New research on Medieval embroideries from Tell Edfu at the Louvre Museum

Amandine Mérat

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The archaeological site of Tell Edfu is located in the modern town of Edfu, on the west bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt. Today Edfu owes its fame and reputation to the temple built by Ptolemy III Euergetes in 237 BC and completed in 57 BC. It was dedicated to Horus whom the Greeks equated with their god Apollo, naming the town Apollinopolis Magna after him (Bagnall and Rathbone 2004, 227–32; Vandorpe and Clarysse 2003). From the Roman period, the city was garrisoned, and from at least c. AD 600 it was the seat of a bishop (Gascou 1999, 17; Timm 1984–92, 3: 1148–55). It remained inhabited and prospered throughout the Byzantine and early Medieval periods, when habitation gradually shifted from west of the temple to the south (Gascoigne 2005, 155–59, 187–89, esp. fig. 18). Today, some parts of the tell are as high as 20m and provide stratigraphic layers that testify to the continuous habitation of the site from pharaonic to modern times.

Between 1914 and 1939 the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) and, later, a joint mission of IFAO together with Warsaw University undertook ten campaigns at Tell Edfu which revealed material from all of these periods. The excavation of the Medieval cemetery in 1923–24 yielded a large corpus of textiles (Henne 1925, 11–14; Bénazeth et al. forthcoming), among which were the six embroideries presented here. These textiles demonstrate a combination of traditional Egyptian and Medieval materials and techniques and indicate a range of garments and accessories worn in a Medieval Egyptian town.

History of discovery

The site of Tell Edfu was recorded in the late 18th century by Napoleonic troops during the Egyptian campaign (Description 1809–22, I: 265–340 and pls 48, 49, 53, 55, 61 and 65). At this time only the top of the Temple of Horus was still visible, while most of the roof was covered by the houses of Egyptians living in the modern village (Description 1809–22, pl. 49). In 1859 the temple was uncovered under the supervision of the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, founder and director (1858–81) of the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte and the Musée de Bulaq.

From 1914 to 1933 seven campaigns were carried out at irregular intervals by the IFAO (under the direction of Pierre Lacau from 1914 to 1936). These campaigns took place in the years 1914, 1921/22, 1923, 1924, 1928, 1932 and 1933. The fieldwork, directed by Henri Henne, a French scholar and papyrologist of the Université de Papyrologie, Lille, prioritised, in particular, the search for Greek papyri, which were found in abundance together with demotic, Coptic and Arabic papyri (e.g., Henne 1924).

After a brief interruption (1934–36), an agreement between the IFAO, represented by Pierre Jouguet, director from 1928 to 1940, and Warsaw University, represented by its rectors
Stefan Pieńkowski, from 1933–36, and Włodzimierz Antoniewicz, from 1936–39, was signed to create a Franco-Polish archaeological mission (Bruyère et al. 1937, v–vi). These excavations were carried out over the course of several consecutive years, in 1937, 1938 and 1938/39 (Bruyère et al. 1937; Michałowski et al. 1938; 1950).

The Louvre Museum and the National Museum of Warsaw were both major beneficiaries from these excavations and acquired many objects (Rutschowscaya and Bénazeth 1999; Majewska 1999; Mossakowska 1999; Aksamit 1999). The finds discovered during the excavations of the 1914–33 IFAO mission led by Henne became the object of regular distributions to French institutions after every campaign. By contrast the results of the French-Polish excavations were not divided until 1939.

With the exception of the 1914 season, which was not published due to the start of World War I (Henne 1924, 1 and note 4), the results of the IFAO and French-Polish campaigns and finds were presented in a series of reports between 1924 and 1950. Since 1939, when the French-Polish excavations were halted by the outbreak of World War II, there has been little archaeological work at the site (an exception, Gascoigne 2005). Since 2005, the Tell Edfu Project launched by Nadine Moeller of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago has concentrated on the pharaonic-period occupation (Moeller 2011). Today in France, the core of current research concerning Tell Edfu is the archaeological material acquired through the excavations at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Louvre collection and recent work

The Louvre acquired c. 500 objects from the IFAO and French-Polish excavations at Tell Edfu (Rutschowscaya and Bénazeth 1999). Almost 100 of these items, mainly pharaonic, came from the French-Polish excavations, while the rest (almost 400), largely Graeco-Roman, Late Antique and Medieval, came from the IFAO excavations. The majority of Tell Edfu objects in the Louvre have been studied and published in catalogues organised by material, where they are presented along with other similar pieces of the same era and function but belonging to other sites and excavations (Arveiller and Nenna 2005; Bénazeth 1992; Dunand 1990; Rutschowscaya 1986).

