

THE TURBAN OF SAMUEL IBN MUSA (¹)
THE EARLIEST DATED ISLAMIC TEXTILE

BY

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In June 1932 the Museum Islamic Art in Cairo—previously known as the Arab Museum—acquired by purchase from an antique dealer in Cairo, a piece of Islamic textile with tapestry decoration and inscription (²).

The ground material is coarse linen and the warp threads, of which the inscription and the ornament are woven by the tapestry method, are in coloured wool.

It measures 75 by 32 cms. and has two horizontal bands. The upper band contains Arabic inscription in Kufic characters. The line of inscription is 60 cms. in length and has one streak at its beginning and another at its end. Above the inscription is one of the original bands of the stuff and there is a fringe formed by the warp threads. The lower band contains medallions enclosing birds and separated by geometrical ornaments.

In 1934, the piece was first referred to by late Hassan El-Hawwary, once a curator in the above mentioned museum, who gave for the first time the Arabic text woven on it (³).

In May 1935, the piece was exhibited in the "Exposition des Tapisseries et Tissus de Musée Arabe du Caire" held in Musée des

(¹) This paper was read in the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists, Cambridge, 1954.

(²) Its register number is 10846.

(³) Hassan Muhammad el-Hawwary, *Un Tissue Abbasid de perse*, *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte* T. XVI, 1934, pp. 62, 63.

Gobelins in Paris and was described very briefly for the first time in the Catalogue of that exhibition written by Wiet. It was dated 707 A.D. (88 A.H.) according to the inscription woven on it (1).

In August of the same year its picture appeared in an Arabic book written by Zaky Hassan then a curator of the Arab Museum of Cairo. He gave a very brief description of the piece with the Arabic text woven in it. His reading was different in some words from that of Al-Hawwary (2).

The piece was again reproduced in an article written by Pfister in 1936. He considered it to be much later than the date depicted on it. He is inclined to put it in the 9th century A.D., although the woven inscription brings it to the early 8th century. His evidence for this inclination lies merely in the style of the pattern (3).

This view of Pfister was heartily accepted by my Prof. Dr. Kuhnelt in 1938 who even gave it more strength. He says that the date is in contradiction with the style of the woven patterns and because of this contradiction he is perfectly in agreement with Pfister that the piece cannot be before the 9th century A.D. He, thus, considers the date woven in the piece as being incomplete and, probably, it ought to be 188 H. instead of 88 H. i.e. 804 A.D. (4).

In an Arabic book appeared in 1942, I shared Pfister and Kuhnelt their view (5) without looking at the piece itself because, unfortunately, it was away from the museum during the last Great War (6).

(1) G. Wiet, *Exposition des Tapisseries et Tapis du Musée Arabe du Caire, Musée des Gobelins*, Paris, p. 3.

(2) Zaky Muhammed Hassan, *Al-Fann Al-Islami Fi Misr*, Tome I, Publication du Musée Arabe du Caire, le Caire, 1935, p. 86.

(3) Pfister (R.), *Matériaux pour servir au classement des Textiles Egyptiens postérieurs à la Conquête Arabe*, *Revue des Arts Asiatiques*, T. X, fasc. 1 et 2, pp. 74, 78.

(4) E. Kuhnelt, *La Tradition Copte dans les Tissus Musulmans*, *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, T. IV, p. 86.

(5) Muhammad Abdel-Aziz Marzouk, *Al-Zakhrifa Al-Mansurafa Al-Aqmisha al-Fatimiya*, Publication du Musée Arabe du Caire, 1942, p. 87.

(6) During the last Great War (1939-1945) all the objects of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, were transferred to safe stores in the Serapium at Saqqara.

In 1948, while preparing a lecture to my students, I examined the piece more closely, and began to doubt my view concerning its date.

In 1952 Kuhnel referred again to this piece saying that it was "tentatively dated 88h., (707 A.D.) but perhaps later"⁽¹⁾. This shows that his inclination to put the piece later than the woven date is not so strong as before. It became thus evident that my previous statement should be strongly modified, and the occasion of this congress presents rather a good opportunity for this modification.

In fact, the value of this piece lies, to a great extent, in the unique text⁽²⁾ woven in it and there is a certain amount of interest in the actual wording of the inscription.

The full Arabic text is:

عملت: 6: موسى: 5: بن: 4: لسمويل: 3: الهامة: 2: هذه: 1:
الحمد: 12: منور: 11: []: 10: رجب: 9: شهر: 8: ق: 7:
ف: 13: ثمان: 15: سنة: 14: ق: 16:

The first word is the usual demonstrative pronoun to indicate that which is near.

