

# A note on two unpublished Coptic textiles from Belgrade

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*This text presents to the academic public two so-far unpublished pieces from the collection of Coptic textiles housed at the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade. The aim of this text is to identify the motifs represented on them, as well as to propose a possible iconographic and iconological reading of their imagery. Both pieces of Coptic textile presented here display a number of iconographic subjects typical of Late Antique Egypt such as the Dionysiac thiasus and other subjects related to Dionysos – vines, lions, panthers and other animals, as well as the so-called Coptic horseman. They are typical of the visual idiom which survived from the classical period into Late Antique Coptic Egypt and was taking on new meanings in the context of religious and cultural syncretism.*

*Key words: Coptic textile, Late Antique Egypt, Dionysos, Christ, syncretism, Nonnos of Panopolis*

The Museum of Applied Arts in Belgrade houses an exceptionally interesting and yet little known collection of Coptic textiles. Although accompanied by a catalogue published in 1980,<sup>1</sup> the collection has so far received no in depth study, whether as a whole or focusing on any of the individual pieces of textile comprising it. Two items have been left out altogether, missing even from the catalogue, and remain unpublished to this day. The aim of this text is to present these as yet unpublished pieces of Coptic textile to the academic public, identify the motifs represented on them, as well as to propose a possible iconographic and iconological reading of their imagery.<sup>2</sup>

The first item (inventory no. 11456) is a woven strip, part of a *clavus* (15.5x24cm). The motifs woven on the linen, natural colored background are mostly made of purple dyed wool, with accents of dark brown, green, red and yellow. This piece of textile displays the following motifs: two medallions and figures of lions and leopards, delineated on either side by friezes running along the longitudinal edges in the form of stylized vines, rinceaux, and floral motifs (fig. 1). More specifically, from left to right, the repertoire of this *clavus* fragment includes a

medallion with two schematized, frontally positioned human figures, two animal figures, a running, leaping panther and a lion (or lioness, tigress?), one above the other, followed by a medallion with three ducks and a stylized plant, lotus or water lilly. At the right end of the preserved segment of this *clavus* we find again the two superposed animal figures, here in reversed order, a lion on top and a panther. This piece of textile could be dated to the 6th or 7th century.

The second piece (inventory no. 11423) is far more complex, in both content and composition. It is a *segmentus* (R 19cm), a decorative patch placed at the shoulder or near the knee, in the form of a roundel made of linen, natural colored background with motifs woven in purple wool (fig. 2). The abundance and density of highly stylized motifs populating the entire and rather small surface of this *orbiculus* makes it difficult to discern and identify the various individual representations. The general composition is that of two concentric circular forms. The central circle, the roundel or emblemata within this medallion, is clearly dedicated to Dionysiac imagery. In it we can distinguish two standing figures which can be identified as Pan and a dancing Nymph or Maenad. They are flanked by two small animals, possibly hares, judging by the shape of their bodies and the rather large ears. The background is filled with stylized floral motives. The heads of the two figures are not clearly discernible. In fact, it appears that the top part of this roundel and the upper part of the outer band of this *orbiculus* actually belong to a different piece of textile sewn together with this one at some point in time in order to replace its missing top part.

The outer band is filled with several „scenes“ or groups of images comprising distinguishable representations. The lower part of the outer band is of the same piece of textile as the central roundel. Directly under the figures of Pan and the Nymph-Maenad, we find a standing male figure, whose head is rather damaged, dressed in a short tunic, with arms outstretched. The right arm of the figure is raised to the level of his head. On either side of this figure are felines, what appears to be a lion (lioness) on the right and a panther on the left. One potential interpretation could point in the direction of seeing this scene as an abridged version of Dionysos in triumph, although the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Stojanović, *Koptske tkanine*, Beograd 1980 (with summary in French: *Les tissus Coptes*).

<sup>2</sup> I hereby extend my deepest gratitude to my dear colleague Draganja Maskareli, head custodian of the Department of Textile and Costume of the Museum of Applied Art from Belgrade, for her dedicated assistance in my investigation of the collection of Coptic textiles from this museum.



