

Stories behind Archaeological Textiles Fragments from the Early Islamic Period till the Medieval Period in the Land of Israel

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Abstract:

Archaeological textiles can suggest diverse geographical origins, possible places of textile manufacture and follow the main routes to their final destination. We will show a few examples from sites in the Holy Land:

The textiles excavated at **Nahal Omer**, a farming village on the Spice Routes joining Petra and Gaza from the Early Islamic period (7th century CE) display a remarkable variety of materials, techniques and dyes. Preserved by the arid climate, most of the textile material, much of which had been cut into small pieces, was discovered in waste dumps. Most significant are a number of cotton fragments decorated in the warp-ikat technique coloured in blue, brown, cream, red-dish-brown and/or red, which constitute the earliest documented occurrence of this type of textile anywhere in the world, originated probably from India.

The second story is about **Qasr el-Yahud**, situated on the west bank of the Jordan River, nearby Jericho features the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, believed to be the traditional site of the Baptism of Jesus. 34 skeletons from the ninth century CE were retrieved, probably representing a hospital population of tuberculosis, leprosy and facial disfigurement cases. Such individuals traveled enormous distances, attracted to the site in the hope of washing away their illness. Anthropological evidence indicates that the individuals were probably Egyptian in origin, while structural analysis of the skulls proved that some were Nubian. This is also indicated via the textiles, mainly tunics – their shape, material and decoration.

The third story is about small remains of textiles discovered in a Christian grave under the pavement of the Crusader's Cathedral in **Caesarea** on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The burial was in a wooden coffin with iron nails. The textile fragments were of several layers, in very poor condition – partly carbonated and very fragile. It is assumed that they are fragments of the coffin lining and of the shrouds and/or vestments of the deceased. There are two fragments of a silk tablet woven band, brocaded with a gilded membrane lamella wound on a silk core. Using splendid silks in burials of high ranking church and secular dignitaries was customary in medieval Europe. The tablet woven bands brocaded with gilded lamella, are a sign of high social status either of a Church dignitary or of a secular aristocrat. In both cases they would have been buried in the Cathedral. As the Caesarea band resembles so closely the above mentioned European bands it can be assumed that they were made there.

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Introduction

Archaeological textiles can suggest diverse geographical origins, possible places of textile manufacture and follow the main routes to their final destination. We will present a few examples from sites in the Holy Land.

Nahal 'Omer

The textiles excavated at Nahal 'Omer in Israel's `Aravah Valley display a remarkable variety of materials, techniques and dyes, suggesting diverse geographical origins. Most significant

are a number of cotton fragments decorated in the *warp ikat* technique, which constitute the earliest documented occurrence of this type of cotton textiles anywhere in the world.

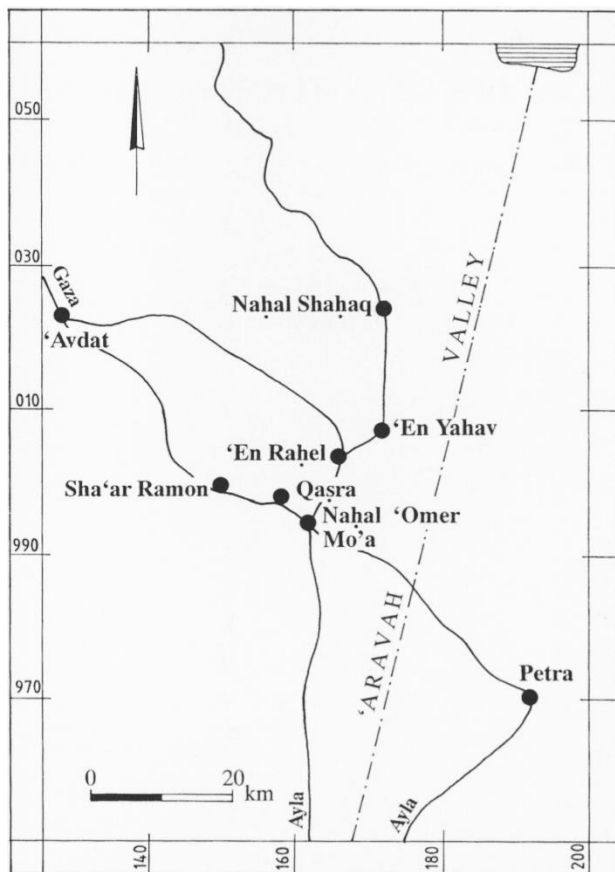


Fig. 1:
Location of Nahal 'Omer and nearby Spice Route sites (after Baginski and Shamir 1995, 21).