The second word means here the scarf wound round the turban⁽³⁾. It is the only example, as far as I know where this word is

(¹) E. Kuhnel and L. Bellinger, *Catalogue of Dated Tiras Fabrics* Washington, National Publishing Company, 1952, p. 84.

(²) The phraseology here differs greatly from the usual texts found on most Islamic textiles where the inscription may contain any or all the following: good wishes, the name of the Caliph, the wazir, the nature of the factory (private or public), the name of the manager of the factory, the city or the date.

(³) The word *عمامة* has in fact two meanings: it means either the headgear with the scarf wound round it; or it means only the scarf that is wound round the head gear as it is the case here. There is a wide literature on this piece of costume which was used by the Arabs before and after Islam. It would be sufficient here to give two references; Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des Vêtements chez les Arabes*, Amsterdam, 1845, p. 306; and Levy (Reuban), *Notes on Costume from Arabic Sources*, J.R.A.S., 1935, pp. 319-338.

used on historical Islamic textiles⁽¹⁾. The present piece might form the decorated outer end of the scarf applied in the same way we recognise from a figured representation on a lustre potsherd in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo which may be attributed to the 10th or 11th century A.D. Although this evidence is comparatively late and is not a proof for an early period, yet it is very suggestive concerning the way in which the piece was used⁽²⁾.

The third, fourth and fifth words represent a proper name. It is quite clear that this proper name does not apply to a Muslim. It may be a name of a Christian or a Jew. But who is this Samuel ibn Musa I cannot tell simply because I do not know⁽³⁾.

The sixth word means "was made": It is said that this word « صنع » is typical of the Abbasid inscription and the word « عمل »

(1) All the inscribed textiles that came to my attention do not contain any word that may identify their use with the exception of few examples having the word كورة at the end of the text. This word may refer to garment or to clothing in general. In the Répertoire Chronologique are listed three early inscriptions whose texts were preserved by the historians and which clearly say that they were especially for the covering of the Ka'ba, (See, Répertoire Chronologique, d'Epigraphie Arabe, vol. I, nos. 44, 80, 101).

(2) Aly Bahgat and Massoul, *La Céramique Musulman de l'Egypte*, Publication du Musée Arabe du Caire, 1930 pl. 18 (3).

(3) When reading this paper in the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists at Cambridge, I stated that I felt inclined to consider Samuel ibn Musa as a Jewish Rabbi (حاطم) or a Jewish priest, a hazan (حازان) and the piece under discussion is a miter (see article "miter" in the Jewish Encyclopaedia, New York, MDCCCXVI). My inclination then was not without reason. It is evident from the Old Testament that the children of Israel were commanded to make the clothes of the service needed to do service in the holy place, and the garment needed to minister in the priest's office (Exod. XXXIX, 41, 42, 43). Among these garments and clothes is the miter, i.e. the turban which was made of linen (Exod. XXVIII, 39).

Prof. Mayer (L.A.) who was attending promised to discuss this point. He was so kind to write to me drawing my attention to two verses in the Old Testament (Deut. XXII, 11 and Levit. XIX, 19), from which it is clear that no theologian or a very religious person was allowed to wear a garment—not a miter—of divers sorts, as of woolen and linen together. As the piece under discussion is made of coarse linen and coloured wool so I agree with Prof. Mayer that this turban belonged, very probably, to a rich layman.

is typical of the Umayyad inscription (¹). This may be true in some instances (²) but it should not be taken as a rule because the present document shows the opposite and thus it would be much safer if we exclude this view from consideration.

The final "y" in the seventh word is quite different from the final "y" in the fifth word. It seems that the weaver liked to use another type of the final "y" namely the reversed one «الباء الراجعة». This type, in fact, was known in his time and we have, fortunately enough, two dated examples: the first is the earliest Muslim inscription on the tombstone of Abdel-Rahman ibn Khair Al-Hajri dated 31 H. (³) and the second is the inscription of the Dome of the Rock just before the words of the date which is 72 H. (⁴).

The eighth and ninth words mean the month of Rajab رجب and Rajab is the seventh month of the Muslim Calendar. It is one of the four months of the "holy truce"—الأشهر الحرم. These months are made up of the last two months, the first month and the middle month i.e. Rajab (⁵). The first three which follow each other were especially set aside for religious observance and fourth month for trade.

The tenth sign was transcribed by some scholars as "من" i.e. "from" (⁶). In fact this sign cannot be transcribed thus, though the

(¹) Day (F.). *The Tiraz: Silk of Marwan*, Archeologiae Orientalia. in Memoriam of Ernst Herzfeld, New York, 1952, p. 41.

(²) Day (F.), *Ibid.* footnote (11).

