



Coptic Textiles in the Rijksmuseum

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Few people are aware that the Rijksmuseum has a number of Egyptian textiles in its collection. This group has never before been published.¹ Most of these fabrics are ‘Coptic’, also known as Late Antique or Byzantine textiles. A minority are Islamic. Compared with other museums’ collections, this is small – only seventy-one items. Nonetheless it gives a good idea of the diversity of motifs and technical aspects as well as the evolution in these weavings.²

The History of Coptic Textiles in the Collection

The purchase of the Egyptian textile fragments must be seen in the light of the Rijksmuseum’s collecting policy at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Applied or decorative arts were to serve as a source of inspiration for craftsmen, designers, industry as a whole and the textile industry in particular.³ The idea was that good, beautiful designs – and the museum’s collection – could be used as examples in the courses at the Rijks Normalschool voor Teekenonderwijzers and the Rijksschool voor Kunstnijverheid. The former trained teachers with a view to improving art education in primary schools. The latter’s training focused on the makers so that better products would be produced.⁴ Both institutions were housed in the Rijksmuseum.⁵

Detail of fig. 11

The first and so far only textile catalogue was published in 1903.⁶ What was brought together there were fragments of fabrics – the author Jan Kalf calls them ‘samples’ – to give an overview of the history of the ornamentation. These are mostly small, since ‘fine examples’ did not necessarily have to be large pieces of fabric. When the collection was begun, this was the approach adopted by most museums. Fabrics were cut up so that the small pieces could be sold to several institutions. Kalf grouped the textiles by motif, rather than classifying them chronologically. In the introduction to the catalogue he states that the collection is anything but a complete historical overview of fabric ornamentation. He specifically refers to the lack of Coptic fabrics and at the same time announces that this gap was to be filled.⁷ This is something that was addressed in the years that followed.⁸

The bulk of the collection of Egyptian textiles, fifty-one pieces, was acquired between 1904 and 1910.⁹ Two of them were gifts, the others were purchased.¹⁰ With the exception of one fragment they were all bought from foreign antique dealers.¹¹ Large quantities of Coptic textile fragments came on to the market at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth as a result of the many excavations that were going on.¹²

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth a great many European and American museums and private collectors purchased what were for the most part groups of several pieces of fabric glued or stitched on to cardboard.¹³ An early purchase by the Rijksmuseum dates from 1904, when the museum acquired three pieces of silk from P. Schulze of the Königliche Gewebesammlung in Krefeld.¹⁴ Nine very representative pieces, mainly decorated in purple wool and with geometric motifs, were bought from the dealer A. Stanislas Baron (1824-1908) in Paris in the same year.¹⁵ One of the most important dealers in Egyptian artefacts was Theodor Graf (1840-1903) of Vienna. He often travelled to Egypt, where he instructed his local contacts to carry out excavations in burial grounds and, through intermediaries, shipped back thousands of the papyrus and textiles that had been found.¹⁶ Graf's importance in terms of Coptic textiles is evident in the fact that a great many museums have textile fragments that come from him in their collections.¹⁷ In 1908 the Rijksmuseum bought twenty-eight Coptic textiles from his antiques firm.¹⁸ The consignment is very varied in terms of type, size and condition. There is an extremely fragile piece of a tunic that reveals something of the shape of the garment and the use of decorative tapestry work in it.¹⁹

A year later the museum bought seven more Egyptian fabrics from Georges Brauer in Paris.²⁰ The majority are from the Islamic period (tenth-thirteenth century) and are in various techniques and materials, so that they formed a splendid addition to the Coptic textiles that were in the collection at that time.²¹

Finally twenty Coptic textile fragments were given to the Rijksmuseum on long-term loan by the Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel in 1942.²² They include a number of large pieces, part

of a tunic, pieces of a scarf or curtain, and an embroidered and a looped fabric.²³

The Origins of Coptic Textiles

The word 'Copt' is derived from the Greek word *Aigyptios*, which means 'from Egypt' or 'Egyptian'. After the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs in 641 they called the country *dar al-Qibt* or the 'house of the Copts' whereby *Aigyptios* was corrupted into *Qibt* and later into *Copt*. What nowadays are described as Coptic textiles are those which were made by Christian Egyptians.²⁴ The fragments of weavings originate from tomb finds and can be dated between the third and twelfth century, the period in which Arabic was spoken in Egypt. From the middle of the third century the Christian dead were buried clothed and covered by a shroud, and the head and sometimes the feet, too, were placed on a cushion. Aside from clothing, including scarves, and cushions we also know of domestic and interior fabrics like blankets, curtains and wall hangings.²⁵ The fabrics are mainly linen with decorations in wool. The decorations consist of woven or appliquéd squares (*tabulae*), circles (*orbiculae*) and bands (*clavi*) that are monochrome purple with ecru patterns or rich in colour with figurative motifs.

Thanks to Egypt's dry, sandy soil the textiles are well preserved. The most important site of origin is Akhmim in Upper Egypt. Discoveries have also been made in Antinopolis (near present-day Sheikh Ibada) in Mid-Egypt, in Sakkara near Cairo and in Fayoum.²⁶ Unfortunately, comprehensive notes of what was found where were not made during the excavations in the second half of the nineteenth century and consequently important information about the finds has been lost. This is compounded by the fact that the fabrics were frequently cut up for the sake of the decorations and ended up in a variety of places.²⁷ Because

they were cut up so drastically, it is not always possible to deduce whether a piece of fabric came from a tunic or from fabric used in the home. We also know that textiles were reused.²⁸

Technical Characteristics

In terms of material and technique, Coptic textiles can be divided into three categories: fabrics with single thread flax warps and fabrics with woollen warps that can be dated between the third and tenth-eleventh centuries, and fabrics with twisted flax warps which were only woven during the seventh and eighth centuries.²⁹ The group with a woollen warp and a woollen weft has a weft rib effect – in this case the warp count is smaller than the weft count. The Rijksmuseum has two examples – a fragment of a tunic in dark blue and red with two *clavi* with animals and stylized flowers in red on a neutral background, some in medallions, and a fragment of a sleeve with two decorative bands in dark blue with leaf motifs and rosettes.³⁰ Flax thread is sometimes used for the details because of its colour.

