Late Antique and Medieval headwear from Egypt in the Victoria and Albert Museum

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A small collection of Egyptian headwear held by the Asian Department in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) was catalogued in 2012 prior to its move to a new storage location at Blythe House, London. The artefacts from cemeteries in Egypt date from the Late Antique and Medieval periods and display a variety of styles and decorative elements.¹ This contribution aims to describe the types represented in the collection² and compare them where possible to similar items in other institutions.

Most of the twenty-nine objects forming the corpus were registered between 1891 and 1900, three in the 1920s and one in 1976. In the 19th century the V&A, along with other national institutions, sought to identify cultures at risk by the modern world and make them a focus for collecting. This concern led to the Museum’s development of an early Egyptian textile collection that became one of the largest of its kind (Persson 2012, 6). The selection of headwear under study complements the larger V&A textile collection.

Twenty-one of the objects under study were given to the Museum as gifts and eight were purchased. Acquisition records hold incomplete information about the purchases but can give insight into how material arrived at the Museum. For example skull caps labelled ‘from a tomb at El-Azam [sic], near Asyut, Upper Egypt’ were acquired in 1891 along with a number of other items from Mr Henry Wallis Esq who was given £500 by the Museum to spend in Cairo. A hood said to be from a tomb at Edfu, Upper Egypt, was bought for the sum of £2 and 1 shilling,³ while other pieces of headwear were bought as part of a bundle of ten objects for £33 in total.⁴

Objects with known provenance

Little can be said about the provenance of the items. Archaeology in the late 19th century was not the science we know today and few details were usually recorded during excavations. Therefore a lack of reliable provenance detail is common for Egyptian material uncovered at this time. Two sites are given in the acquisition records (as noted above) while most simply state ‘from a tomb in Egypt.’

¹ The Medieval period as defined here spans c. AD 800–1500. All but one object in the collection is dated between AD 1000 and AD 1500. Item V&A T.251-1926 (see Fig. 13 below) dates c. AD 400–700.
² Only two objects have been previously published, V&A 1085-1900 (see Fig. 16 below; Mayer 1952, 31) and V&A 45-1899 (see Fig. 11 below; Jones 2009, 25).
³ V&A T.25-1929 (see Fig. 14 below).
⁴ Items V&A 702-1898 and V&A 703-1898 were included in the bundle (see Figs 1 and 15 below).
Deir el-Azzam
Deir el-Azzam literally means ‘Monastery of the Bones.’ The extant remains of the site are situated at the top of a mountain plateau in the northwest part of the Gebel Asyut al-gharb (Coquin and Martin 1991; Grossmann 1991; Kahl 2007, 99–100). Pottery recovered from a heap of debris below the monastery suggests that the site was in use from about the 8th to 13th century AD, and possibly as early as the 5th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 207; Kahl et al. 2012, 20). Three sides of Deir el-Azzam were surrounded by graves when the site was excavated by G. Maspero and W. De Bock in the 1890s. This cemetery contained around 1,400 graves that were cut into the ground, each containing one or two bodies either in wooden coffins or wrapped in a mat of palm leaves. Some bodies were wrapped in plain linen and others in decorated cloth (Kahl 2007, 99–102). Of relevance to the V&A material is a description of burials in which the dead wore headwear:

Some of the deceased ... wore a thinner cloth underneath the outer linen and were clad in a silken robe, which had embroidered arms or Arabic inscriptions. They wore caps made from several layers of cloth, the outermost being blue, with a gold tip. ... . The women sometimes wore small ear-rings or had a wooden comb underneath their head. Children formed a large proportion of the buried persons (Kahl 2007, 100–2).

Although the exact findspot of the bonnet said to be from the site cannot be determined, this description gives some indication of the general context in which it may have been found.

Edfu
The findspot of the hood said to be from Edfu is even less certain. Edfu was an important provincial city in Upper Egypt and is best known for its Ptolemaic temple in and around which the Late Antique and later early Islamic town developed (Timm 1984–92, 3: 1148–57; Gascoigne 2005, 155). In 1928, a year before the V&A hood was registered, excavations by the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) were underway in the Medieval cemetery of Tell Edfu (Mérat 2014, 64–65) and this is the most likely source. Nevertheless other Late Antique and Medieval sites are known in the region (Effland 1999; O’Connell 2013) and the possibility that the hood was found at one of them cannot be excluded.

The collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum
Without provenance, excavation data or extensive comparative material it is difficult to state how representative of the headwear fashions of the Late Antique and Medieval period the V&A collection is. Therefore the following types, based on shape and form, should be seen as a starting point for future study. Table 1 presents the types represented in the collection. Almost half of the twenty-nine objects are head caps (fourteen), followed by skull caps

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5 V&A 703-1898 (see Fig. 15 below).
6 V&A T.25-1929 (see Fig. 14 below).
eight. The remaining types include two stiffened hats, two hoods, two bonnets and one conical hat. The objects will be discussed below in this order.

Eighteen pieces have constructional fabrics consisting of a combination of silk with a lining of undyed linen (one is incomplete but is thought to be in this category), eight are of silk only, two are of linen and one is of wool. Stylistic and decorative variations include changes in the width of the head bands and the size of the skull caps, but also the use of chin ties, quilting, padding and embroidery, metal threads, patterned fabric, button-hole stitch, gilded leather strips, beading, embossing and painting as decorative elements.

Head caps
The head cap is defined as a shaped head covering comprising a skull cap with an attached head band. Variation is seen in the width of the head band and the size and construction of the skull cap element. The head cap is commonly found in historical and modern costume collections and similarly shaped headwear is prevalent around the world today. There are fourteen head caps in the V&A collection, a selection of which is presented in Fig. 1.

Embroidery is employed on one head cap which uses a button-hole stitch around circular holes in the fabric (Fig. 2, V&A 1094-1900). The skull cap area is constructed of triangular pieces sewn together to create a red cross. This form of embellishment, suggesting a possible Christian association, can be seen on another head cap held by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Fig. 3).

Comparable head caps dating to the Mamluk period (c. AD 1250–1517) are held in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the University of Leeds and the Ägyptologisches Institut der Universität, Heidelberg (Bénazeth 2011, 25–31; Hyman 2013, 39–40; von Falk and Lichtwark 1996, 296). These display similarities to three caps in the V&A collection (Fig. 4, V&A T.174-1976, V&A 1097-1900 and V&A 46-1899).

One head cap (Fig. 5, V&A 1088-1900) is composed of twists of red, black, yellow, green and blue silk of around four Z-spun threads which are twisted together in the S direction. These twists are sewn together to create a rope-like decoration of geometric shapes. Inside, where the skull cap is attached to the band, is a thin band of plain woven undyed linen that reinforces the join.

Two head caps (Fig. 6, V&A 702-1898 and V&A 1092-1900) are constructed using pre-formed bands that run across the centre and also act as the head band. The Arabic script and motifs on these bands have similarities to a fragment of Chinese silk and gold brocade held at the V&A (Fig. 7; Kendrick 1924, no. 993, pl. XXI). In 1903 the script on V&A 1092-1900 was translated by Mr A. R. Guest, revealing the phrase ‘Glory to ... the King.’ Another head cap (Fig. 8, V&A 1093-1900) has an inscription around the head band, also translated by Guest, which names ‘El Malik ... Nasin Muhammad.’ All have been dated to the Mamluk period.

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8 Notes regarding the translations by Mr Guest are found beside entries for V&A 1092-1900 (see Fig. 6 below) and V&A 1093-1900 (see Fig. 8 below) in the V&A acquisition files.
Skull caps
The skull cap is defined as headwear with circular fabric covering the crown and a hem or thin band around the edge. It is worn today often with religious affiliations as with the Roman Catholic zucchetto or the Jewish yarmulke. Four variations are seen within the eight examples held by the Museum. Variation A consists of a single piece of fabric round two thirds of the skull with a different piece covering the rest (three examples). Variation B includes a central pre-formed band across the skull with a semi-circle of fabric sewn either side (three examples). Variation C has triangular shaped pieces of fabric sewn together (one example) and variation D has a circular piece of fabric covering the skull (one example). A selection of skull caps from the V&A collection is seen in Fig. 9.

There are examples of skull caps in other museum collections. For example, the Musée des Tissus, Lyon, holds one made of silk and linen and dated roughly between the 12th and 13th centuries (Durand and Saragoza 2002, 193).

Stiffened hats
The type series includes a form—not identified yet in other collections—described as stiffened hats. These present the same structure as the head caps with the exception that the fabric has been stiffened or moulded into shape.

There are two stiffened hats under study (Fig. 10, V&A T.144-1921 and V&A 1089-1900). The first one, V&A T.144-1921, is made of linen and other unidentified fibres. The outer layer is of glazed linen hardened around a thin layer of fibrous padding, probably wool or flax, and then lined with another hardened layer of blue-dyed linen. The inner layer appears to be continuous but the outer layer is divided into skull cap and head band sections. The outer layer has white threads alternating with blue; some still retain their metal gilt. A floral pattern has been painted on and a light yellow stain has been applied to the body of the flower.