The objects dating from the Medieval period (c. AD 800–1500) mainly come from cemeteries and houses and are essentially utilitarian: ceramic tableware (Lyon-Caen 2008), keys, glass tableware, jewellery, door lintels (Bénazeth et al. 2010, 73, 94, 119, 157), papyri (Boudhors 1999), ostraca (Bacot 2009), textiles (Bénazeth et al. forthcoming), among other object types. The textiles and, in particular, the embroideries discovered in the Medieval cemetery at Tell Edfu have recently been the subject of PhD research, of which the first results will be presented below.

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1 Excavation reports are listed in a separate section in the bibliography, in year-date order.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_21/merat.aspx
Embroideries from the Medieval cemetery

The Louvre holds the collection of the Egyptian embroideries from Tell Edfu discovered by Henne during the 1923–24 campaign and published in the site report the following year (Henne 1925, 11–14, 17 and pl. 17). Three of these samples were illustrated with the following caption: ‘Etoffes trouvées sur les morts du cimetiére’ (Fig. 1; Henne 1925, pl. 17).\(^2\)

The cemetery that Henne refers to was discovered in 1923, under what he described as the highest sand layer, and dated to the 10th century. The description of the fabrics provided by Henne is brief:

… le linceul qui enveloppe les cadavres se compose de deux à cinq pièces de toiles, très simples. … Ces vêtements sont tout à fait analogues à ceux de nos jours … pour les enfants, une chemise, pour les hommes en plus, un caleçon et une gallabieh, pour les femmes, un vêtement semblable, sauf que le caleçon est remplacé par un pantalon plus étroit et plus long. La gallabieh peut être serrée à la taille par une ceinture; sur la tête un bonnet serré par un ruban, et tout autour un large turban; le visage des femmes était parfois recouvert d’un mouchoir, certaines portaient une sorte de châle … (Henne 1925, 12–13).\(^3\)

Although not numerous, the six Edfu embroideries preserved in the Louvre are particularly interesting from an archaeological and scientific point of view. Indeed, when they were ‘rediscovered’ during the summer of 2011 in the stored collection of the Section Copte of the Département des Antiquités Égyptiennes (DAE) of the Louvre they were still in a state similar to that which can be seen in excavation photos (Henne 1925, pl. 17). The pieces were found together with a set of tapestries and plain weave textiles (Bénazeth forthcoming; Bénazeth et al. forthcoming), lying flat on archival cardboard.

Since these objects had not been treated since their arrival at the Museum, aside from protecting them for storage, they had the potential to provide information on materials, embroidery techniques, the site of Tell Edfu and its occupants. In 2011, five of the six embroideries were radiocarbon dated as part of a larger project at the Louvre (Bénazeth et al. forthcoming). Below are the results of a technical and iconographical study of these embroideries, together with the dates provided by this radiocarbon-dating study.

Three embroideries with geometrical designs (counted-threads embroideries)
The three pieces reproduced in the excavation report plate (Fig. 1; Henne 1925, pl. 17) and marked in blue ink ‘Edfou’ followed by a number—probably written by Henne himself, but

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\(^2\) ‘Fabrics found on the bodies belonging to the cemetery.’

\(^3\) ‘… [T]he sheet wrapped around the cadavers is made of a simple textile of two to five pieces. … These clothes are very similar to the ones we wear nowadays … for children, a shirt, for men underpants and a gallabieh is added, for women the clothing is similar but underwear is replaced by tighter and longer trousers. The gallabieh may be secured with a belt around the waist, a bonnet on the head is kept in position by a ribbon, and all around a large turban; the faces of women are sometimes covered by a handkerchief, some of them wore a kind of a shawl … .’
sometimes now illegible—are similar in production and design. They may be fragments from
garments, perhaps from the gallabieh of which Henne writes. All three have a ground fabric
of unbleached linen tabby weave, with mostly Z-spun threads, sometimes S-spun. From early
pharaonic times, Egyptians traditionally spun linen in S-direction; thus the appearance of
Z-spun threads may indicate that the three textiles presented here were manufactured after
the Arabic conquest (i.e., post-7th century).

The first piece with embroidered decoration (Fig. 2, AF 13230, Edfou 1765) was made
with ecru cotton (Z-spun) and blue wool (Z-spun) thread twisted together in S direction (2
Z-spun S-plied). For the second and third fragments (Fig. 3, AF 13229, Edfou 1756; Fig. 4,
AF 13233, Edfou 1780), the embroidery was made with blue wool thread only (low Z-spun).
The decoration created in this way for all three pieces is exclusively geometrical, composed
of chevrons, lines, diamond motifs and small pyramids and lanterns. The embroidery was
made using cross stitches, running stitches and satin stitches following the counted-threads
technique (Müller-Christensen 1963, figs 1 and 13). This technique was very common during
Medieval times and produces a symmetrical and well-balanced design in accordance with the
decorative taste of this era.

