

Dietrich Willers and Bettina Niekamp, **Der Dionysosbehang der Abegg-Stiftung**. Riggisberger Berichte, volume 20. Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg 2015. 269 pages, 12 line-drawings (as text figures), 188 text figures in colour, 32 colour plates.

No classical archaeologist visiting the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Bern, for the first time and coming unexpectedly upon the Dionysus Hanging can fail to be astounded: not only is its scale monumental, but it is Roman art in a completely unfamiliar form and context. Measuring over eight metres long and two metres high, the ›Dionysosbehang‹ is the largest wall-hanging to survive from antiquity. Mounted vertically in the exhibition it has enormous visual impact.

The many fragments large and small that make up the hanging were acquired by the Abegg-Stiftung on the German art-market in 1986 at the instigation of Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, the Foundation's redoubtable head of conservation, who recognised the fragments' significance, led the team that conserved them, and in 1988 published the first interim report on the hanging with an initial attempt to reassemble the pieces in their original order for exhibition purposes. Sabine Schrenk published a longer account of the hanging in 2004 in her catalogue of the ancient textiles in the Abegg-Stiftung's collection.

The volume under review, based on two decades of research, is intended to be a definitive, all-embracing account of the Dionysus Hanging written by an art-historian, a conservator and a textile analyst. It falls into three sections: the iconography of the hanging and its interpretation by Dietrich Willers, its restoration and conservation by Mechthild Flury-Lemberg (with additions by Bettina Niekamp), and a textile-technical report by Bettina Niekamp. The order of treatment is deliberate, following the house-style of Abegg-Stiftung publications: it reflects what might be expected to be the primary focus of the general reader, narrowing to

the particular interests of the specialist. The sections are largely independent of one another, but the approach of the art-historian and the art-collector sets the tone throughout. A textile archaeologist might wish to read the book in the reverse order. He or she would certainly observe regretfully that while there are scales on some of the line-drawings, there are none on any of the plates, nor are any dimensions given in the captions.

As an archaeological textile, the Dionysus Hanging may be characterised as follows: the warp was of S-spun flax yarn, at a count of twenty-four to twenty-five threads per centimetre, originally over eight metres in length. The tabby ground weft, also of S-spun flax yarn, has a count of ten to fourteen threads per centimetre, self-bands in specific circumstances, and a length of about two metres. No original edges are preserved. The decoration is of (Gobelin) tapestry inserts within the linen ground weave, woven in many colours, blends of colour and subtle combinations of S-spun wool yarn (twenty-eight to forty-eight per centimetre) supplemented occasionally by weft threads in flax. Two types of warp crossing (*croisage*, *Kettfadenverkreuzung*) are present in the tapestry decoration, accompanied by some floating warp on the reverse of the textile. ›Flying thread‹ in flax and wool is used sparingly for surface enhancement. The tapestry figures and columns were woven horizontally from the weavers' perspective. Damaged areas in the cloth had been repaired in antiquity. A radiocarbon date of cal. AD 260–530 (95,4 percent probability) was obtained in 2014 (p. 243), while stylistic criteria suggest a Constantinian date for manufacture.

Consideration of the interpretation and significance of the Dionysosbehang as a work of art (›Bild und Deutung‹) was entrusted to Dietrich Willers, an eminent historian of ancient art who has long been concerned with the hanging. His discussion is at once comprehensive and authoritative, resting on an impressive grasp of the multifarious relevant sources. Here, and throughout the volume, copious footnotes support and streamline the main narrative. His quotation and reproduction of so many images of comparanda is particularly welcome.

Willers' prefatory remarks (pp. 7–13) draw attention *inter alia* to the exceptional scale of the hanging (but the actual dimensions are not quoted until p. 149!) and to representations of wall hangings in classical art, principally in wall paintings and relief sculpture. The focus then shifts to what the Dionysus Hanging depicts, a series of eight (arguably once nine) standing figures within an arcade constructed of columns linked by arches, both variously ornamented.

The first attempt to work out the original arrangement of the many surviving textile fragments began under Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, and several revised schemes have been proposed since. It is agreed that the hanging shows Dionysus and his followers (his *thiasos*), a well-known theme in classical art since the sixth century B. C. and particularly popular in late antiquity in the form shown on the Abegg-Stiftung's hanging. Dionysus occupies the central position, flanked on his right by his

companion Ariadne and on his left by a satyr, each with their characteristic attributes. Here, and as the discussion unfolds, the reader will need constant recourse to plate 1, a helpful outline drawing of the ensemble (with columns and figures individually lettered for reference), plate 2, a photographic reproduction of the same spread, and the individual plates that follow.

