

Dorothee Renner-Volbach, *Spätantike und koptische Textilien im Erzbischöflichen Diözesanmuseum in Köln*. Verlag Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1992. 84 Seiten, 14 Tafeln, 3 Farbtafeln.

A collection of sixteen fragmentary garment and furnishing ornaments acquired in the early 1960s comprises the Coptic textiles in the Archbishop's Diocesan Museum at Köln. Most of these pieces were woven when Egypt was part of the medieval Islamic world, but a small number exemplify late antique styles of Coptic weaving and are dated in the late fifth or sixth century.

After the customary introductory matter in Coptic textile catalogues – a note as to the sources of the collection (these are all dealer's pieces without ties to identified excavations) – there follows an introduction (*Herkunft und Zuordnung*) to the field of Coptic textiles. The need, always, is to study them without the support of a physical or archeological context. D. Renner-Volbach makes clear that her primary interest is the iconography of the tapestry-woven depictions, the patterns themselves. However, she also takes into account transformations of the iconography or stylistic changes, but gives less consideration to the effects of technical developments in the larger textile field upon the evolution of patterns. The attempts of other scholars to work with this material in an effort to relate stylistic developments to technical influences, which would make some datings more precise, is nevertheless included in a footnote (p. 10, n. 4).

A thoughtful discussion of her reasons for dating the pieces in the Diocesan Museum (pp. 19–22), calls mostly upon her earlier dating of comparable pieces in other museums. (In some respects, the reasoning here is more explicit than that given in the individual catalogue entries, and the reader should therefore be careful to come back to this section after consulting the entry for each piece.) The author has previously published catalogues of the Coptic textiles in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, in the Collection of Prince Johann Georg of Sachsen, in the Vatican Museum, and in the Martin von Wagner Museum of the University of Würzburg, but she also calls upon other published collections. This is the classical, art historical, approach to the study of Coptic textiles, as depictions, or images; the reviewer's personal preference is to give greater weight to technical considerations, to the consistency, construction and possible function of the object, in its relation to its connected objects. Thus the author points out the recurrence of conventional motifs in greatly transformed late Coptic patterns, e.g. the "Nilknaben" or swimming putti with objects, derived from marine and sometimes Nilotic iconography; nereids from marine thiasoi; cymbals from the cult of Kybele; the ancient tree of life (pp. 13–16). But while the student of late Coptic textiles becomes adept at recognizing and separating from each other their disparate motifs and iconography taken from late antique compositions, the confluences in which they figure and the significance of these repetitive

conflations, do not seem significant in the author's eyes to establishing distance from the prototypes in terms of date and their conventionalization in society (why are these themes intermixed and made 'decorative'?). Since late Coptic textiles with details that can be dated in comparison to works in other media like Fatimid *ṭirāz* have not been found in scientifically excavated, let alone published, contexts, it may well be that such very late Coptic textiles did not come out of the typical (post-Ptolemaic) types of burials that writers of Coptic textile catalogues, this reviewer included, regularly describe to explain the volume and good preservation of this large amount of material. We simply do not know anything about the circumstances of their discovery because their suppliers have maintained an impenetrable silence.

The technical part of the catalogue entries lack indications of the spin of yarns and of warp and weft construction (if they are plied, paired, if the tapestry weave is irregular, etc.). These details help the student of Coptic textiles to visualize the pieces better and occasionally to determine if fragments in other collections could have come from the same textile. The photographs are clear and indicate that the textiles did not undergo much conservation before publication, and pasted fragments taken from other textiles remain in gaps, just as the pieces came from the hands of dealers. Lack of conservation is particularly apparent in catalogue no. 3, an illusionistic bust medallion from a largescale weaving; in this case, the reviewer would hesitate to study the piece before conservation.

Included among the sixteen Köln textiles are two which can be tentatively attributed to well known excavation sites. Catalogue no. 1, a fragmentary narrow border with a swimming putto on a red ground, is possibly from Antinoopolis, and catalogue no. 6, a square containing a hare and cut from a border is dated in the late fifth to sixth century, and attributed to Akhmīm/Panopolis. Judging from the coarseness (warp to weft ratio or Fadenzahl) of the weave of no. 6, it was cut out of the ground of a curtain; under magnification, the photograph shows paired warps, typical of such largescale weavings. The discussion of no. 1 might also be enlarged by considering its technique. Here, the photograph under magnification is harder to read, yet the color illustration suggests it was woven on plied linen warps rather than "auf Wolle (?)", as in the text. If so, it is from the large group of plied (linen) warp ornaments which include Old and New Testament scenes and late antique decorative motifs. D. Renner-Volbach's dating to the late seventh to early eighth century appears correct to the reviewer because of the stylistic agreement of the figural and decorative motifs with those of Umayyad art.

Catalogue no. 4, a classicizing purple-ground, "black-figured" square showing a horseman in the flying gallop with the pattern defined by overall flying shuttle work, is also woven on paired warps. Its fine quality (8 : 110) and closeness to late antique sources make it the finest expression of late antique style in the collection. With such a ratio of wefts to warps (did Renner-Volbach count the flying shuttle threads too?), one wonders if silk wefts are present. (Such classicizing textiles with black-figured motifs delineated purely by flying shuttle work are discussed by the reviewer in Bull. Centre Internat. Étude Textiles Anciens 69, 1991, 24-33; for Coptic textiles with classicizing iconography and silk wefts see the reviewer in Bull. Centre Internat. Étude Textiles Anciens 57-58, 1983, 90-103.)

A number of pieces in the Köln collection are patterned by motifs which originally were larger scale, independent, Coptic textile patterns but are now assembled as repetitive motifs, each apparently of equal importance to the next, e.g. catalogue numbers 7-12; Renner-Volbach appropriately uses the word "Kompilation" to describe this effect. Catalogue nos. 13-15, polychrome wool fragments, represent a similar design principal, the reduction of formerly dominant motifs (mainly figures from marine contexts and busts) to overall, abstracted, patterns. Possible explanations for these reductive styles are proposed by the reviewer in Journal Am. Research Center Egypt 22, 1985, 55-71, where some datings of highly stylized types of textiles are a century or two later than those of Renner-Volbach. In catalogue no. 11, for example, dated by the author 8/9 century, the forms of the hares most closely approach those of *ṭirāz* dated to the early twelfth century (e.g. L. GOLOMBECK/V. GERVERS, Tiraz Fabrics in the Royal Ontario Museum. In: V. GERVERS (ed.), Studies in Textile History in Memory of H. B. Burnham [1977] 117, Royal Ontario Museum acc. no. 963.95.2). For that matter, the organization of some of these late, 'compiled' borders actually resembles the complex equally 'compiled' decorative bands of some of these eleventh and twelfth century *ṭirāz*. These comments are made not so much as quibbles about the dating of individual pieces as to indicate that no matter how many parallels are found to the individual details of a textile: to its border motif, to its color scheme, to the stylization of its turbaned heads (e.g. catalogue no. 14), a lot remains subjective and in the eye of the scholar, because of the lack of context of this material.

D. Renner-Volbach has done an extremely thorough piece of work in calling attention to the iconography and stylistically comparable material relevant (and sometimes barely relevant) to each textile, and has created a consistent and logical synthesis. Except for the minor technical omissions noted above, this is the best that one can expect from a good catalogue of Coptic textiles in the present state of our knowledge. The Diocesan Museum of Köln is to be congratulated for having arranged for the scholarly publication of its collection. When one thinks of the major collections elsewhere that remain to be catalogued, many acquired early in this century, a certain amount of envy makes itself felt as we celebrate the publication and availability for study of this small but interesting collection.

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