The site is located c. 40 km northwest of Petra on the western edge of the 'Aravah with a spring nearby (fig. 1). It appears to have been a farming village on the Spice Routes joining Petra, in the Edom Mountains of present-day Jordan, and the mercantile outlets on the Mediterranean Sea, notably Gaza and El Arish. These routes also led to Egypt, to the Arabian Peninsula, to Yemen, to parts of the Persian Gulf and the sea-routes to India, as well as to Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and from there all the way to China. The caravans carried a variety of trade goods as well as spices which were a major economic asset during the Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The caravans were also used by pilgrims heading for Mecca. This route had also existed earlier during the Nabataean period (1st century BCE-3rd century CE).

The one-dunam (0.1 ha) site is situated on the eastern bank of Nahal 'Omer, and includes remains of 17 rectangular units of dwelling and a mosque occupied during the Early Islamic Period between 650 and 810 CE. The date of this material, provided by its archaeological context, has been confirmed by carbon-14 analysis.

Preserved by the arid climate, most of the textile material, much of which had been cut into small pieces, was discovered in middens (waste dumps) and also included basketry and cordage items. Only a few samples were recovered from the remaining ruins of the buildings. The small number of textiles and other artefacts including simple and poor ceramic vessels found in association with these buildings indicate that the site was used only for a limited period – the Early Islamic period, having been abandoned by its inhabitants when the route changed its path, moving away from Nahal 'Omer. It is probable that the site provided caravans with shelter, limited water, fodder, and other amenities. This village offered welcome relief as long-distance caravan trade was fraught with dangers such as winter torrents, intense summer heat, and limited water sources, not to mention the danger of enemy.

The Textiles from Nahal 'Omer

We studied and catalogued 251 textile fragments. Many of the discarded cut and torn pieces appear originally to have come from garments. The composition of the Nahal 'Omer assemblage is remarkable for its high proportion of cotton textiles – 153 out of 251, as cotton is rarely found in this period. Three textiles are made of silk, the only silk textiles discovered in the Land of Israel during this period. The other textiles are made of wool or linen.



Fig. 2:
A fragments of the cotton warp Ikats found at Nahal 'Omer. © Israel Antiquities Authority.
Photo: Clara Amit

A small group of eight cotton fragments from Nahal 'Omer are decorated in *warp ikat* technique (fig. 2). This technique forms a pattern by tying, and thus reserving, portions of the yarn – either warp, weft, or both – before dyeing. In *warp ikat*, only the warp threads are reserved in this manner; the weave structure of the fabric is warp-faced tabby. Weavers who need more precise patterning use *warp ikats*, where they can see the pattern on the loom.

The *warp ikat* threads at Nahal 'Omer are coloured in blue, brown, cream, reddish-brown, red, cream and tan or combinations of these colours dyed with madder (reddish brown and brown) and indigo (blue). The patterns consist of 'feathers' and/or lozenges. All the *ikat* cloths at Nahal 'Omer have threads that are Z-spun. This contrasts with the local yarn which was twisted in the opposite direction – S-spun. Other cotton textiles from Nahal 'Omer are S-spun, the dominant spin direction for thousands of years in the Land of Israel. Z-spun yarns are usually considered imported to Israel.

Ikat-decorated textiles resembling those discovered at Nahal 'Omer are depicted in cave paintings of the Vakataka Period (late 5th to 6th centuries CE) in Ajanta, India (Caves 1 and 17). Among the courtiers and ladies in the palace of Prince Siddhartha many wear wraps with flame-striped patterns like those produced by *ikat*. The Nahal 'Omer *ikats* constitute the earliest cotton warp *ikat* decorated textiles excavated in a documented archaeological site to date, and were probably brought to the site by travellers from India.