The last surviving figure on the viewer's right, next to the satyr, is a *maenad* – and beyond her a truncated vault from which the figure is missing. The three figures at the far left of the hanging, however, are singled out by Willers for special treatment. The ›*monosandalos*‹ (girl with one sandal), Dionysus' childhood nurse) posed next to Pan looks odd: the placing of her bare right leg outside her ankle-length tunic defies logic, an echo perhaps of a much earlier misunderstood image.

The clothing of the outermost figure, identified as Silenus, is likewise problematic. The broad dark band running centrally down the front of his body garment does not logically follow the folds of the cloth. Willers thinks that it was meant to show the Persian sleeved riding coat, which has a frontal opening; but the riding coat was usually longer, rarely worn girt, and lacked the tapestry patch and narrow band (*clavus*) visible on Silenus' garment. Besides, Silenus already carries a cloak on his left shoulder and arm. The curious bicolour rendering of Silenus' long trousers, when compared with those of the Silenus of a second hanging fragment in the Abegg-Stiftung (inv. 5438), may be a garbled attempt to show the tapestry-woven bands on Partho-Persian trousers – as at Palmyra – and could lead to the suggestion that the ›riding coat‹ might in fact be the Palmyrene style of tunic with wide vertical frontal band (as Sabine Schrenk noted in her 2004 catalogue). But that, too, did not have the Roman-style shoulder tapestry decoration! No blame should attach to the weaver for these ›misunderstandings‹; transmission of an unfamiliar image over time brings increasing obscurity. The impression of a generically oriental costume is achieved notwithstanding.

The third enigmatic figure is an apparent intruder into the *thiasos*: a mortal woman clad in a *dalmatic* with wide purple-and-gold *clavi*, by common consent seen as a symbolic initiate into the Dionysiac mysteries. Thoughts that she might be a real person are – sadly, but rightly – dismissed by Willers.

Willers considers some of the broader questions which the hanging raises. In addition to the Dionysosbehang, the Abegg-Stiftung possesses parts of two more hangings – a Silenus (inv. 5438) and an ornamental fragment showing a column (inv. 5422), which may be claimed as ›replicas‹, copies of a common archetype, which (as Bettina Niekamp points out later) share common technical as well as iconographic features. Their role as wall-hangings is accepted without query; but the evidence in favour of that assumption is only advanced in Bettina Niekamp's discussion (pp. 174 s.) of the floating threads which mark the reverse of the textile.

Where was the Dionysus Hanging displayed? In what kind of private or public building? Willers favours

its exhibition in a space dedicated to the Dionysiac cult. (There might be a Christian parallel: the wall-painting – a wall-hanging substitute? – showing an arcade peopled with orantes in oriental tunics that adorned the fourth-century Christian house-chapel at Lullingstone in Kent.)

Three further topics remain to be addressed: Where was the Dionysus Hanging found? Where was it made? When was it made?

The extensive pillaging for the art and curiosities market of the Christian cemeteries around the town of Achmim (Panopolis) in Middle Egypt (1880–1894) to supply the art and curiosities market makes ›Achmim‹ an obvious dealers' choice of label for otherwise unprovenanced ›Coptic‹ textiles. But Willers, by reference to comparable hanging fragments with better attested origins in other collections, makes an attractive case for Achmim being the actual findspot of the Dionysus Hanging. Niekamp notes that the rarely attested combination of Type IV and Type VII warp crossing in the Dionysus Hanging is paralleled in textiles ›from Achmim‹ now in Vienna (p. 172). A tiny scrap of weft-faced compound twill (the so-called Marienseide) was discovered during conservation in the Abegg-Stiftung still adhering to the hanging. Assuming that the silk was the residue of the clothing of the deceased and the hanging the outer wrapping, a funerary findspot seems assured.

The search for a production centre for the hanging leads discussion up several culs-de-sac, and Willers, sensibly, leaves the question open. He notes that the cramped urban weaver's workshops revealed by the papyri are quite inappropriate. Given the distribution of findspots of textiles with the same or similar characteristics to the Dionysus Hanging in Egypt, however, there is no reason to seek a source beyond Egypt's borders.

