliche Buchmalerei*, München 1977, p. 15, Fig. XI.



3. Two medallions from *clavi* on a fragment of a Coptic textile from the National Museum in Warsaw (Reg. No. 199443 MN; Phot. Z. Doliński).

illustrations.¹⁴ Perhaps we are dealing here with a scene of God talking to Adam, the later shown in prayerful pose, a scene from Paradise before the primeval father of Christians disobeyed the Lord. A detailed iconographic search for this scene is in order, although it is not within the scope of this article. It also seems highly probable that the short piece of sleeve from the Kraków tunic was cut from a larger whole, on which either one or both scenes with Adam would have been repeated or would have been accompanied by other scenes from the *Book of Genesis* or even other, not necessarily Biblical scenes, as was the case on the *clavi* from the Vienna tunic.¹⁵ The actual use of a biblical narrative from the *Book of Genesis* (1.8-20) for the decoration of a linen tunic is of significance. It would have been a festival robe perhaps, worn by some affluent Christian from Egypt, perhaps even a clergyman of rank.¹⁶

With regard to the Heracles images, there is a larger set of scenes on the Warsaw tunic, because this mythical hero appears on a yellow ground in all of the medallions (nineteen have been preserved, **Fig. 3**) decorating the two red *clavi*. It occurs in scenes, which are repeated twice (every six medallions). Moreover the vertical bands have the same kind

¹⁴ See K. WEITZMANN, H.L. KESSLER, *The Cotton Genesis British Library Codex Cotton Otto B. VI*, Princeton 1986; VIKAN, *Gesta* 18/1, 1979, pp. 99–108.

¹⁵ PILLINGER, *MCA* 8, 2002, pp. 18–27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

of medallion at the same level. Thus, we are dealing with only six of the hero's labors, which also cannot be analyzed in detail here. In any case, the lowest medallion on the left *clavus* (as one looks at the textile) shows Heracles fighting the Lernaean Hydra. In the next medallion he overcomes the Nemean Lion or the Cretan Minotaur, it is difficult to say which, because the head of the brown animal is not to be seen, whereas both quadrupeds had long tails. In the third scene Heracles appears to be sending arrows in the air, which means that he is killing the Stymphalian birds and in the fourth scene, he appears to be holding a large blue-colored animal by the horns, which would suggest the capture of the Cerynean stag. In the fifth medallion he is shown holding a smaller, white human figure by the head and this could be the Amazon Hippolyte.¹⁷ The scenes are repeated in the same order higher on the left *clavus*. On the right band, however, the next medallion after the one with the Lernaean Hydra depicts Heracles carrying the body of another large blue-colored animal with white tusks – the Erymanthean boar. The difficulties of identification in the case of these representations, common in analyses of figures depicted in textile decoration, derive from the specific technique of execution of these images. Similar but even shorter *clavi*, with more distinct scenes of the labors of Heracles, which are still difficult to identify beyond all doubt however, are kept in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.¹⁸

I would like to note, however, a different element of the decoration of the said tunics, namely, the borders of the figural representations. The finishing of all the *clavi*, from Warsaw as well as Kraków, on either side of the medallions and figural rectangles is much the same (Figs 2 and 3). Shown against a black background there is a scrolling unidentified vine with curling tripartite leaves. The dominant background on all but the shortest band with heads (which is black) is of red color, while the type of naked white Adam from the Kraków fragment is similar in body proportions and movement depicted to the Heracles figure from the Warsaw piece. All of this may indicate, although not necessarily, the same workshop origins. It should be remembered, however, that figural images on textiles are usually different from representations in other fields of art. Hence, the specificity of the woven image often leads to uncertainty regarding the proper identification of figures and the correctness of stylistic and formal comparisons of various elements of the analyzed objects.

The two textile fragments are dated similarly to the whereabouts of the eighth century.¹⁹ It is a pity that the provenience in both cases cannot be established with any precision. The Warsaw fragment may have come from the collection of Teodor Graf, acquired by the National Museum in 1948/49, and could have originated from one of the known necropoleis in Achmim-Panopolis, Fayum or Armant.²⁰ As for the Kraków fragment, it was purchased in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in 1944, hence it may have come from the same source.

¹⁷ See E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, Herakles auf einem Stofffragment im National Museum zu Warschau, [in:] Festschrift für Piotr O. Scholz, *in press*.

¹⁸ L. KYBALOVA, Die alten Weber am Nil. Koptische Stoffe, Praga 1967, pp. 44–145, Figs 96–98.

¹⁹ In Warsaw to the seventh–ninth century AD (URBANIAK-WALCZAK, PANNENKO, Spätantike Textilien, p. 14); in Krakow to the seventh/eighth century AD (BABRAJ, SZYMAŃSKA, Bogowie, p. 207).

²⁰ URBANIAK-WALCZAK, PANNENKO, Spätantike Textilien, p. 14.

In view of the late date of both pieces, the tunics they were part of must have been worn by Christians. This assumption is only natural with regard to tunics decorated with Biblical scenes, but also fully understandable in the case of a tunic ornamented with scenes of the labors of Heracles. Images of this mythical hero were quite numerous on Egyptian textiles, although they were much more common in earlier times (fourth/fifth century) than in the eighth century AD when our two fragments were made. In the later period Heracles was depicted more often as a single figure, mainly in scenes of combating the lion,²¹ but there is no lack of cycles putting together different scenes with the same hero.²² Textiles from the fourth/fifth century could have been woven for a pagan clientele, but in the eighth century AD there is no doubt that the tunics were intended for Christians. The decoration of the tunic, which was nearest to the body of the wearer, exemplifies the wearer's dearest values, hence the presence of the figures of Heracles and Adam could indicate personal acceptance and admiration for these particular heroes and the values and traits that they represented. Hence, these two modest textile fragments, kept in Polish museums far from Egypt, can be considered, like many other Egyptian textiles scattered around the world in public and private collections, as testimony of the strength and vividness of ancient traditions and the penchant for mythological figures in eighth century society, as well as of a new 'fashion' for biblical scenes in the same context of decoration on robes. This at a time when Egypt was already under the thumb of the Arabs, although Christians still constituted the core of the population.

Elzbieta Jastrzębowska
Instytut Archeologii
UW, Warszawa
e.jastrzebowska@uw.edu.pl

²¹ See M. MATIE, K. LAPUNOVA, *Hudožestviennyye tkani koptoskogo Egipta*, Leningrad 1951, pp. 53–54, 98–99, No. 35, Pl. XVIII/3; EGGER, *Frühchristliche und koptische Kunst*, p. 175, No. 520, Fig. 118; WESSEL, *Koptische Kunst*, p. 319, No. 302.

²² EGGER, *Frühchristliche und koptische Kunst*, p. 183, No. 553, Fig. 109; WESSEL, *Koptische Kunst*, p. 318, No. 299, pp. 322–323, No. 311.