Technically speaking Coptic textiles with single-thread flax warps are the most interesting and the most common group. The weft in the undecorated parts is natural-coloured flax, but in the decorations consists of coloured wool with natural-coloured or bleached flax thread here and there depending on what was required for the design. The plain part consists of a tabby weave with a warp rib effect.³¹ The decorated parts were woven in weft weave and this can be made up of different combinations of threads.³² In a number of fragments where the weft has partially disappeared, the warp threads are visible and it is evident that the weft threads repeatedly go over and under more than one warp thread (fig. 1).

Unfortunately, few complete tunics have survived.³³ The oldest tunics are sleeveless, have a split neck with selvages left and right, and side seams.



There are also tunics with sleeves that were woven in one piece on very wide looms, and tunics that consist of three parts that were woven in succession and then cut up and sewn together.³⁴

The decorations on the clothing consists of the square (*tabulae*) or circular (*orbiculi*) chest, back or shoulder adornments we have already mentioned, long vertical bands symmetrically across the chest (*clavi*), some ending in a square, a circle or an oval, rectangular or round decorations along the neckline, single or double bands as sleeve decoration and possibly L-shaped decorations at the bottom of the front or back.³⁵ *Tabulae* and *orbiculi* are also sometimes placed at knee height. Decorations may be woven in or sewn on. In the latter case,

Fig. 1
Medallion with figure with nimbus, 5th-7th century. Linen and wool, 6 x 7.2 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12066-E.

these were pieces that were cut out of an old fabric and reused or decorations woven on a separate loom.³⁶

Chronology

It is not always easy to date pieces of Coptic textile. In the past authors proceeded on the assumption that the style evolved from refined and detailed to more simplified and stylized. Nowadays this line of reasoning is no longer accepted in its entirety as styles can also overlap. Furthermore, scientific research has demonstrated that some textiles found in Egyptian tombs were imported from Syria and Persia.³⁷ We also know that there were weavers from Syria active in Egypt; they probably introduced the tapestry technique there and it was through them that the influence of the Eastern Mediterranean entered the country.³⁸ Over the last few decades the carbon-14 dating method has contributed to more accurate dating.³⁹ This method has resulted in the discovery of tunics that are centuries older than the style characteristics would seem to suggest or, conversely, much more recent than was thought because one style continued to survive for several centuries.⁴⁰

Textiles in the Collection

As well as a classification based on the technical characteristics of the Coptic fabrics, it is of course also possible to catalogue them according to the use and the shape of the fabric or according to the style of the decoration and the use of colour in the decorations.⁴¹ The fragments in the Rijksmuseum's collection come from clothes and from domestic and interior textiles.⁴²

Motifs on Monochrome Purple or Dark Blue Backgrounds

The largest group of fabrics in the Rijksmuseum's collection are the fragments with monochrome purple, dark blue or purplish red wool wefts and geometric patterns.⁴³ The motifs

are created by the 'flying shuttle' technique.⁴⁴ This is a method in which a fine flax thread in a neutral colour is added over the woven weft threads during the weaving of the woollen weft so that an effect of fine, seemingly embroidered lines is created on the coloured background. Textiles like this can be dated to between the third and fifth centuries.

The earliest figurative works show the influence of the Hellenistic style and are detailed. The Rijksmuseum's collection contains a monochrome, very finely woven *tabula* in this genre that can possibly be dated to the fourth or fifth century. It shows Dionysus between two satyrs with musical instruments, the castanets clearly recognizable on the right, and at his feet three reclining maenads, his female disciples. The neutral background is filled with a very finely woven tendril motif. Around the central design there is a border with circular motifs containing lively running animals, including lions, panthers and hares (fig. 2).

Fig. 2

Fragment of fabric with figures, 4th-5th century. Linen and wool, 20.2 x 21.7 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-11834.



Fig. 3
 Fragment of fabric
 with *tabula* with
 braid motifs,
 4th-6th century.
 Linen and wool,
 32.2 x 27.8 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. BK-NM-12105.



This is the only figurative example of this genre on a purple background in the collection. Most of the other textiles in this colour have a variety of geometric motifs. They consist of patterns of continuous wide and narrow braids, meandering lines, crosses, octagons, stars, lobes, spirals, swastikas and waves, and fill squares, circles, star shapes and bands (fig. 3).⁴⁵ One of the fragments of fabric has a dark purple woven *clavus* and an appliquéd *orbiculus* consisting of an octagon placed in a circle (fig. 4). This motif is derived from the octagon formed by two intertwined squares within a circle that was incorporated in

Coptic weaving as a Christian motif. It can be found on tiles, architectural elements and mosaics from the third and fourth centuries in Syria, Jordan, Constantinople, Ravenna and other Byzantine Mediterranean areas.⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that four corners of the octagon are woven with orange thread. This can be regarded as an imitation of gold thread.⁴⁷ The central circle is filled with four vases placed opposite one another from which pendant vines emerge.⁴⁸ Around the star-shaped motif there is a wider circle with continuous braiding and a serrated border. This also applies to the *clavus*, which has a decoration of