Fig. 1. Coptic textile from the Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, inventory no. 11456.  
Photo: courtesy of the Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade

god's cart is completely missing. To the right and left of this centrally positioned representation are scenes which mirror each other in content. On either side we find a horseman followed by a feline beast, a lioness on the left and a panther on the right side, and finally a single standing figure which could be identified as a dancing nymph or maenad playing a tympan. This is the point at which another piece of textile is joined to the *orbiculus* – displaying the same type of imagery, standing male figures and beasts are discernible, and a vine in the background – of a clearly different manner of stylization. This is best seen on the left side where the standing figure of a nymph is cut off at bust level while the conjoined piece of textile shows another bust of a male figure, so that they appear to stand one in reverse of another, almost joined at waist level. It is also obvious from the stylization of the „knots“ or schematized buds lining the outer perimeter of the circular border of the *orbiculus* that there are actually two pieces of textile joined into one. Although dating Coptic textiles solely on the basis of stylistic analysis is unreliable, before thorough carbon dating is performed we could date this item to the end of the Late Antique period, i.e. to the 6th or 7th century.<sup>3</sup>

Both pieces of textile in the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade are completely undocumented as far as their provenance and the history of their accession in the col-

<sup>3</sup> On the history and historiography of characterization and dating of (Coptic) textiles from Late Antique Egypt v. T. K. Thomas, *Coptic and Byzantine textiles found in Egypt. Corpora, collections, and scholarly perspectives*, in: *Egypt in the Byzantine world, 300–700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, Cambridge 2007, 137–162, especially 144–153.

lection, the identity of the possible donor or the time of acquisition is concerned. Considering the fact that the two sites richest in textile finds in Egypt are Antinoe or Antinoopolis in Greek, the modern village called Sheik Ibada in Arabic, and Panopolis in Greek, i.e. Achmim or Akhmim in Arabic, we could perhaps identify these two cities as their points of origin. At first, with the beginnings of scientific interest in and exploration of Egyptian antiquities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, textiles discovered at these and other sites, as part of unsystematic excavations of cemeteries and burial grounds, were regarded more as curiosities than material heritage worthy per se of scientific documenting and studying. First signs of change were noted in the 1880's and 1890's as scholars, explorers, and scholar-explorer-entrepreneurs began to exhume well-wrapped corpses and harvest great quantities of textiles from Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic cemeteries in Egypt. Antinoe was excavated by Albert Gayet (1856–1916) and Panopolis by Robert Forrer (1866–1947).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Excavations at Akhmim began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Director of the Antiquities Service, Gaston Maspero, identified the site as a source of “Byzantine and Coptic mummies along with fine cloths.” The vast quantity of mummies and beautiful textiles attracted robbers and art dealers, who plundered the site. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, other scholars visited the site, including Vladimir de Bock, Theodor Graf, Carl Schmidt, Charles Edwin Wilbour, A.W. Budge, and Robert Forrer. On the history of excavation and the formation of the first collections of Coptic textiles in Europe and America v. *ibid.*, 137–142; eadem, *From curiosities to objects of art. Modern reception of Late Antique Egyptian textiles as reflected in Dikran Kelekian's textile album of ca. 1910*, in: *Αναθήματα εορτικά. Studies in honor of Thomas F. Mathews*, ed. J. D. Alchermes, H. C. Evans, T. K. Thomas, Mainz 2009, 300–312, with bibliography. See also C. Fluck, *Akhmim as a source of textiles*, in:



Fig. 2. Coptic textile from the Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, inventory no. 11423. Photo: courtesy of the Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade

The most common items of clothing in which the bodies of the deceased were wrapped for burial were rectangular shawls and loose-fitting tunics, which could be decorated with inwoven tapestry passages along the neckline and cuffs, as well as with *clavi* (bands extending longitudinally over the shoulders) and *segmenta* (squares or roundels) placed at the shoulders or near the knees. These basic arrangements were improvised upon as was an ornamental repertory of geometric and interlaced forms and vegetal and animal motifs, in addition to mythological and Christian motifs. Motifs chosen to decorate clothing and homes represented character often by emphasizing a householder's virtue through the portrayal of exemplary figures such as heroes, divinities, and saints. Individuals with sufficient wealth and authority also displayed distinctive understanding of themselves, as persons and as members of a family and society, partly through their clothing and household furnishings.<sup>5</sup>

*Christianity and monasticism in Upper Egypt VI. Akhmim and Sohag*, ed. G. Gabra, H. N. Takla, Cairo 2008.

