

THE TEXTILES FROM PALMYRA

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The more than 2.000 textile fragments found at Palmyra are among the largest groups of antique textiles of proven origin. They all were found either as parts of mummies (Fig. 1-2) or as isolated fragments in tower tombs dated by inscriptions from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD.

In order to preserve these unique documents of cultural heritage, urgent conservation work was necessary. Thus in 1991, an international interdisciplinary project, involving co-operation between the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Syria and the German Archaeological Institute, was inaugurated on the basis of the UNESCO Charter.¹ The textiles were cleaned, restored, documented and stored in a proper way. A portion of the collection was presented to the public at permanent exhibitions in the Museums of Palmyra and Damascus. All restoration work was done directly in Syria, taking into account the special climatic conditions of the country. Only samples of the fibres were sent abroad for technical and chemical analyses.

Two groups of fabrics can be distinguished: textiles produced locally and fabrics imported from India and China. The locally-produced fabrics are made of linen, wool or cotton, and are generally of outstanding quality and with sophisticated designs (Fig. 3-4). Wool was dyed with different colours extracted from plants or insects (e.g. madder root, weld plant, indigo plant, kermes insect and purple shell). The dyestuffs were produced locally or imported from other areas such as from India.

Silk fabrics were imported from China (Fig. 5-6). Some of them can even be traced back to certain Chinese imperial workshops on the basis of inwoven Chinese characters. Palmyrene weavers also imitated Chinese silk fabrics, using local weaving methods and materials.

¹ The work is directed by Khaled al-As'ad and Andreas Schmidt-Colinet. Further collaborators are Jawdat Chehade, Mohammed Fares, Harald Böhmer and Annemarie Stauffer. We would also like to thank the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Syria and the German Archaeological Institute for all financial and administrative support.



Fig. 1. Palmyra, foot of a mummy from the Atenatan tower tomb (1st century AD).

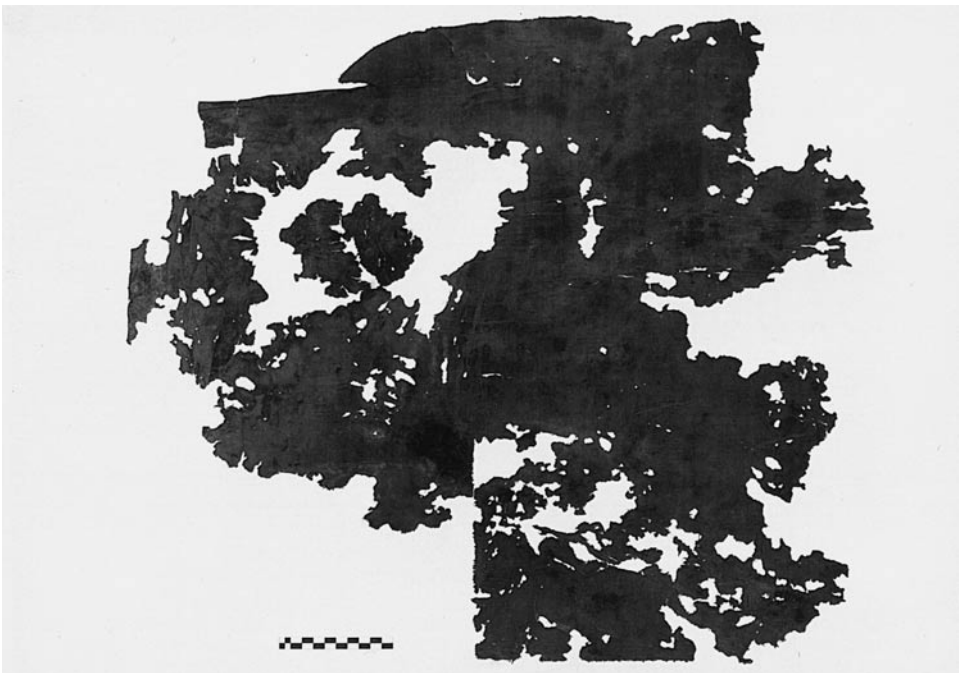


Fig. 2. Fabric of fine wool cut into shape, innermost layer of the mummified foot in Fig. 1, after restoration.

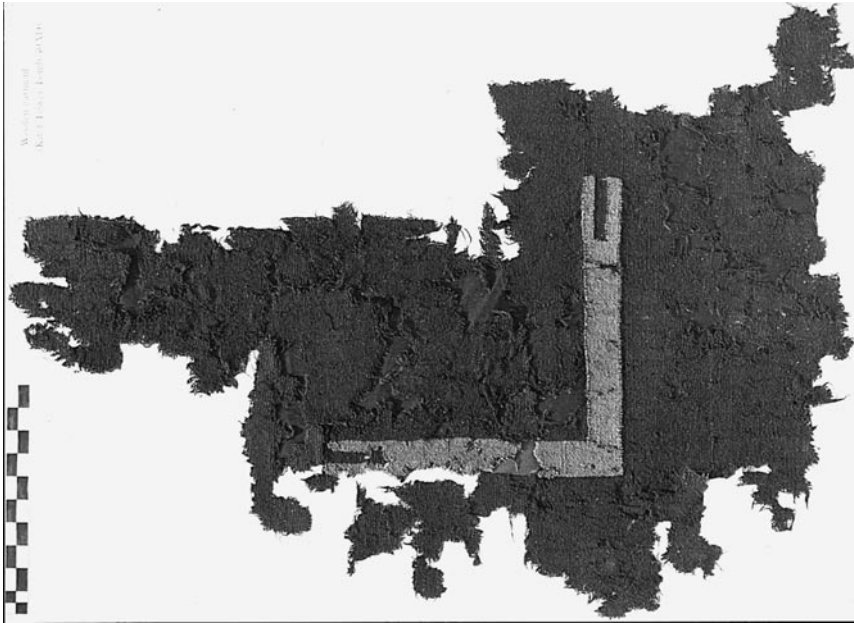


Fig. 3. Palmyra, woollen garment with purple dyed decoration, produced locally, from the Kitot tower tomb (1st-2nd century AD).