Fig. 4

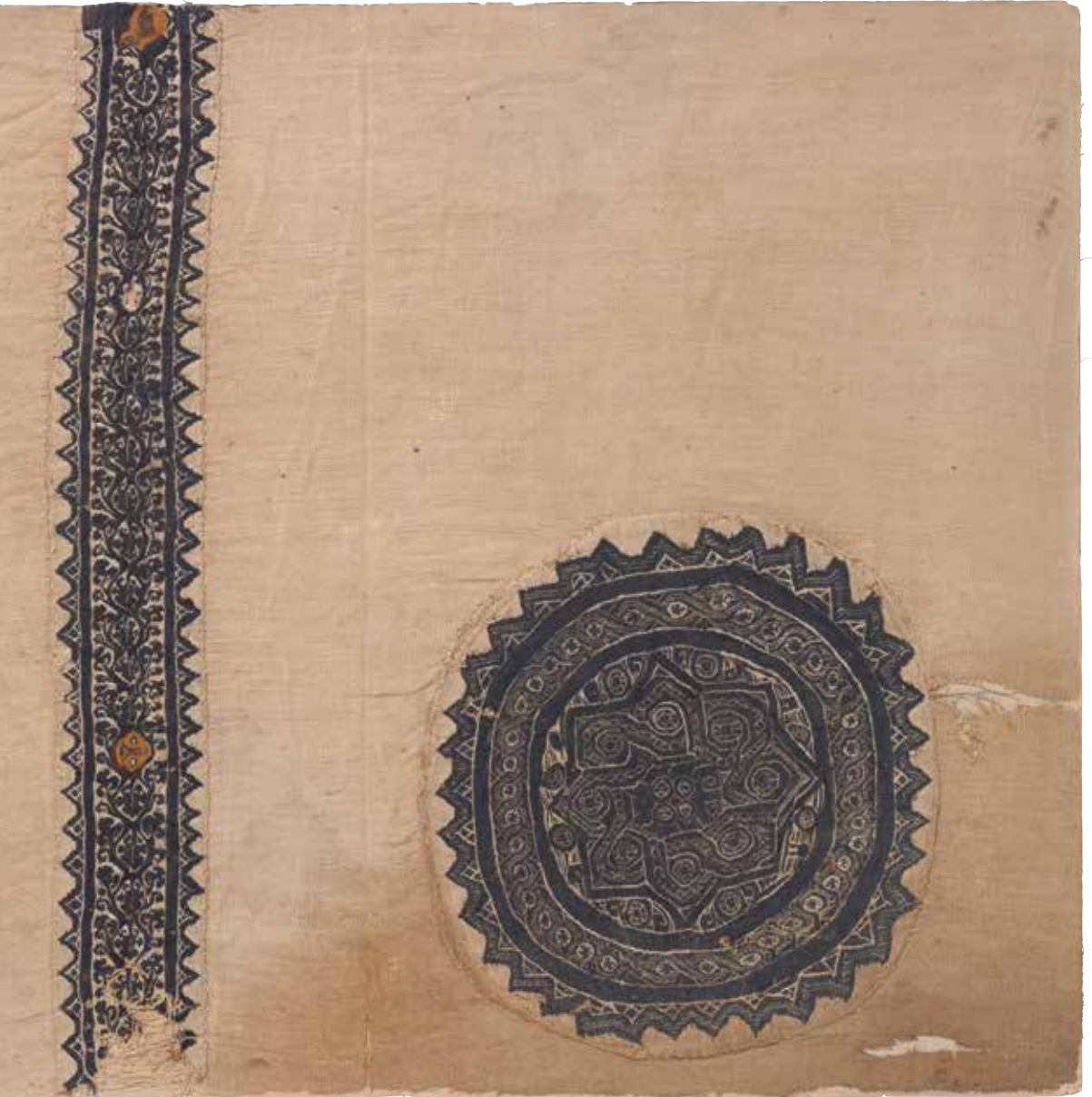
Fragment of fabric with woven *clavus* with vases and an appliquéd *orbiculus* with braid motifs etc., 3rd-6th century. Linen and wool, 22 x 23 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-11839.

consecutive flower vases, medallions and foliar motifs, the details of which were also executed using the flying shuttle technique. The *orbiculus*, which can be dated to the third or fourth century, was sewn on and is more finely woven than the fifth-sixth century *clavus*. This tells us that the ornament was reused. A variation of the octagonal motif placed in a circle can be seen on another piece of fabric from around the fourth to fifth century (fig. 5). The dark blue *orbiculus* is lavishly filled with braid motifs and loops and bordered with a zigzag edge. The matching vertical decorative band is still present here too.⁴⁹ The repeating vine motif is interrupted in a number of places by a small, stylized human head in orange with large white eyes outlined in black.⁵⁰ A colourful little bird is woven in at the end of the band. There is a dark blue variant of the vases motif surrounded by a circle in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 6).⁵¹ Ornamental bands consisting of a serpentine vine emerge from both



Fig. 5
Fragment of fabric
with appliquéd
clavus with small
heads and an
orbiculus with
braid motifs,
4th-5th century.
Linen and wool,
67.5 x 51.3 cm.

Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-BR-453-B;
on loan from
the Nederlandse
Maatschappij
voor Nijverheid
en Handel.



sides of the circle, ending along one side in a small square with leaves and along the other in the shape of a pinecone.

Motifs in a Rainbow of Colours

Fabrics with colourful figurative depictions are a second important group. The tunic is in plain cream

linen, while the decorations are in coloured wool. Wool is easier to dye than flax and it is possible to obtain all kinds of colours. Red, orange, yellow, blue and green in various hues were used in Coptic tapestry weaving.⁵² There is also a huge diversity in motifs. A prevalent theme in Coptic textiles is the oval or round depiction of a bulbous



Fig. 6

Fragment of fabric with *clavi* and *orbiculus* with vases and braid motif, 4th-6th century. Linen and wool, 51 x 73.3 cm.

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-BR-453-E; on loan from the Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel.



Fig. 7

Fragment of fabric with *orbiculus* in the shape of a vase with the tree of life, 4th-6th century. Linen and wool, 21.5 x 26.2 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12060.

vase with scroll handles from which coil twisted branches or vines with colourful birds sitting in them and with a hare looking round in the centre. The motif symbolizes the tree of life. The Rijksmuseum has a fragmentary example (fig. 7).⁵³ There are unfortunately no Hellenistic examples of woven detailed figures in subtle colour transitions in the collection, but there are several representative pieces with colourful designs. There is one group of fragments of *clavi* with figures, and another of *orbiculi* with a central motif. They include a circle containing a fearsome animal with huge claws and a snake at its feet (fig. 8) and one with a nude figure, a Nereid, arms raised above her head, holding a scarf that creates the impression of an arch (fig. 9).⁵⁴ A red *orbiculus* with a garland motif and small, stylized colourful figures on a dark blue ground is a good example of how the weft was not always laid horizontally, one



Fig. 8

Detail of fabric with appliqué orbiculus with a clawed animal, 6th-7th century. Linen and wool, 15 x 16 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12057.

thread directly above the other, but was woven obliquely in the shape of the motif. This made it easier to create undulating lines (fig. 10).