<sup>5</sup> T. K. Thomas, *Material meaning in late antiquity*, in: *Designing identity. The power of textiles in late antiquity*, ed. T. K. Thomas, Princeton 2016, 21–52, with bibliography. On images on clothing and furnishings in a Late Antique house as both expression and assurance of abundance, imbued with a numinous power, v. H. Maguire, *The*

Both pieces of Coptic textile from the collection of the Museum of Applied Art from Belgrade display a number of iconographic subjects typical of Late Antique Egypt. The Dionysiac thiasus and other Dionysos related representations, the vines and the felines, the lions or lionesses and panthers, as well as other animals, such as the ducks and hares, which could also be interpreted as symbols of the changing seasons, along with the so-called Coptic horseman, are typical of the visual idiom which survived from the classical period into Late Antique Coptic Egypt and was taking on new meanings in the context of religious and cultural syncretism.<sup>6</sup> We can trace this continuity of

*good life*, in: *Late Antiquity. A guide to the Postclassical world*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, O. Grabar, Cambridge, MA 1999, 238–256.

<sup>6</sup> On these motifs and their possible meaning and agency on textiles in Late Antique Egypt see S. Lewis, *The iconography of the Coptic horseman in Byzantine Egypt*, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 10 (1973), 27–63; H. Maguire, *Garments pleasing to God. The Significance of domestic textile designs in the early Byzantine period*, *DOP* 44 (1990) 215–224; idem, *Profane icons. The significance of animal violence in Byzantine art*, *RES: Anthropology and aesthetics* 38 (2000) 18–33; P. M. Jácome, *Bacchus and Felines in Roman iconography. Issues of gender and species*, in: *Redefining Dionysos*, ed. A. Bernabé, M. Herrero de Jáuregui, A. I. Jiménez San Cristóbal, Berlin 2013, 526–540. On Dionysiac imagery on Coptic textiles in particular see S. H. Allen, *Dionysiac imagery in Coptic textiles and later Medieval art*, in: *The Classics in the Middle Ages. Papers of the Twentieth annual confer-*

motifs in the medium of woven textiles, as well as in other media, floor mosaics, frescoes, the production of luxury items such as ivory carvings and silverware, and especially in funerary sculpture dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> As an example of a garment with Dionysiac scenes, possibly representing the type of clothing to which the pieces of textile from Belgrade could once have belonged, we look in the direction of the tunic with Dionysiac motifs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Although admittedly a very farfetched possibility, the central place given to Pan in the medallion within the roundel from Belgrade could be associative of Panopolis i.e. Akhmim as a point of origin.<sup>9</sup>

The repertoire of motifs on the two pieces of Coptic textile from Belgrade can be associated with a broad spectrum of Dionysiac themes popular, certainly not exclusively in visual culture, in the Roman world of Late Antiquity and in Egypt in particular.<sup>10</sup> Both the horseman and the Dionysiac motifs can be associated with the eschatological, the ride into the beyond and the triumphant return and accession to divine heights. They could also be invested with magical and apotropaic qualities and be a potent medium of invoking and magically attracting prosperity and the protection of spirits triumphing over evil for the benefit of the wearer and his household.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Dionysiac imagery could function in either a pagan or a Christian context.

In the Late Antique world, Dionysos symbolized the principle of fertility inherent in the grape, the life force of the vine itself, both the vine and the grape being his recognizable attributes and iconographic signs. The polarity of his dual nature, with a divine father and a mortal mother, expressed itself in the creative and destructive characteristics of pleasure and brutality. Employed by the Ptolemies in their ruler cult, in Roman times Dionysos emerged as a politicized god of theatrical revels and triumphs. Roman rulers, from Marcus Antonius to Galerius, identified with Dionysos who could be celebrated both as a conqueror that civilizes barbarian peoples and as a savior, not only in a political but in a spiritual way as well.<sup>12</sup>

*ence of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. S. Bernardo, S. Levin, Binghamton 1990, 11–24.

<sup>7</sup> T. K. Thomas, *Egyptian art of Late Antiquity*, in: *A companion to Ancient Egypt II*, ed. A. B. Lloyd, Oxford 2010, 1032–1063. For an overview of textiles of Late Antique Egypt see, for example, J. Trilling, *The Roman heritage. Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 300–600 A.D.*, Washington, D.C. 1982; M.-H. Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, Paris 1990; *Fragile remnants. Egyptian textiles of Late Antiquity and early Islam*, ed. P. Noever, Ostfildern 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Tunic with Dionysian Ornament 26.9.8, Online Collection. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447844> [01/12/2017].

<sup>9</sup> A. Egberts, B. P. Muhs, J. van der Vliet, *Perspectives on Panopolis. An Egyptian town from Alexander the Great to the Arab conquest*, Leiden 2002.