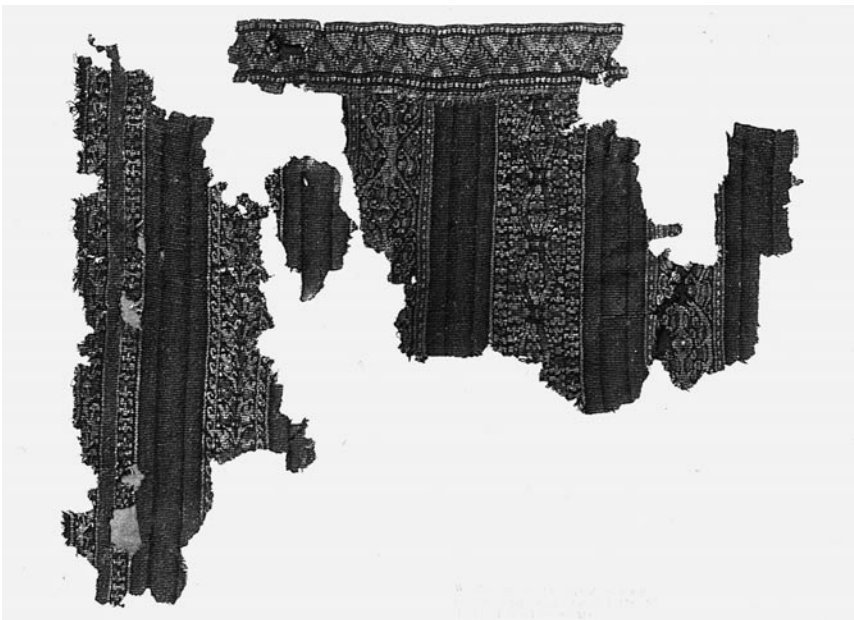


Fig. 4. Palmyra, woollen garment with sumptuous decoration, produced locally, from the Iambliq tower tomb (2nd century AD).

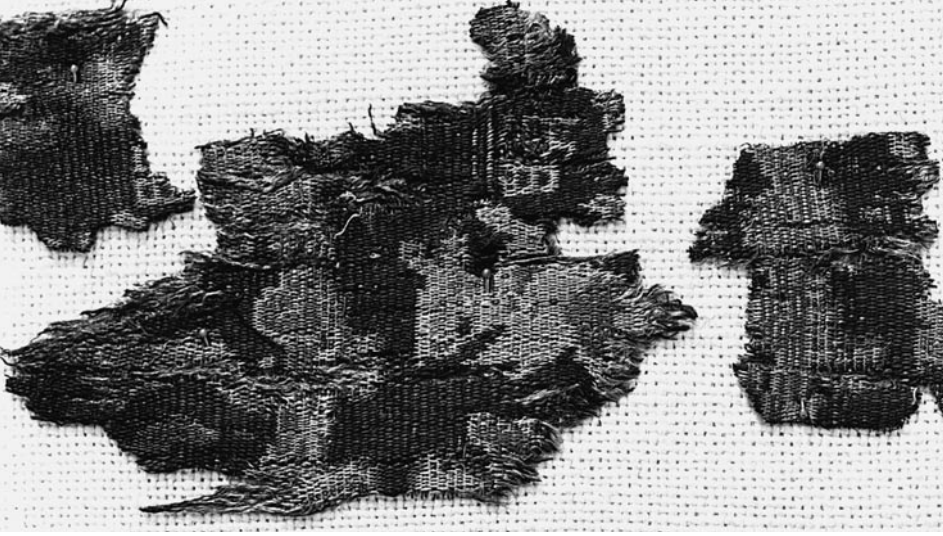


Fig. 6. Palmyra, polychrome Chinese silk with woven decoration and Chinese characters, from tower tomb No. 46 (2nd century AD).



Fig. 5. Palmyra, monochrome Chinese silk ("Han-Damasc") with Han-mask and rhombus decoration, from the Elahbel tower tomb (2nd century AD).

The designs or patterns of local Palmyrene textiles also appear on Palmyrene sculptures and buildings. It is obvious that the same books of patterns were used by textile workshops, sculpture ateliers and architectural workshops. Thus, the typical “arabesque” architectural decoration of Palmyra can largely be traced back to local textile patterns.

In general, the textiles embody an unusual amount of detailed information about the history of Palmyra. The methods of weaving and dyeing, as well as the link with the Silk Road, informs us about the economy and trade. The reconstruction of garments and their significance adds to our knowledge of Palmyrene daily life and culture; and the use of mummification enhances our knowledge of Palmyrene religion and burial customs. The final scientific report is yet to be published; but the bibliography below gives preliminary reports and results.

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