The quality of the textiles at Nahal 'Omer attests to the prosperity of the site's inhabitants and the travellers who frequented it. These finds contrast sharply with the rather drab assemblages characterizing nearby sites of the same period which yielded only wool, goat hair and linen textiles. Nahal 'Omer is the only site in the Land of Israel where silk and cotton textiles in great quantities were found from the Early Islamic Period, and which can testify to textile encounters with faraway lands (Baginski and Shamir 1995; idem 2014; Zhao and Wada 2014).

Qasr el-Yahud

The second story is about Qasr el-Yahud is situated on the west bank of the Jordan River, 5 miles north of the Dead Sea and east of Jericho (fig. 3). It features the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist. Qasr el-Yahud is believed to be the traditional site of the Baptism of Jesus (John 1:28; Matthew 3.13-17; Gal 2011, 12;) by John the Baptist and has a centuries-long tradition of 'washing of the lepers'. Byzantine and Medieval authors attributed the waters of the Jordan River a special power to heal lepers who bathed in them, especially at the spot where Jesus was baptized (Resnick 2012).

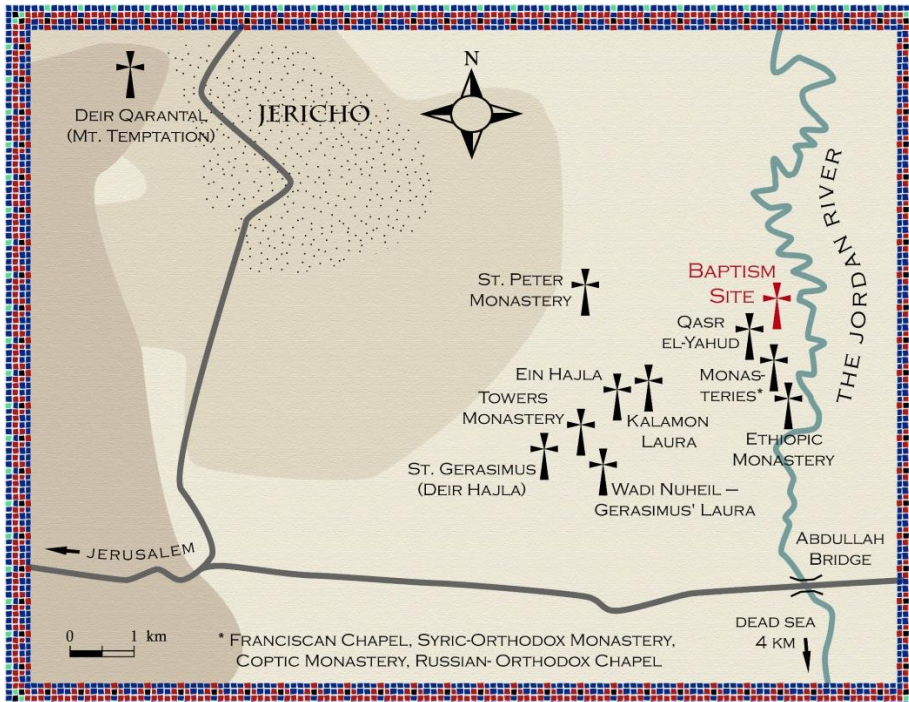


Fig. 3:
The vicinity of Qasr el-Yahud. © Dina Shalem, Ostracon, Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

The existence of the monastery and a church is mentioned in sources from the eighth and ninth centuries AD. In the crusade period (12th-13th centuries CE), the number of pilgrims to the area increased. One source mentions that in 1172 about 60,000 pilgrims visited the Baptism site (Gal 2011, 12). Today ceremonies attended by thousands of people are performed (Gal 2011, 15) (fig. 4).



Fig. 4:
Baptism today at the Jordan River. © Ostracon, Israel Nature and Parks Authority. Photo: Saar Cfir.