(³) El-Hawwary (H. Muhammad), *The Most Ancient Islamic Monument known dated A.H. 31*, J. R. A. S., 1930, pp. 321-33.

(⁴) Albot (Nahia). *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Kuranic Development with a full Description of the Kuran Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute*.—Oriental Institute Publications, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1939, pls. II, V.

(⁵) Al-Qabqashandi. *Subh-al-A'sha*, Cairo, 1922, vol. II, p. 378; Hitti (Philip K.). *History of the Arabs*, London, 1946, p. 102.

(⁶) Al-Hawwary puts a query after his transcription showing that he was not sure of his reading, (see, *Un Tissu Abbasid*, op. cit., p. 63 footnote). Zaky Hassan, without referring to the previous reading and without any hesitation—

meaning may be reasonable by this transcription. The sign resembles, to a great extent, the second letter in the first word that is the medial "dal" and I think it may represent the letter "dal — د" which is the last letter of the word "الفرد" i.e. the isolated⁽¹⁾ by which the month Rajab was usually described. It seems that the weaver had forgotten to weave the first three letters of this word.

The eleventh word was read as "شهور" i.e. months by one scholar⁽²⁾ and as "الشهور" i.e. the months by another scholar⁽³⁾. On examining the word we find that there are three teeth close together and another one isolated from them. Then comes the so-called "h" (هـ) and the "waw" (و) and the "ra" (ر). If we take all these letters into account it cannot be neither شهر nor الشهور; but if we take it for granted that the weaver added a tooth and was unable to weave the "h" accurately, then the word may be شهر but never الشهور. To me the word can still be read as شهر Sanhur⁽⁴⁾ or سابر Sabur⁽⁵⁾. The first is a village in the Fayum district which was

=gave his transcription as Al-Hawwary, as if the sign is very clearly inscribed, (see, Zaky Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 86; and see also his *Funun al-Islam*, Cairo, 1948, p. 348).

(¹) This month got this adjective from the fact that it is isolated from the other months of the holy truce.

(²) Al-Hawwary, *op. cit.*, p. 63, footnote.

(³) Zaky Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 86 and p. 348, I do not find in the word woven any sign of an Alef or Lam, and he does not show on what evidence he transcribed it in that way.

(⁴) Sanhur is one of the ancient towns in the Fayyum district. Gautier (H) in his *Dictionnaire de Noms Géographiques contenus dans les textes hiéroglyphiques*, T.V, p. 37", gives its Pharaonic name as Smen Hor; Ibn Hawqal in his *Sourat Al-Ard* (صورة الأرض) p. 138. 2nd. ed., Leiden, 1938), says that it was famous in various products: in linen, corn, and sugar-cane. He continues to say that it began to lose its importance in his time (331 H.)

(⁵) A district in Iran called after Sabur who constructed the town known also as Sabur which is famous for its stuff. In Elsberg collection, New York, there is a fragment containing an inscription that it is made in Sabur. See Guest (R.), J.R.A.S. 1931, No. 2, pp. 130 f. pl. I.; Wiet, *Exposition Persan*, 1931, Le Caire, 1933, pp. 117, 118; Lamm, C. J. *Cotton in Medieval Textiles of the Near East*, Paris, 1937, p. 108, and the references he gives on p. 215.

famous for its textiles and the second is a place in Persia also known for its textiles. In both suggestions the preposition "بـ" which is lacking must be restored to give sense to the text.

The twelfth word was read as *المحمدية* i.e. al-Muhammadiyah which is made up of eight letters while there are only five letters and the last three (d, y, h) are lacking⁽¹⁾. This may be a possible interpretation if we take it for granted that the weaver had forgotten to weave the last three letters, but it would appear to me, especially in view of the nature of Islam, that this vocalization is far from being easily accepted and I feel inclined to reject it merely because such an attribution or nisba to the prophet Muhammad himself can hardly exist in this early date. undoubtedly the word *المحمدية* was used in the Abbasid period but in another sense. It was then used as a proper name of some towns established by Muslim rulers whose proper names included the word Muhammad⁽²⁾. In fact, this word is curiously written. Its separate alef is treated here in a way entirely different from the separate alef of the second word where the alef is only a short vertical stroke. The alef in the word under discussion is bent to the right at the lower end and the stretched stroke seems to be longer than the vertical one. In the tombstone dated 31 H. to which I referred previously⁽³⁾ the separate alef is near to this and also in the inscription of the Dome of the Rock⁽⁴⁾. In reality one is confronted here with the possibility of three vocalizations; this word can be read as "Al-Higra *الهجرة*", bearing in mind that the weaver made a metathesis by writing the last "h" before the "r". In this case the previous word can be read as months *شهور*. It may

(¹) This is the reading of Zaky Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 86. Al-Hawwary only copied the five letters as they appeared on the piece and put a query after them (*op. cit.*, p. 63. footnote).