The fabric of the second stiffened hat, V&A 1089-1900, is a buff-coloured silk. Blue and gold paint has been applied to the outer layer to produce a floral pattern and one small brown bead (stone/glass?) remains attached to the head band. The fabric has been embossed to form diamond patterns across the skull cap and rings around the head band. The lining is of blue silk and the skull cap and head band are lined separately. Between the layers is a thin padding of undyed wool and paper.

A third stiffened hat is owned by the Museum (Fig. 11, V&A 45-1899) and was previously catalogued for a Museum exhibition (Jones 2009, 25), but only the basic catalogue record was available for study at the time of writing as the object was on loan.

Hoods
A hood is defined as a flat head covering made from a rectangular piece of fabric which is folded, then sewn along the short edge (straight or with a curve) to create a covering for the head and the back of the neck. Evans and Ratliff (2012, 169) describe hoods as typical elements of Egyptian children’s clothes from the Roman to Byzantine eras separately woven and sewn to the back of the tunic. There are two hoods in the collection, different in style, fabric and date, but comparable to items in other collections.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, holds a child’s tunic from Egypt (Fig. 12)\(^9\) radiocarbon dated to AD 430–620 (95% probability), including a hood woven in wool with fringes along its edges and decorated with roundels. The Louvre holds a similar tunic (Durand and Saragoza 2002, 119), as does the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin (von Falck and Lichtwark 1996, 296). These hoods compare with the first of two objects under study (Fig. 13, V&A T.251-1926) which has been sewn to a modern piece of linen for support; its lower edge no longer remains, but some of its fringing and both decorative roundels do.

The other hood under study (Fig. 14, V&A T.25-1929) is sewn with a curve over the back of the head and makes use of button-hole stitch surrounding small holes in the fabric to create decorative elements. A similar embroidery technique can be seen on a fragment of decorated linen dated to the Mamluk period and held in the Musée du Cinquantenaire, Brussels (Cornu 1993, 283). The button-hole stitch around holes is present in this example, as is the geometric motif of a square divided into four and surrounded by triangles forming a larger square. These similarities to V&A T.25-1929 may allow the date to be refined to c. AD 1250–1500, placing it in the Mamluk period. Moreover, some similarities in form and embroidered decoration with modern hoods from India worn by children as protection from the sun (Crill 1985, 36) could demonstrate a similar function for the hoods presented here.

Bonnets

A bonnet is described as a shaped head covering made from circular sections of fabric sewn together to cover the base of the skull as well as the crown. It usually has chin ties and is still worn today, mainly by children. There are two bonnets in the V&A collection, the sizes of which suggest they too were for children (Fig. 15, V&A 1095-1900 and V&A 703-1898). Both are made of plain woven linen with decoration either in linen or silk threads. V&A 703-1898 is decorated with small red crosses, suggesting a possible Christian association.

Conical hat

A conical hat is described as a shaped head covering in which a conical skull cap is attached to a head band. There is one in the collection (Fig. 16, V&A 1085-1900) made of woven silk and attached to a paper backing with a linen lining. It is heavily padded with layers of wool, an unidentified fibre, feathers and inscribed paper. This hat was published in a volume on Mamluk costume (Mayer 1952, 31) where it was described as originally including a feather.

The hat was made by quilting a series of tall, thin triangles into a conical shape. At the top of this cone are three spaced teardrop-shaped holes. Each hole is sewn with light blue thread. The outer layer—now mostly missing—is of silk in washes of pink, blue and green lines. After this layer there is another (in some places two) of thick paper including inscriptions in dark ink. The next layer is of fibre, perhaps flax, followed by another layer of paper. This paper has Arabic inscriptions in a black ink. The innermost layer is of undyed linen. The main body of the hat is attached to a head band. The layers here are stuck together so the innermost layer cannot be seen. Moving inwards, there is silk on paper, wool, fibre, then

paper with inscriptions. The silk is layered in the opposite direction to that on the cone. The bottom rim of the head band is missing but a very small part remains made of unidentified fibres, very small black feathers and red silk threads. Its outer layer is of blue-green fine silk in plain weave. It is stitched to an inner layer of linen and there may be a thin fibrous layer between them. The outside has decorations made in green silk threads embroidered across the main fabric to create diagonal lines with running stitches on either side.

Comparisons for this item are limited although inscribed paper was uncovered in the quilting of a head cap held at the Ägyptologisches Institut der Universität, Heidelberg (Bénazeth 2011, 26–27). The style has similarities to the taqiyya, which was a form of headwear worn by young men or women. Also padded with paper, the taqiyya was originally colourful with a circular flat top until fashion changed making it become higher and more dome-like (Mayer 1952, 31).