In 1983 a rescue excavation was carried out at Qasr el-Yahud by the anthropologist Joe Zias (Zias 1991; idem 2002. The research of Kasr al-Yahud was financed by the Civil Administration in Judea and Samaria, Staff Officer of Archaeology. Dr. Robert Janaway from Bradford University and his students cleaned and treated the textiles. He also worked with me on cataloguing the material; Ra'ya Vinizki of the IAA laboratory cleaned and treated the textiles Nos 3R, 100R, AB1. My thanks are due to Joe Zias who shared with me his thoughts.) A mass grave of around 300 men, women and children was discovered at the site, 90% of which had been destroyed by road construction; however 34 skeletons were retrieved, probably representing a hospital population of tuberculosis, leprosy and facial disfigurement cases. Such individuals traveled enormous distances, attracted to the site in the hope of washing away their illness. Anthropological evidence indicates that the individuals were probably Egyptian in origin, while structural analysis of the skulls proved that some were Nubian (Dauphin 1996, 55; Zias 2002, 264-6 and pers. comm.). They were buried in a Christian manner, lying on their backs, facing the rising sun.



Fig. 5:
Egyptian Balsam (*Balānites Aegyptiaca*) seeds which were found in the hands of the deceased and a walnut shell placed on the thorax of one of the deceased. Qasr el-Yahud. © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Tzila Sagiv.

Some of the burial customs at this site, such as placing seeds from the tree Egyptian Balsam (*Balānites Aegyptiaca*) in the hands of the deceased (fig. 5), conform to Egyptian traditions (Zias 2002, 264). Its stones have often been found in ancient tombs at Gizeh, Thebes, and various other sites in Lower and Upper Egypt. The economic value of Egyptian Balsam was known in Egypt since ancient times, its most important product being the oil extracted from its kernel: the fruit pulp was eaten raw or made into cakes, and also went into the preparation of alcoholic drinks. Different parts of the *Balānites* tree were traditionally used to treat a wide range of illnesses (Amar and Shamir 2013; Zias 2002).

The Textiles from Qasr el-Yahud

Dr. Robert Janaway from Bradford University and his students cleaned and treated the textiles. He also worked with me on cataloguing the material. The preservation of the textiles is fairly good, some were damaged by body fluids. Radiocarbon dating of one textile made by Weizmann Institute of Science placed the date at the eighth to ninth centuries (787-877 CE). The excavation lasted only two days, and because of these difficult conditions, no loci or basket numbers were given to the artifacts. With the help of a computer, it was possible to match fragments according to material, spin direction, weaving techniques etc.: for example, matching a separate sleeve with the front of a tunic. We were left with 250 textiles, which were analyzed and described. We have sorted them by fibre of the basic fabric: linen and cotton. The biggest textile is 155 x 119 cm all over.

Linen textiles

176 textiles out of 250 are of linen, mostly S-spun. They are woven in plain weave tabby. All the threads are undyed cream, beige or brown. 30 linen textiles are decorated with selfbands. The other linen textiles are decorated with blue bands, stripes, checks, wool bands, brocading or tapestry. One linen textile is decorated with a woollen red and brown band and squares made from wool. It is the only example among 250 textiles from the site and was probably part of a tunic. One bleached linen textile, no. 35.2R (fig. 6) is decorated with two bands of foliated tapestry of brown wool and white linen. There were probably some other colours but the wool threads had disintegrated and only a few wool fibres were preserved. In addition, there is a decoration of four selfbands. It is probably part of a "Coptic" tunic woven to shape (Baginski and Tidhar 1980, 44) the only one of this type from the site.



Fig. 6:

No. 35.2R, Linen textile decorated with two bands of foliated tapestry of brown wool and white linen. Qasr el-Yahud. © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Clara Amit.

Cotton textiles

84 textile fragments are of cotton. The spin direction is mostly S or S-spun in the warp and Z-spun in the weft. S-spun cottons are typical to Nubia. The cottons are woven in plain weave tabby technique. No weaving techniques more complex than variations of the plain weave were found at the site. This is in contrast to other sites from the Byzantine period onwards. All cotton textiles are undyed cream or beige except three which are faded blue and four textiles that are decorated with self-bands. Two have selvedge to selvedge (loom width) preserved: One (no. 13.1) measuring 43 cm in width and the other one 23 cm (fig. 7). When there is evidence of patching it is not extensive.