A sequence of riders or standing figures with nimbus appears on the surviving *clavi* (fig. 11).⁵⁵ They can be dated to between the sixth and tenth centuries. One of the fragments of fabric has two appliqué *clavi* with an attractive decoration of compartments containing broad figures with nimbus, holding staffs, on a red ground, wearing colourful garments in light and dark blue, light and dark green, yellow, orange, red and purple, alternating with naked, dancing Nereids with raised arms, holding scarves or veils fluttering above their heads against a dark green background. Around them the surface is filled with all kinds of fish (fig. 12).⁵⁶ While the main motif in the *clavi* is bordered by colourful, decorative



Fig. 9

Detail of fragment of fabric with appliqué orbiculi with a Nereid, 6th-8th century. Linen and wool, 34 x 42 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12058.

Fig. 10

Detail of *orbiculus* with figures between undulating lines, 5th-7th century. Linen and wool, 20 x 23.2 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12219; gift of G. Bosch Reitz, Laren (North Holland).



Fig. 11

Detail of two appliquéd *clavi* with horsemen, 7th-8th century. Linen and wool, 27.5 x 23.8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12050.

patterns, these decorative bands have a plain red border, again featuring finely-drawn fish.

Yet another group of textile fragments was predominantly woven in brick-red wool with a design in ecru flax thread.⁵⁷ The most important is a piece with three medallions repeating the same design, dated to the sixth or seventh century. In the centre stand two riders, whose horses are turned away from one another, facing each

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Fig. 12

Detail of fragment of fabric with two appliquéd *clavi* with dancing Nereids and figures with nimbuses, 6th-8th century. Linen and wool, 76.5 x 48.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12049-B.





other with bows and arrows at the ready. Below them are four animals running and jumping in two directions. What at first glance appears to be a hunting scene may well be a fight, since the horsemen are each wearing a different headdress; their clothes, bows and horses are different too – and they are pointing their arrows at one another, not down at the wild animals (fig. 13).⁵⁸ The circles are bordered by a fine foliar ornament. In the areas between the medallions there are stylized leaf motifs pointing up and down. In design and composition this kind of fabric is akin to the silks made by the Sassanids.⁵⁹ The example is evidence of the influence of the silk fabrics on Coptic textiles.⁶⁰

In the Rijksmuseum's collection there are also a number of linen fragments with loops. They were used as cushion-covers and blankets or curtains and were decorated in the

same manner as the tunics, in tapestry technique. The cushion fragment has a typical decoration of a central horseman with circles in the corners containing figures and recumbent animals, with colourful baskets of fruit between them (fig. 14).⁶¹ In one piece the decoration consists of a geometric motif of dark-coloured loops in the form of an interwoven swastika (fig. 15).⁶²

Condition of the Collection

Most of the Coptic textiles have been in the Rijksmuseum's collection for more than a hundred years. On acquisition many of them were glued on to cardboard, often with several fragments on one sheet. Subsequently a large part of the collection was stuck on a sturdy linen base.⁶³ Over the years, as many of these textile fragments as possible have been loosened from their support and, where possible, the remains of the glue have been

Fig. 13

Fragment of fabric with three medallions with horsemen with bows and arrows and animals, 7th-9th century. Linen and wool, 79 x 24.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-12049-A.



Fig. 14
 Loop fabric fragment
 with *tabula* with a
 horseman, figures
 and fruit baskets,
 4th-7th century.
 Linen and wool,
 39.5 x 49 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. BK-NM-12062.





removed.⁶⁴ Two of the fragments discussed above, which today are separate, arrived in the collection sewn together as one item (fig. 16).⁶⁵ The one underneath served as a support fabric for the much weaker fragment on top (see figs. 12 and 13 respectively).⁶⁶ Two-thirds of the piece underneath were covered and the colourful *clavi* bands were only half visible.

Although textiles can never be shown continuously it is essential that they are correctly treated and preserved. The collection of Coptic textiles is consequently being conserved in the Rijksmuseum's textile restoration workshop so that the fragments are better supported.⁶⁷

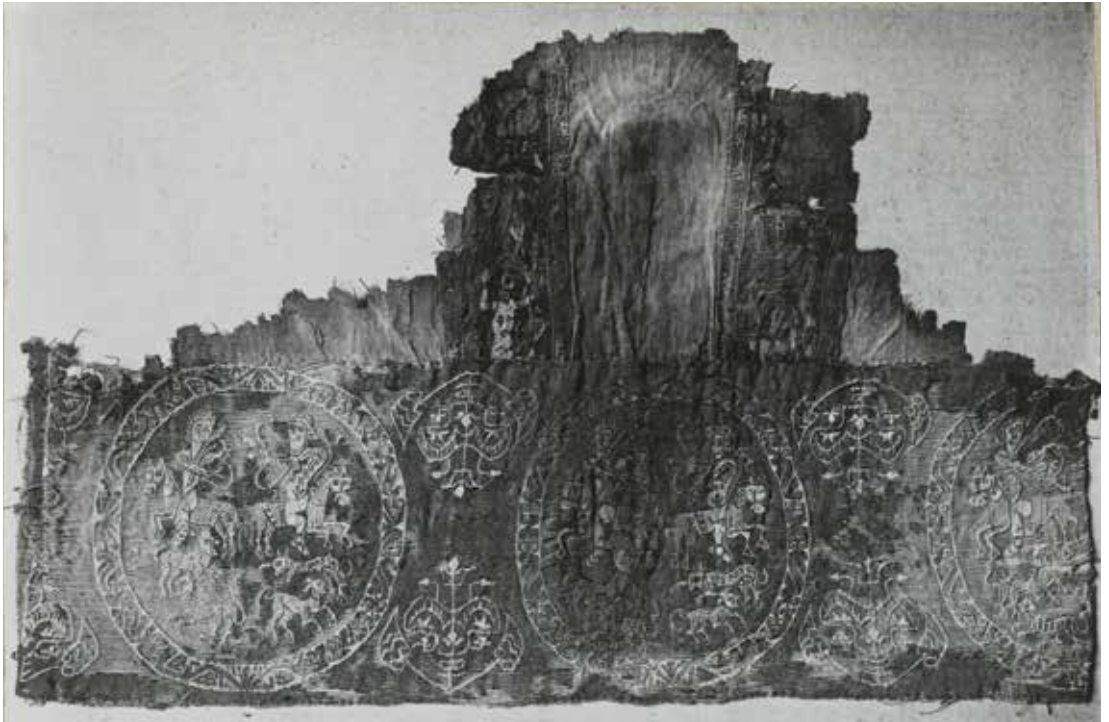
Reference to Tapestry Technique in Europe