When these pieces were discovered, Henne linked their production to the early post-
conquest period, between the 7th and the 10th century; however, the patterns themselves are
characteristic of Mamluk iconography (AD 1250–1517). Indeed the radiocarbon results show
a 50% probability that these embroideries were produced between the 13th and the 15th
century (Table 1, nos 1–3). Such information is particularly valuable, forcing us to reconsider
assumptions concerning the dating of the cemetery where they were discovered and thus
giving us a new perspective on the site of Tell Edfu itself and on the history of its occupation.

A headband

A fragment of a headband (Fig. 5, AF 13228, Edfou 1696; Bénazeth et al. forthcoming) has
a ground fabric of unbleached tabby weave linen, with a simple edging on the lower part,
and another hemmed border, now unfolded, closing the upper part. The threads are S-spun,
following the Egyptian tradition, but the piece also has Arab-influenced iconography which
consists of combinations of motifs such as chevrons, lines, circles and pyramidal motifs with
star-like signs above them. This geometrical decoration is massed at the centre of the piece
to ornament the forehead and was embroidered in brown, red, blue and yellow wool by using
double running stitches, stem stitches, cross stitches and flat stitches (Müller-Christensen
1963, figs 2, 4, 9b and 14).

Both ends of the fabric are creased, probably due to its function as a headband. Most likely
the two ends were tied together to hold the so-called bonnet on the head—as Henne writes
in his report (see above)—so that the headband was positioned on the forehead and knotted
at the back of the head with the two ends. In contrast to the left end which is attached to
the body of the headband, the right end was manufactured with a tabby weave piece sewn to
the rest of the fabric. As for the other fabrics, radiocarbon analysis invites us to reconsider
the dating, indicating that this headband may not be as old as originally thought, with a 78%
chance that it was made in the 13th century (Table 1, no. 4).
A woman’s handkerchief?
The following piece (Fig. 6, AF 13236, no Edfou number; Bénazeth et al. forthcoming) is a square of warp-faced tabby weave unbleached linen and Z-spun threads, with embroidered decoration using S-plied blue threads (2 Z-spun S-plied yarns) of cotton(?). A selvedge is still preserved, as well as three simple hemmed edges held by overcast sewing stitches. These edges indicate that this textile is a complete piece, cut from a pre-existing fabric to this size. As with the preceding examples, this fabric was radiocarbon dated to the 13th–14th centuries (Table 1, nos 5.a and 5.b).

The embroidered decoration is made up of geometrical motifs without any apparent arrangement or symmetry. The motifs include an irregular swastika and a sign (probably a stylised bird) reproduced five times, as well as embroidered blue lines still extant along three of the four edges of the textile. These patterns were manufactured using double running stitches and cross stitches (Müller-Christensen 1963, figs 2 and 9b) by what appears to be an inexperienced hand. Many embroidery threads are now missing, as can be seen by the presence of numerous needle holes in the fabric. A tracing produced during the current study (Fig. 7) makes it possible to visualise the appearance of the piece’s complete decoration, which originally included a frame of stitches (now missing) on all four sides, 3–4cm from the edges of the fabric and parallel to the extant blue lines described above.

The alignment of the needle holes seems to contrast with the ‘shaky’ appearance of the blue embroideries. Such a difference of techniques suggests that two embroiderers worked on this textile, one apparently more experienced than the other. In contrast with the embroideries that we would subjectively qualify as ‘shaky,’ none of the threads used in the better-executed embroideries can be observed, not even a trace of fibre in or next to the needle holes. This makes us consider two hypotheses: first, that the now-missing threads were made of a different fibre that may have deteriorated; or second, more probably, that the threads were deliberately taken out. Thus, it is possible that this fabric was a kind of practice piece in which a master embroidered an example for a student, and then unpicked it. The general shape and appearance of this textile corresponds to the description that Henne made of handkerchiefs used to cover the faces of women in a funerary context. Concerning the identity of the ‘master’ and ‘student,’ one might speculate that this product of domestic handicraft was made by a woman and her child.

A tiraz fragment
A tiraz\textsuperscript{4} fragment (Fig. 8, AF 13227, Edfou 1671; Bénazeth et al. forthcoming), deliberately cut when excavated, has a ground fabric of unbleached cotton warp-faced tabby weave (Z-spun), on which a double inscription line was embroidered with blue floss-silk threads. The whole surface of the fabric is covered by a kind of lustre that made radiocarbon dating impossible to perform. Nevertheless, it is well known that glazed textiles produced this way, with a shiny and smooth appearance that makes them resemble leather or papyrus, were the most expensive ones on the market during Fatimid times (AD 969–1171) (Desrosiers 2002).