Fig. 7:
No. 13.1, Cotton textile with selvedge to selvedge (loom width) preserved. Qasr el-Yahud.
© Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Clara Amit.

Use



Fig. 8:
Cut-to-shape tunic. Qasr el-Yahud. © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Clara Amit.

The use of the textiles is varied including tunics, head coverings, bandages and shrouds. 25 tunics were found at Qasr el-Yahud (fig. 8). They were cut to shape. The sleeves, if any, are made from separate pieces. Some tunics have a binding at the bottom, usually of 3 cm in width. It was used in order to reduce the wear at the bottom of the tunic. Cut-to-shape tunics can be divided into two groups according to their cut, namely straight tunics cut and sewn to form a cylindrical tube of cloth, and gored tunics forming a cone shape. Triangular gores were used in the lower parts of the side seams, each gore usually composed of two triangular panels of the same cloth as the ground weave. The sleeves, if any, were made from separate pieces (Linscheid 2001, 76). Few tunics have a gusset resembling finds from Kulubnarti in Nubia, 600 to 850 CE, where square gussets reinforced the underarm area of the sleeves al-

low greater freedom of movement (Adams 1999:55). They were also found at the Jeziret Fara'un (Coral Island) from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. The classical Mediterranean tradition of weaving clothes to shape lingered on in Egypt until well after the Arab invasion (Granger-Taylor 1982, 22). It became more common following the Arab expansion and within two hundred years it became predominant (Granger-Taylor 1983).



Fig. 9:
No. 14.1, Shroud. © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Clara Amit.

Shrouds are usually big rectangular pieces in secondary use and full of body fluids (e.g. no. 14.1.; fig. 9). They were used for wrapping and binding the deceased.

Discussion and summary

The textiles from Qasr el-Yahud are of great importance because they give us an idea about the burial costumes used by Christians at the Late Islamic period.

These individuals probably arrived from Egypt and Nubia. S-spun cotton threads are typical to Nubia. One of the tunics is decorated with two bands of foliated tapestry from "Coptic" origin. The deceased were buried in their cloths, sometimes wrapped with a shroud and probably lying on a mat. The Piacenza Pilgrim described the baptism ceremony and wrote: Some wear linen, and some other materials which will serve as shrouds for burial (Gibson 2004, 225-9).

Whereas traditional burial in Egypt consisted of wrapping in multiple layers of linen, Christian burials could include tunics, sometimes decorated with ornate patterns in dyed wool, a fibre considered unclean and unfit for use in burial in earlier Egyptian religious practice (South 2012, 47).

The status of the deceased from Qasr el-Yahud could be studied from the clothes – most were undyed and undecorated, of simple materials and weaving technique. On the other hand, the textiles were almost not mended or patched. Apparently some of the individuals used new cloth for the long journey from Nubia and Egypt to Israel (Shamir 1995; 2015).

Caesarea

The third story is about small remains of textiles, which were discovered in a Christian grave under the pavement of the Crusader's Cathedral in Caesarea on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea (fig. 10). The burial was in a wooden coffin with iron nails. The small textile fragments

(No. 2007-9011) were of several layers, one on top of the other, in very poor condition – partly carbonated and very fragile. It is assumed that they are fragments of the coffin lining and of the shrouds and/or vestments of the deceased. There are two fragments of a silk tablet woven band, brocaded with a gilded membrane lamella wound on a silk core.



Fig. 10:
Caesarea silk textile. © Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo: Naama Sukenik.

Using splendid silks in burials of high ranking church and secular dignitaries was customary in medieval Europe. The tablet woven bands brocaded with gilded lamella, are a sign of high social status either of a Church dignitary of the rank of a bishop or above or of a secular aristocrat. In both cases they would have been buried in the Cathedral. As the Caesarea band resembles so closely the above mentioned European bands it can be assumed that they were made there (Baginski 1996; Shamir and Baginski 2016).

Conclusion

From these three stories we can study the importance of textiles telling the story of the site and of the habits and social status of the people at that period.

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