Although the Coptic textiles came to us in fragments, it is important to attend to them, even if they are only tiny decorative elements.⁶⁸ Reference

works on the history of western textiles and tapestries often begin with Coptic fabrics, or they are given a prominent place in the introduction.⁶⁹ Coptic textiles are not included in these historical overviews solely because Egypt was under Byzantine rule until 640, but also because the tapestry technique, where the coloured weft completely covers the warp, was used for weaving wall hangings in Europe from the Middle Ages onwards. Coptic decorations woven in wool can be considered as a forerunner.⁷⁰ They are also interesting in a historical context and in the story of exchange and influence.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Rijksmuseum did not follow the fashion for collecting Coptic fabrics for no good reason; it was already understood that these tomb finds were important in the broad history of textiles. This is why they are a valuable part of the collection.

Fig. 16
Old photograph showing how fragment BK-NM-12049-A was sewn on to BK-NM-12049-B.



NOTES

- 1 The Rijksmuseum's textile collection numbers around 10,000 items excluding costumes and accessories. Since the introduction of the Adlib records system and the ability to consult the museum's database online, it has become possible to find which objects and works of art are held by the museum. See www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search.
- 2 It is not possible to discuss all the textile fragments within the scope of this article, so a number of striking or typical items will be considered. The specific technical properties of the textile fragments will not be examined. A separate Rijksmuseum publication is planned for the future; it will include technical analyses and characteristics.
- 3 In so doing the Rijksmuseum mirrored the mission of other large foreign museums, the best known being the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.
- 4 G. van der Ham, *200 jaar Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 194-95.
- 5 Then still called the Nederlands Museum. In 1881 in an already finished room in the main building; in 1892 in a separate building next door, called the 'Teekenschool'.
- 6 It contains 439 numbers with no illustrations. J. Kalf, *Catalogus van de textiele kunst. Weefsels, gobelins, tapijten, borduurwerk. In het Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst te Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1903.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- 8 Adriaan Pit, the then director of the Nederlands Museum, wanted to improve the quality of the collection and acquire work that was not Dutch in origin as well as Dutch art and applied art. He aimed to put together a collection 'that reveals something of the relationship between man and the outside world, where a logical progression in the production of artefacts and plastic art can be studied' and where the evolution of the ornament could be traced. In 1905 he reported that the textile industry was well represented. J.F. Heijbroek, 'Adriaan Pit, directeur van het Nederlandsch Museum. Een vergeten episode uit de geschiedenis van het Rijksmuseum', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 23 (1985), no. 4, pp. 233-65, and Van der Ham, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 202-04.
- 9 The Rijksmuseum's collection was created in an entirely different way from those in other Dutch museums, such as the Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden in Leiden, which has around 115 textiles (the first fifteen decorated Coptic fabrics were already present in the collection in 1888, followed by seven items in 1889.) See M.J. Raven, 'The Collection of Egyptian Textiles in the rmo', *Proceedings of the Archaeological Textiles Meeting 1989. Oudheidkundige mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden te Leiden* 70 (1990), pp. 193-95, and P.P.M. van 't Hooft, 'De datering van Koptische weefsels en de interpretatie van de iconografie', *ibid.*, pp. 208-11; see for a comprehensive explanation about this collection also P.P.M. van 't Hooft et al., *Pharaonic and Early Medieval Egyptian Textiles*, cat. Leiden (Dutch National Museum of Antiquities), vol. 8, 1994, and the Allard-Pierson Museum in Amsterdam, which has the largest collection of Coptic textiles. Aside from its own collection this museum has Coptic fabrics on long-term loan from the collections of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague (88 Coptic fabrics, the majority acquired in 1936; see A.C. Lopes Cardozo and C.E. Zijderfeld, *Koptische weefsels*, exh. cat. The Hague (Haags Gemeentemuseum) 1982, p. 3) and from the Audax TextielMuseum in Tilburg. Museums elsewhere, the MAS|Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp for example, also have collections of Coptic textiles that have grown over the years and are often of high quality, see E. Janssen and F. Therry, 'De verzameling Cogels', in E. Gubel and T. Oost, *Egypte onomwonden. Egyptische oudheden van het museum Vleeshuis*, exh. cat. Antwerp (Museum Vleeshuis) 1995, pp. 237-53.
- 10 A gift made in 1910 by S.C. Bosch Reitz of Laren (inv. nos. BK-NM-12218 and BK-NM-12219, both colourful tapestry fabrics).
- 11 A flawless piece of fabric with motifs in the flying shuttle technique (inv. no. BK-NM-12105) was purchased for ten guilders from the art dealer Anton Mensing (1866-1936) in Amsterdam in 1908.
- 12 Judging by the many pieces of fabric in museums large and small, there are without doubt many tens of thousands, and numbers ranging anywhere from 35,000 to 150,000 have been suggested. See Lopes Cardozo and Zijderfeld, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 3. In 1907 The Metropolitan Museum in New York itself began carrying out excavations in Egypt. See P. de Montebello, 'Introduction', in A. Stauffer, *Textiles of Late Antiquity*, exh. cat. New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1995-96, p. 3, and N. Kajitani, 'Textiles and Their Context in the Third- to Fourth-Century CE Cemetery of