The generous timespan of A.D. 260 to 530 offered by the 2014 radiocarbon determination for the harvesting of the fibres making up the Dionysus Hanging may be narrowed (Willers believes) by reference to iconographic criteria which point to a date in the second quarter of the fourth century. The associated fragment of silk, however, is stylistically dated to the second half of the fourth century or first half of the fifth. This suggests that the hanging could have been on display during the mid to latter part of the fourth century at least.

The direct link between the ›Marienseide‹ fragment with the Dionysus Hanging provokes Willers into examining the position of pagan art in an increasingly Christian world and revisiting the poetry of Nonnos of Panopolis for (not much) enlightenment. Willers muses that the wealthy pagan Gesios of Panopolis, the *bête noir* of the rabid and voluble Christian monk Shenute, may have been just the kind of prominent figure to have owned and housed the Dionysosbehang. It is a very attractive scenario!

Between the art-historical appraisal and the textile-technical report on the hanging is a short section on its conservation, largely reproducing Mechthild Flury-Lemberg's published account of 1988, but with a

supplement from Bettina Niekamp. It documents, not so much the conservation methodology, as Flury-Lemberg's struggle to arrange the extant fragments in a meaningful order for exhibition. Mounted behind glass, her arrangement as seen today can unfortunately not be revised to reflect the revisions of Schrenk and Willers without risking harm.

In 2004 the Abegg-Stiftung purchased a fragment depicting an ornamental column (inv. 5422, see above) and in 2005 pieces of a cloth with Silenus in an architectural framework (inv. 5438) in the belief that as possible replicas they belonged to the same workshop milieu as the Dionysus Hanging, a hypothesis not challenged by the radiocarbon dates obtained. Bettina Niekamp presents here the first technical report on them.

Description and discussion of the archaeology of the Dionysus Hanging hold centre stage for the first time in Niekamp's two following chapters, entitled respectively ›Textile Technical Observations‹ and ›Notes on the Production Process and Formation‹. Her work is outstanding, exploring new avenues of research as well as following familiar ones. Her footnotes reveal the breadth of her reading, the extent of her fieldwork, and the fruitful personal contacts she has made with the experts on specific technical matters. In a short compass it is impossible to do justice to all the observations she makes, and the reviewer has to be content with commenting on a few of the core themes.

Given a (presumably uninterrupted) warp length of at least eight metres and weft length of 197 centimetres, weaving the Dionysus Hanging was an unusually demanding task for a team of highly experienced weavers. Niekamp posits the use of a two-beam vertical loom with a facility for storing bare warp under tension, perhaps along the lines documented in early modern Iran; but she does not mention the problem of storing an even greater quantity of freshly woven cloth. Wisely she refrains from pressing the issue of loom structure any further.

To enable the weaver to beat up the weft in a tapestry insert as densely as possible for optimal colour impact, the number of working units of warp had to be reduced. For this purpose, when the point of insertion was reached, the even-numbered and odd-numbered warp threads were divided into two separate warp sheets, and the warps in each warp sheet were gathered into a series of bundles. At the point of division between the warp sheets, crossing of adjacent warp threads took place. Weavers developed a variety of ways of reducing the number of crossed warp threads and pushed much of the excess warp to the back, to float loose behind the inserted tapestry weft. Regina Knaller identified ten types of warp crossing in 2004, but the weavers of the Dionysus Hanging employed only two of them (Types IV and VII) – which was an uncommon combination. Thanks to the warp grouping and prompted by De Jonghe's 1983 analyses, Niekamp was able to demonstrate the direction in which the tapestry weavers worked (pp. 180 s.). Once the shed for the tapestry insert has been opened, the first few weft shots are of multiple, followed by a few single,

linen threads before the first wool weft is inserted. The corresponding ›shadow‹ at the other side of the tapestry, just before the pattern rod is withdrawn, was only of single linen threads. (For clarification a schematic drawing to illustrate this feature would have been helpful.)

In wall-painting it was not technically difficult to achieve finely nuanced colour gradation, for example to render three-dimensional flesh surfaces. For the mosaicist it was more of a challenge. The tapestry weaver faced a similar task. Shading in tapestry involved the simple insertion of wedges of yarns in one colour into areas of another, while in what Niekamp calls ›false shading‹ two yarns of two different colours were passed into the same shed for a more finely graded transition. The most sophisticated approach, however, was for the weaver to work with yarns already incorporating wool fibres of more than one colour (melierte Garne).