**Demographics**
The majority of surviving ancient and Medieval textiles are from funerary contexts and it is probable that most of the V&A headwear discussed herein are also from burials. Maspero and De Bock indicated that women and children were found at the burial site at Deir el-Azam (Kahl 2007, 99–102) but no specifics were recorded. The circumferences of the headwear may give a general indication of the age of the deceased who wore the headwear assuming that the item was an approximate fit on the deceased when they were buried. Adult head circumference is related to height (Bushby et al. 1992, 1286) but without further knowledge of the burial remains the following remarks can only be suggestive, specifically with respect to gender. On the basis of measurement averages from several on-line resources, women's average head circumferences range from 530 to 570mm and men's range from 560 to 610mm.

Of the hats in the collection that would be fitted when worn, fifteen (52%) have remaining circumference measurements. The range lies between 250mm and 640mm and includes the skull and head caps and the conical hat. The hoods and bonnets do not have comparable circumference measurements, and as stiffened hats may have been worn sitting on top of the head (Fig. 11) they have not been included. All but one are equal to or less than 560mm, allowing for a general suggestion that the majority of headwear in this collection was found in burials of children or youths (of either gender) or women.

Any discussion on social aspects of the deceased must be limited, although the presence of gold on some items would suggest a social class with a certain amount of wealth. Likewise, items embellished with crosses could suggest religious affiliations, assuming the symbol is not purely a decorative motif.

**Dating**
All the artefacts in the collection had been previously catalogued by V&A staff to a basic level including a simple description and date probably based on style. Further study, and in particular scientific analysis, may enable dates to be narrowed. Nevertheless, based on style all but one object under discussion can be broadly dated AD 1000–1500.

One hood can be dated c. AD 400–700 based on comparison with the child's tunic held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, radiocarbon dated AD 430–620 (95% probability).
Conclusion

Formally cataloguing these items of headwear has identified them as part of the Late Antique and Medieval Egyptian textile collection at the V&A and enabled greater access for further study. The lack of provenance and excavation data means we only have the artefacts themselves to work with and are unable to consider wider social aspects such as burial practices and social status. Although small and not fully representative of headwear types of the periods, the V&A collection does allow us to examine fabrics and decorative techniques in use at the time. There is also the possibility of non-Egyptian aspects in the craftsmanship which may be representative of broader social influences. For the 2009 V&A exhibition ‘Hats: an anthology’ the milliner Stephen Jones collaborated with the Museum to present the history of hats over the past seventeen centuries. Jones noted a link between hats of the past and the present (Jones 2009, 25) and the Egyptian headwear collection strengthens this idea. Clearly, head caps, skull caps, hoods and baby bonnets are all still worn today, displaying in some cases religious affiliation. By presenting twenty-nine items of Late Antique and Medieval headgear in the V&A collection this contribution aims to add to the numbers of published examples and facilitate future study.

Acknowledgements

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Bibliography


See V&A collections online: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/.

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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Stiffened hat</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Conical hat</td>
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<td>A shaped head covering where a conical skull cap is attached to a head band</td>
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Table 1: Description of headwear types in the V&A collection. Bold inventory nos indicate illustrated objects (Courtesy of the V&A, table and photos R. Smalley).
Fig. 1: Head caps; V&A 702-1898, V&A 133a-1891, V&A 1086-1900 and V&A 1093-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).

Fig. 2: Head cap in embroidered silk; V&A 1094-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
Fig. 3: Silk head cap; Fitzwilliam Museum inv. no. 51285 (© Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge).
Fig. 4: Head caps; V&A T.174-1976, V&A 1097-1900 and V&A 46-1899 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
Fig. 5: Silk head cap: V&A 1088-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).

Fig. 6: Head caps with Arabic script; V&A 702-1898 and V&A 1092-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).

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Fig. 7: Chinese silk and gold brocade (Kendrick 1924, pl. XXI).

Fig 8: Head cap with Arabic inscription; V&A 1093-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
Fig. 9: Skull caps; V&A 1099-1900 (variation A), V&A 2163-1900 (variation B), V&A 814-1898 (variation C) and V&A 815-1898 (variation D) (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
Fig. 10: Stiffened hats; V&A T.144-1921 and V&A 1089-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).

Fig. 11: Stiffened hat; V&A 45-1899 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_21/smalley.aspx
Fig. 12: Child’s tunic; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 27.239 (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Fig. 13: Hood; V&A T.251-1926 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
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Fig. 15: Bonnets; V&A 1095-1900 and V&A 703-1898 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).
Fig. 16: Conical hat with detail; V&A 1085-1900 (Courtesy of the V&A, photo R. Smalley).