- al-Bagawat, Khargah Oasis, Egypt, from the 1907-1931 Excavations by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York', in S. Schrenk (ed.), *Textiles in Situ. Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millennium CE* (Riggisberger Berichte, vol. 13), Riggisberg 2006, pp. 95-112.
- 13 The list of museums is too long to include here. The most important can be found in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Lyon, Riggisberg, London, Brussels, Fribourg, Geneva, Moscow, Saint Petersburg and also Dijon, Krefeld, Düsseldorf, Trier, Prague, Budapest, Athens, Manchester and American museums in New York, Washington DC, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia and elsewhere.
 - 14 Two heavy silk fabrics (samite), one of which is stuck on cardboard, part of the missing pattern drawn on, and a half silk tapestry fabric. The samite fabrics were most probably excavated in Akhmim, woven in Palestine or Syria and date from the 7th-8th century; the tapestry fabric may date from the 11th century (inv. nos. BK-NM-11806, BK-NM-11819 and BK-NM-11820, purchased for 60, 65 and 45 German marks respectively. The two fragments that were not stuck on cardboard were between two sheets of glass when they were purchased.) The Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels also have pieces of these fabrics in their collection, see J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Koptisch Textiel van de Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis*, Brussels 1988, cat. nos. 89 and 90. In 1908 and in 1911 similar samite textiles were purchased from P. Schulze (BK-NM-12073 for 50 German marks, and BK-NM-12258 for 25 guilders).
 - 15 In total 750 French francs were paid for the nine items. In the case of a number of these fabrics there is a written reference in the acquisition ledger to the (drawn) illustrations in the book by M. Gerspach, *Les Tapisseries Coptes*, Paris 1890, one of the books that was in the library of the 'Rijksopleidingsinstituut voor teekenleeraren'. (In the same year the museum also bought nine more silk fabrics from Baron, mainly from Italy, but also from Spain and France.)
 - 16 In 1882, for example, his agents discovered a large necropolis in Fayoum. J. von Karabacek, *Die Theodor Graf'schen Funde in Aegypten*, Vienna 1883. These textile finds were exhibited in Vienna in 1883 and 769 pieces were acquired by the present-day Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK). See for their comprehensive web catalogue of 'Spätantike Textilien' (1,181 items): <http://sammlungen.mak.at/sdb/do/sammlung.state?id=4>.
 - 17 Aside from the MAK in Vienna other museums including the Musée des Tissus in Lyon (622 fragments), the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (500 fabrics) and the Metropolitan Museum in New York (1,229 pieces) acquired Coptic fabrics from Graf. There are also a great many textile fragments from Graf in Berlin, see C. Fluck et al., *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Bestandskatalog, Band 1, Textilien aus Ägypten, Teil 1: Textilien aus dem Vorbesitz von Theodor Graf, Carl Schmidt und dem Ägyptischen Museum Berlin*, Wiesbaden 2000.
 - 18 The Rijksmuseum's acquisition ledgers record that the fragments were bought from T. Graf. However he had died in 1908. Unless the items were recorded five years after they were purchased, which is unlikely, this probably refers to his antiques firm. There is a separate note for each item stating its cost, however it is not clear whether the amounts paid were in Austrian crowns or German marks.
 - 19 Inv. no. BK-NM-12055. There is no complete and well-preserved tunic in the Rijksmuseum's collection. There are, though, a number of large fragments that were clearly part of a tunic (inv. no. BK-NM-12054 in dark blue and red wool, and inv. no. BK-BR-453-J with a round neckline and appliqué decoration in red tapestry work with geometric motifs and in dark blue fabric with red figuration).
 - 20 They were part of a total of twenty-four pieces of fabric, which also included Arabic and Italian silks, all of which were purchased for 8,100 French francs.
 - 21 Inv. nos. BK-NM-12146, BK-NM-12147, BK-NM-12148, BK-NM-12150 and BK-NM-12155. The Islamic fabrics are outside the scope of this article.
 - 22 Inv. no. BK-BR-453-A-T.
 - 23 Large pieces: inv. nos. BK-BR-453-B, E and K; tunic fragment: inv. no. BK-BR-453-L; scarf or curtain fragments: inv. nos. BK-BR-453-P and S; embroidered fragment: inv. no. B-453-J; looped fabric: inv. no. BK-BR-453-C.
 - 24 A great deal has been published on Coptic textiles. In this article it is not possible to refer to all the publications that are relevant to the Rijksmuseum's collection. An extremely comprehensive bibliography can be found in S. Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit (Die Textilsammlung der Abegg-Stiftung, vol. 4)*, Riggisberg 2004, pp. 495-510.
 - 25 These were also excavated from temple ruins. The Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg has several