\textsuperscript{4} The Persian word \textit{tiraz} originally meant embroidery, especially a cloth with embroidered bands with Arabic writing on them. It came later to mean an inscription, embroidered, woven or painted. \textit{Tiraz} was also used to designate the royal factories that manufactured such work and the operations of these factories.
Numerous blue silk threads used to manufacture the embroidered decoration have disappeared, but their original existence is proven by visible needle holes. The inscription appears incomplete, but can be revealed by the tracing that was made in the course of this study (Fig. 9). On the tracing, the extant embroideries are indicated in blue, while the needle holes are in red, making it possible to determine the location of the missing stitches. The result is a Kufic inscription in which can be read the name of Allah followed by an embroidered point, after which no further text appears. Given that the right-hand side of the inscription, read from right to left, is missing, it may be the end of a sura. Above this inscription a double line of geometrical motifs can be seen representing a pseudo-inscription, embroidered with thin blue silk threads. The embroidery stitches used to make these inscriptions are many and varied: chain stitches for the down strokes, figure stitches for their summits and decorative motifs located under the letters, back stitches and a derivative of the cross stitch—similar to the catch stitch—for the curves of the letters (Müller-Christensen 1963, figs 6, 3 and 12).

Many similar pieces are held in museums today. A comparable tiraz was discovered in Iraq and is now housed in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV 6778/RP 67 I; Cornu 1992, 508). It is woven in cotton tabby, embroidered with blue floss-silk threads and glazed. Although its inscription looks different from that of our tiraz the two inscriptions resemble each other in their stylistic treatment and use the same thin, small down strokes with identical summits made with chain and figure stitches. According to G. Cornu these down strokes are characteristic of Iraqi manufacture from the first part of the 10th century, an observation that makes us question the origin of our fragment, which was discovered in an Egyptian cemetery together with other, later embroideries radiocarbon dated to the 13th–14th and/or 15th centuries (Figs 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

Conclusion

Despite their limited number, the academic value of the six embroideries from the Medieval cemetery of Tell Edfu housed in the Louvre Museum cannot be denied. From a technical point of view they are excellent examples of Medieval manufacture, in which the Egyptian weaving tradition (linen fibres and S-spun thread) and Eastern influences (e.g., Z-spun linen thread and counted-threads embroideries) are found together in the production of pieces with exclusively geometrical, abstract or Arabic inscription motifs. Thanks to the Henne excavation report and his description of the fabrics it is possible to assign a function to most of the pieces, as well as to evaluate the clothing trends of the inhabitants of Edfu during the Medieval period. This population seems in all probability to have been of modest means—rehabilitating old fabrics to manufacture new pieces and embellishing them with embroidered decoration, probably in a domestic context for personal or familial use.

Radiocarbon analysis of these embroideries reveals dates much later than Henne suggested at the beginning of the 20th century based on his interpretation of the stratigraphic layers in which they were found. According to analysis results these pieces—and by extension the

\[^5\] For a complete translation and presentation of this inscription, see Naïm Vanthieghem, in Bénazeth et al. forthcoming.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_21/merat.aspx
cemetery from which they came—would date between the 13th and the 15th century and not to the 10th century as he thought. This re-dating of the textiles points a way forward for future research which might usefully include in-depth study of other artefacts discovered in the Medieval cemetery, with the aim of re-examining different occupation phases of Tell Edfu during the Medieval period.

Acknowledgements

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Bibliography

Excavation reports in year-date order
Cited works


Fig. 1: Excavation report photograph depicting six textile fragments, including three embroideries in the top row: AF 13233, AF 13230 and AF 13229 (Henne 1925, pl. 17).
Fig. 2: Fragment of a garment in linen, cotton and wool, L 12cm, W 18.5cm; AF 13230 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyrie).

Fig. 3: Fragment of a garment in linen and wool, L 26cm, W 9.8cm; AF 13229 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyrie).
Fig. 4: Fragment of a garment in linen and wool, L 12.8cm, W 8cm; AF 13233 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyrie).

Fig. 5: Headband in linen and wool, L 70cm, W 8.5cm; AF 13228 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyrie).
Fig. 6: Handkerchief in linen and cotton(?), L 37cm, W 37cm; AF 13236 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyre).
Fig. 7: Tracing of handkerchief AF 13236. Blue represents the extant embroideries, red the needle holes where they are missing (Drawing A. Mérat).
Fig. 8: Fragment of *tiraz* in cotton and silk, L 31cm, W 18.5cm; AF 13227 (© Musée du Louvre, photo Cécile Lapeyrie).

Fig. 9: Tracing of *tiraz* fragment AF 13227. Blue represents the extant embroideries, red the needle holes where they are missing (Drawing A. Mérat).
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Table 1: Radiocarbon dating results for the three garments fragments (AF 13229, AF 13230 and AF 13233; nos 1–3), the headband (AF 13228; no. 4) and the handkerchief (AF 13236; nos 5.a and 5.b) (© Laboratoire de Mesure du Carbone 14, Gif-sur-Yvette, France).