(²) Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, vol. II, p. 219 and vol. IV, pp. 430, 431. See also, Lane-Fools (S), *Catalogue of the Collection of Arabic Coins preserved in the Khedivial Library at Cairo*, London, 1897, p. 38.

(³) Al-Hawwary, *The Most Ancient Islamic Monument*.

(⁴) Abbot *op. cit.*, pls. II, V.

also be read as "bil Fayyum بالفيوم" bearing in mind that the separated alef which has a bent to the right at the lower end represents the preposition "b" with the alef; and that the weaver by a technical mistake in weaving was obliged to draw the tooth of the medial "y" to the left with a bent and forgot to add the final "mim" after the "waw". In this case the previous word can be read as "bi Sanhur - سنهور". It may also be read as "al-'Ajam العجم" i.e. Persia and in this case the previous word can be read as "bi Sabur" i.e. سابور.

I must confess here that all the readings of these last two words are not entirely satisfactory. It is rather impossible with these letterings to determine the exact significance which the weaver had in his mind.

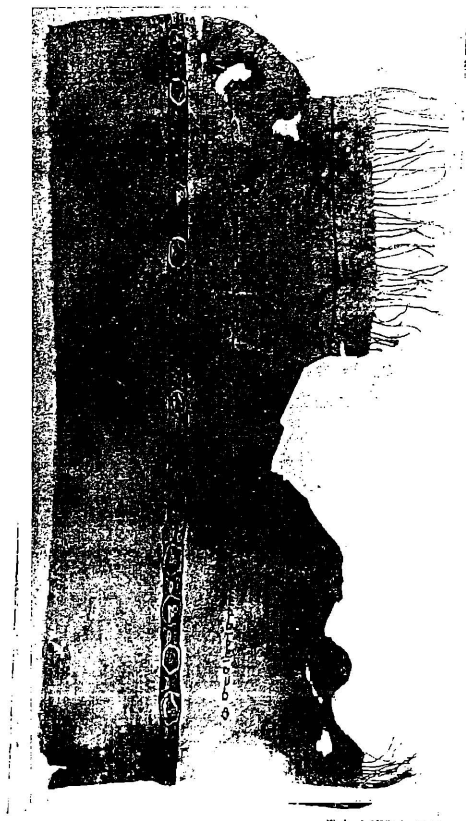
The thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth words are quite clear except for the last word which is incomplete. It is not spelled out completely but cannot be any other number than eighty and the four words read as "in the year eight and eighty" i.e. "ثمان وعشرون". My tentative readings may stir the interest of other scholars. But to me the nearest possible reading of the whole text may be:

هذه العمامة لبحمىل بن موسى عملت في شهر رجب [الفرد] د سنهور بالفيوم في سنة ثمان وثمانين [٨٨٨]

The material of the fragment i.e. linen and wool; the colours used, the style of the decoration and the curious writing—all these features or at least most of them are not unfamiliar in the pieces woven in Al-Fayyum^(*).

(*) Although it is dangerous to rely entirely upon information given by dealers, yet I am inclined, in the present case, to trust what Mr. Tano has told me about this piece. He is the dealer who sold the piece to the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo. His statement was that the fragment was excavated in the Fayyum District.

(*) For the Islamic textiles of Fayyum see: Kuhnelt, *Catalogue of Dated Tiraz Fabrics in the Textile Museum, Washington*, 1952, pp. 2, 3, 6, 8, 84, 85, 102, 107.



After the sixteenth word there is a streak which shows that the inscription is finished. Undoubtedly, this is a proof that the text is complete and does not lack the figure of hundred as it was suggested before (1). The reading of the last four words is beyond any doubt and thus the piece can be attributed with a great amount of certainty to the first century of Hira i.e. the beginning of the 8th century A.D.

The validity of this conclusion can still be corroborated by another positive evidence as we enter upon the ground of the style of inscription. The letters are more or less square and angular and have short vertical strokes. They look low and stumpy and lack all signs of refinement. These features with the reversed "y" are more marked in the early Islamic inscription than in later ones.

Coming to the question of the decoration, one finds the argument to the effect that the piece cannot be before the 9th century A.D. is not any longer convincing, especially when we add to the previous evidences a new one that the bands of inscription and pattern are tapestry woven which clearly shows that both bands were made contemporarily. There is, in fact, no way of accepting the suggestion that there is a contradiction between the date and style of decoration.

Thus we are here in the presence of the earliest dated Islamic textile.

(1) Kuhnelt, *La tradition Copte op. cit.* p. 86.