- impressive and important examples of these kinds of interior fabrics Ibid., pp. 23-77, cat. nos. 1-18, as do the Musée du Louvre in Paris and the Musée des Tissus in Lyon. M.-H. Rutschowskaya, *Le châle de Sabine, chef-d'œuvre de l'art copte*, Paris 2004.
- 26 The following publication with contributions by international specialists brings scientific research related to the sites together: S. Schrenk (ed.), *Textiles in Situ: Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millennium CE* (Riggisberger Berichte, vol. 13), Riggisberg 2006.
- 27 Scientific research has led to the discovery of fragments that belong together (such as fragments from the Musée du Louvre in Paris which go with pieces from the Musée des Tissus in Lyon, the Musée Georges-Labit in Toulouse and the Musée des Antiquités in Rouen) and to the exchange and re-joining of them (such as fragments from the Musée du Louvre and the Musée des Tissus). Rutschowskaya, op. cit. (note 25), pp. 108-09. Fragments in the former Museum of Decorative Arts in Athens, the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and Katoen Natie in Antwerp have also been shown to belong together. A. De Moor et al., *3500 jaar textielkunst. De collectie in headquARTers*, Tiel 2008, p. 37. Cutting up fabrics was also lucrative for dealers because they were able to accommodate more buyers.
- 28 There is an example where a child's tunic was adapted into a scarf. See A. Stauffer, 'Production locale et importations', in A. Stauffer, *Textiles d'Égypte de la collection Bouvier. Antiquité tardive, période copte, premiers temps de l'Islam*, cat. Fribourg (Musée d'art et d'histoire de Fribourg) 1991, pp. 174-75, cat. no. 80.
- 29 D. De Jonghe and C. Verhecken-Lammens, 'Technologische bespreking/Technological discussion', in A. De Moor (ed.), *Koptisch textiel uit Vlaamse privé-verzamelingen/Coptic Textiles from Flemish Private Collections*, Zottegem 1993, pp. 34-41.
- 30 Inv. nos. BK-NM-12054 and BK-NM-12066-B respectively.
- 31 In the case of warp rib the warp count is greater than the weft count.
- 32 This means that the weft goes over and under different numbers of warp threads and, depending on the weave, the weaver sometimes allows a number of warp threads to float along the back.
- 33 There is an outstanding collection with a variety of tunics, twenty or so, exhibited in the private museum HeadquARTers of the Katoen Natie in Antwerp. De Moor et al., op. cit. (note 27), pp. 9-10, figs. 1a, 1b. See also B. Evans, 'The Past Made Present', *HALI* 171 (2012), pp. 88-89, fig. 1. There are also a number of splendid tunics in the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, see Schrenk, op. cit. (note 24), pp. 147-92, cat. nos. 51-63.
- 34 De Jonghe and Verhecken-Lammens, op. cit. (note 29), pp. 41-52.
- 35 M. Martiniani-Reber, *Tissus coptes*, cat. Geneva (Musée d'art et d'histoire) 1991, vol. 1, pp. 18-20; A. Lorquin, *Les tissus coptes au Musée national du Moyen Âge. Thermes de Cluny. Catalogue des étoffes égyptiennes de lin et de laine de l'Antiquité tardive aux premiers siècles de l'Islam*, cat. Paris (Musée National du Moyen Âge) 1992, pp. 16-19.
- 36 When these are decorations with a woollen weft and a single-thread flax warp, they are cut out.
- 37 The silk and half silk samite fabrics that the Rijksmuseum purchased in 1904 are examples of this. See note 14.
- 38 Stauffer, op. cit. (note 28), pp. 13-20; De Moor et al., op. cit. (note 27), p. 37; A. Völker, 'Late Antique and Early Islamic Textiles', in P. Noever (ed.), *Verletzliche Beute. Spätantike und frühislamische Textilien aus Ägypten/Fragile Remnants. Egyptian Textiles of Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, exh. cat. Vienna (MAK) 2005, pp. 9-11. The international research group 'Textiles from the Nile Valley' undertakes continuous research into various aspects of these fabrics and brings the results to a conference in the HeadquARTers of Katoen Natie in Antwerp every two years.
- 39 The older the organic material such as textiles and leather (remains of plants, animals and people), the less the evidence of radiocarbon. M. Van Strydonck et al., 'Het dateren van Koptisch textiel met behulp van de radio-koolstofmethode/The dating of Coptic textiles by radiocarbon analysis', in De Moor (ed.), op. cit. (note 29), pp. 65-71. Because comparison material is essential several museums (the Louvre in Paris, Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst and the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin and the University of Manchester) have recently been collaborating to investigate these types of textiles, see De Moor et al., op. cit. (note 27), pp. 96-97. The Coptic fabrics in the Rijksmuseum have not so far been dated using the carbon-14 method. Their given dates have therefore been based on publications of dated fabrics.
- 40 Ibid.; see also the research by the University of Bonn in association with the Royal Institute

- for Cultural Heritage in Brussels and the database for carbon-14-dated fabrics: www.textile-dates.info. On it can also be found an up-to-date bibliography list with regard to carbon-14 dating of Coptic fabrics and fabrics from the first millennium CE.
- 41 The MAK web catalogue, referred to above, is a very good example of this. In the voluminous publication by Schrenk, op. cit. (note 24), the classification is made on the basis of function and shape.
- 42 In this article I am primarily addressing the types of decorations.
- 43 Purple is found in several colour gradations because it was obtained from various dyes. Mollusc purple or Tyrian purple was incredibly expensive; this is why it is also called royal or imperial purple. Because it had such a status it was imitated by combining woad and madder and other dyes were also used (kermes, cochineal root, lac, indigo). See for example, D. Davanzo Poli, *La porpora*, exh. cat. Venice (Palazzo Loredan) 1996; J.H. Hofenk de Graaff, *The Colourful Past. Origins, Chemistry and Identification of Natural Dyestuffs*, Riggisberg 2004, pp. 101-02, 266; R. Hofmann-de Keijzer, 'Dyestuffs in Coptic Textiles', in Noever (ed.), op. cit. (note 38), pp. 27-35; A. Verhecken, 'Natuurlijke kleurstoffen', in De Moor et al., op. cit. (note 27), pp. 87-95.
- 44 This is also known as the 'flying needle' technique, but 'flying shuttle' is most commonly used, although it is uncertain whether a needle or a shuttle has been used.
- 45 Inv. no. BK-NM-11835: *tabula* with braiding on a red-purple background; inv. no. BK-NM-11836: *tabula* with four crosses, a border of braiding and a border with a succession of round links on a dark blue background (this piece is almost identical to a *tabula* in the collection of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, 4th-5th century, see R. Shurinova, *Coptic Textiles. Collection of Coptic Textiles State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts Moscow*, Moscow 1967, cat. no. 57, colour plate no. 21); inv. no. BK-NM-11838: *tabula* with the corners filled with a leaf motif and a trefoil in hemispheres along two sides; inv. no. BK-NM-12066: lobed *orbiculus* with a serpentine motif on a red background; inv. no. BK-NM-12066-G: *orbiculus* with serpentine braiding on a dark blue background; inv. no. BK-NM-12105: *tabula* with four compartments with a serpentine diagonal swastika motif and an undulating braid on a dark blue background; inv. no. BK-BR-453-D: *tabula* with lozenge motif, central braiding and braided border on a dark blue background; inv. no. BK-BR-453-K: *tabula* with braiding on a purple background and three leaves in a triangle from which *clavi* emerge along two sides; inv. no. BK-BR-453-H: ornamental strips from a sleeve with geometric motifs on a dark blue background.
- 46 A. Schmidt-Colinet, 'Deux carrés entrelacés inscrits dans un cercle. De la signification d'un ornement géométrique', in Stauffer, op. cit. (note 28), pp. 21-34; Stauffer, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 10-14.
- 47 De Moor et al., op. cit. (note 27), pp. 148-49; these kinds of fabrics with gold imitation in orange wool can be found here and there in collections. A few Coptic fabrics with real gold thread have survived; see Noever (ed.), op. cit. (note 38), pp. 109-11, no. 31.
- 48 This is one of the fabrics in the acquisition ledger, where there is reference to the illustration in Gerspach, op. cit. (note 15), i.e. nos. 17 and 18. Gerspach used the same drawing with a motif of vases (no. 17) as the illustration on the title page.
- 49 Both decorations are sewn on to the linen base.
- 50 A similar stylized head in the centre of a circle with braiding on a *tabula* can be found in Fribourg. See Stauffer, op. cit. (note 28), pp. 90-91, no. 15.
- 51 Similar fragments or a variation of them can be found in museums including the Städtischen Museum Simeonstift in Trier (C. Nauerth, *Die koptischen Textilien der Sammlung Wilhelm Rautenstrauch im Städtischen Museum Simeonstift Trier*, Trier 1989, p. 47, inv. no. VII.19, fig. Fach 14) and in the collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, op. cit. (note 14), cat. no. 49).
- 52 HPLC (High Performance Liquid Chromatography) dye analysis was used to determine the precise composition of the colours, see J. Wouters, 'Kleurstofanalyse van Koptisch textiel/Dye Analysis of Coptic Textiles', in De Moor (ed.), op. cit. (note 29), pp. 53-64; R. Hofmann-de Keijzer, 'Dyestuffs in Coptic Textiles', in Noever (ed.), op. cit. (note 38), pp. 27-35. A judicious selection of Coptic fabrics in the Rijksmuseum collection will be subjected to dye analyses in the near future.
- 53 Fine examples in good condition can be found in the collections of the Musée du Louvre in Paris and of the Brooklyn Museum (D. Thompson, *Coptic Textiles in the Brooklyn Museum*, New York 1971, pp. 14-15, cat. no. 2; with reference to other collections). The MAK has several of these fabric decorations, see Völker, op. cit. (note 38), pp. 140-41, cat. no. 80. We also know an example which