Niekamp's study of the ›melierte Garne‹ in the Dionysus Hanging is arguably her most innovative technical contribution to this volume. The use of those materials, she observes, was a much more widespread phenomenon than hitherto recognised. Aided by some excellent micro-photographs (e. g. p. 198 figg. 153–154; p. 202 figg. 161–165), she draws a distinction between ›melierte Garne‹ which can be classified conventionally as ›woollen yarns‹ (Streichgarne), with many fibre ends visible on the yarn surface, and those classifiable as ›worsted yarns‹ (Kammgarne), with parallel fibres and few if any projecting fibre ends. In craft practice today the shorter dyed fibres would be blended on hand-cards ready to be spun into ›woollen‹ yarn, while the longer dyed fibres would be mixed together on wool-combs to make ›worsted‹ yarn. Roman iron wool-combs are well attested across the Empire; but for the existence of hand-cards set with short teeth there is no clear archaeological evidence for the Roman period. Indeed, most textile archaeologists have accepted Marta Hoffmann's argument that hand-cards were an early medieval invention.

Niekamp approaches the problem with fresh eyes. (The references which she quotes to carding in the papyri, however, are in reality references to combing with a wool-comb.) She initiated experiments by a modern wool-worker in the creation of ›melierte Garne‹ by combing (on a fixed wool-comb) and ›carding‹ (placing the fibre mass on a card, furnished with teeth without hooks, and brushing it). The experiments were both successful. The only obstacle to assuming that more or less the same methodology was applied in antiquity is the lack of archaeological evidence for a toothed card equivalent. But the fuller's card (aena), set with hedgehog skin, is very close to what was needed, as Niekamp suggests. Perhaps the ›lanarii carminatores‹ of the Po Valley were after all wool-carders, working alongside the ›lanarii pectinarii‹, wool-combers. The whole subject deserves to be re-examined.

Niekamp returns (Localisation of the Workshop, p. 206) to a question first raised by Willers about where the Dionysus Hanging might have been woven. She emphasises the value of detailed structural analysis as a

tool for identifying features common to a number of textiles that might reveal common origins. The Dionysus Hanging, the Silenus fragment and the length of ornamental column, all now in the Abegg-Stiftung, are a case in point. Willers rightly doubted the relevance of the picture of weavers' workshops in Roman Egypt conveyed by the papyri. Yet, there is another, albeit distant, possibility that the Dionysus Hanging was woven on the premises of the magnate who commissioned it. Wall-painters and mosaicists worked on the spot: according to Diocletian's Prices Edict they were provided with food on top of their daily wages. The same applied to some weavers, too, but ›plumarii‹, tapestry-weavers, were paid piece-rates for work on specific types of garment. Did the weaving team migrate with their equipment and raw materials to their client's house for the duration of their task?

When in 2008 Annemarie Stauffer published her corpus of Musterblätter, small ›pattern sheets‹ on papyrus from Roman Egypt, she fuelled the debate about how patterns were recorded and transmitted between artists in the ancient world. The enigma crops up repeatedly in this volume, and it is targeted by Niekamp from every possible angle. Her painstaking metric analysis of design components of the Dionysus Hanging, from architectural to facial details, reveals both limited commonality and also limited diversity. She argues that there was no overall cartoon to be copied at one-to-one by the weavers, as would be the case today. Stauffer's ›Musterblätter‹ could have served for guidance on particular motifs, but were not rigidly adhered to. Nonetheless, Niekamp believes that there was some sort of overall scheme for the hanging's design drawn on a portable medium, but credits the individual weaver with both a good memory and the opportunity to exercise personal initiative. One might go further and note that many artists today, not just in sub-literate societies, have an astonishing ability to retain a huge repertoire of complex patterns in their minds: the Roman tapestry-weavers must have been their equals.

Niekamp rounds off her technical report with a concise summing-up of her various lines of enquiry and their outcomes as she sees them. But there is no corresponding chapter presenting the final conclusions, and achievements, of the whole research programme, art-historical and textile-technical, on which this volume reports. This is both surprising and regrettable.

The superb photographs of Christoph von Viräg – all else aside – make this book a delight to handle. They range from a magnificent fold-out illustration of the complete hanging to images of textile details in high resolution that are a vital accompaniment to the technical discussions.

The Dionysus Hanging is an exceptional textile artefact, which has now been accorded the exceptional scholarly attention which it so richly deserves. All concerned with its study and publication are to be warmly congratulated.