- includes nude figures picking leaves from the tree (as in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, inv. no. 1214; see M.-H. Rutschowscaya, *Tissus Coptes*, Paris 1990, p. 91).
- 54 Inv. nos. BK-NM-12057 and BK-NM-12058. A similar but somewhat more detailed Nereid figure, likewise with a green scarf and on a red ground, can be seen in a fragment from the 8th century in the collection of the Louvre, see *ibid.*, p. 72. BK-NM-12066-D has decorative patterns.
- 55 Inv. nos. BK-NM-12050, BK-NM-12065-A and BK-NM-12218.
- 56 A fragment with similar figures with nimbuses is in the collection of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Fribourg and is dated to the 8th-9th century, see Stauffer, *op. cit.* (note 28), pp. 182-83, no. 85, and a piece of fabric with similar dancers is in the collection of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and dated to the 6th-8th century, see Shurinova, *op. cit.* (note 45), cat. no. 188.
- 57 Inv. nos. BK-NM-12053, BK-NM-12059, BK-BR-453-Q, BK-NM-12056-B (with dark blue wool, not ecru decoration).
- 58 The Musée de Cluny in Paris has a piece of fabric with one medallion in exactly the same motif. Lorquin, *op. cit.* (note 35), no. 51, pp. 162-63.
- 59 However these were woven on a drawloom and usually have an axis of symmetry. As a result the two riders, although in mirror image, are actually identical.
- 60 There are other fine examples of this influence in Coptic *orbiculi* in the collections of the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York, the Textile Museum in Washington and the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, see F. Volbach, *Il tessuto nell'arte antica*, Milan 1966, pp. 74-77, figs. 33-35, and Schrenk, *op. cit.* (note 24), cat. nos. 164-65, pp. 349-52.
- 61 These kinds of cushion fabrics can be found in several collections, see for example De Moor et al., *op. cit.* (note 27), pp. 172-73; Schrenk, *op. cit.* (note 24), cat. no. 41-43, pp. 130-33; Nauwerth, *op. cit.* (note 51), cat. nos. VII.16 and VII.138; J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *op. cit.* (note 14), cat. nos. 19 and 20.
- 62 There are also embroidered and brocade fragments, a couple of fabrics that may have come from a curtain and a number of fragments of woollen fabric in *taqueté* technique. These are BK-BR-453-J in red and green embroidered stripes and BK-BR-453-T in brocade in lozenges and meanders of red, green, blue and yellow; BK-BR-453-P and BK-BR-453-S with small, colourful motifs, possibly from a curtain; BK-NM-11842 woollen *taqueté* fabric with a small, recurring motif of circles and meanders in brown and yellow and BK-NM-12154 woollen *taqueté* fabric with a repeating pattern of red octagons with animals running to the right and leaping dogs to the left on a green background, with a decorative band in dark blue tapestry with a braid motif in flying shuttle technique (there is a fragment in the collection of the MAK in Vienna which is exactly the same, see Noeyer (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 38), pp. 182-83, no. 113).
- 63 The date of this intervention is unknown.
- 64 At present the collection of Coptic textiles is being treated in the textile restoration workshop of the Rijksmuseum so that it can be better preserved in the future and can be presented safely.
- 65 Old, undated black and white photographs attest to this. Since it was obvious on acquisition that there were two different types of weaves, two separate numbers were allocated to the object (inv. nos. BK-NM-12049-A and B).
- 66 This can still be seen from the horizontal lines with the visible remains of tufts of red woollen sewing yarn.
- 67 The remnants of the old glue are removed. After cleaning, weak fragments are mounted on a support fabric so that they later on can be shown in a temporary display. This is also the time when fabric and dye analyses and carbon-14 dating research can be undertaken.
- 68 One example of a luxurious publication of small Coptic textile fragments is by A.M. Donadoni Roveri (ed.), *Qibti. The Coptic Textiles of the Antonio Ratti Collection*, Como 1993.
- 69 Some publications in chronological order: A. Geijer, *A History of Textile Art*, London 1979; F.P. Thomson, *Tapestry. Mirror of History*, London 1980, pp. 29-44; M. Thomas et al., *L'Art Textile*, Geneva 1985, pp. 39-50; B. Tietzel, *Geschichte der Webkunst. Technische Grundlagen und künstlerische Traditionen*, Cologne 1988, pp. 29-45; M. Ginsburg (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Textiles*, New York 1991, pp. 12-16; B. Phillips, *Tapestry*, London 1994, pp. 15-29.
- 70 Sometimes Coptic textiles are included with an illustrative photo in the introduction of publications that specifically cover the art of tapestry from the Middle Ages onwards, such as the voluminous work by J. Jobé (ed.), *Great Tapestries: The Web of History from the 12th to the 20th Century*, Lausanne 1965, p. 37.