<sup>10</sup> *Masks of Dionysus*, ed. T. H. Carpenter, C. A. Faraone, Ithaca 1993; *A Different God? Dionysos and ancient polytheism*. ed. R. Schliesser, Berlin 2011; *Redefining Dionysos*.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 38; Maguire, *Garments pleasing to God*, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> D. Hernandez de la Fuente, *Parallels between Dionysos and Christ in Late Antiquity. Miraculous healings in Nonnos' Dionysiaca*, in: *Redefining Dionysos*, 464–487, especially 466. See also G. W. Bowersock, "Nonnos' rising", in: *Selected papers on Late Antiquity*, Bari 2000, 93–108, especially 160.

On the other hand, from Hellenistic times on, there were indications, as attested by Greek and Roman authors such as Plutarchos and Tacitus, of an identification of various gods from the region of Judea, the Galilee, and Syria, as well as of the Jewish god, with Dionysos. This paved the way for a syncretic reverence of Dionysos and a number of Oriental divinities among whom Christ himself would soon be included.

During Roman times and in Late Antique Egypt in particular, one of the gods most commonly assimilated to Christ, both in iconography and in literary sources, was Dionysos. He was identified as martyred fertility god and hence a prototype of Christ. Both Dionysos and Christ, born of a divine father and a mortal mother, reveal themselves in epiphanies and express their divine powers on or through water, wine and the vine. Both bring liberation i.e. salvation to their followers, be it the apostles or the bacchants. Christ's miracle of transforming water into wine at the marriage at Cana in Galilee is a moment of public revelation of the power and the glory of the Logos incarnate. Transforming water into wine was also of crucial importance in the epiphany of Dionysos and in the process of securing his triumph.<sup>13</sup> Equating blood with wine is also a common trait shared by the Dionysiac cult and the Christian Eucharistic symbolism. Wine is implicitly Dionysos' blood both in the Orphic myth of Zagreus and in the metaphor of omophagy in Euripides *Bacchae*. Christ, as he himself states in the New Testament, is the true vine, thus making the patently recognizable allusion to Dionysos as the false.<sup>14</sup>

In the second century AD, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr wrote that demons, trying to deceive and seduce the unwary, mimicked the Old Testament prophets by having Dionysos fulfill that which was prophesied of Christ.<sup>15</sup> For Dionysos, like Christ, was killed and returned to life and both Christ and Dionysos were attributed with miraculous healings as a distinctive mark.<sup>16</sup> Hence the early Christian monuments, in Egypt in particular, especially sarcophagi and funerary textiles associated with death and resurrection, often employed references to Dionysos.<sup>17</sup>

The complexity of Dionysiac imagery and his iconography in both the visual arts and literature in the world of Late Antiquity, and especially in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, is best exemplified by and understood through the writings of Nonnos of Panopolis (Akhmim). His *Dionysiaca* collects and renders all episodes of the god's life, from circumstances preceding his birth, through his expedition to India, to the final apotheosis. It is, indeed, a *Summa Dionysiaca*, the most notable attempt in all Greek literature of creating an all-encompassing biography of Dionysos. This poem is written in Greek

<sup>13</sup> Hernandez de la Fuente, *Parallels between Dionysos and Christ in Late Antiquity*, 467, with sources and bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 467–468, with sources.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

<sup>16</sup> For a list of miraculous healings performed by Dionysos, as well as other protagonists of *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos of Panopolis, v. *ibid.*, 473–477.

<sup>17</sup> T. K. Thomas, *Late Antique Egyptian funerary sculpture. Images of this world and the next*, Princeton 2000, *passim*, especially 83.

hexameters, the quintessential meter of epic, exemplified above all by the Iliad, which Nonnus sought to emulate or even surpass. The same poet wrote a *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*. He was a Christian writing poetry inspired by both Hellenistic mythology and the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as recent scholarship has shown, in the context of cultural and religious syncretism of Late Antique Egypt in which Christianity was becoming predominant, Nonnus sought to model the character of Dionysos upon the biographic-mythical pattern of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

This complexity is certainly evident in textiles. In Akhmim, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, one of the bodies was laid to

<sup>18</sup> D. Hernandez de la Fuente, *Bakkhos Anax. Un estudio sobre Nonno de Panópolis*, Madrid 2008, with extensive bibliography. The authorship of his *Paraphrase* is still an open question, see, for example, G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Ann Arbor 1990, 41–42.

<sup>19</sup> Hernandez de la Fuente, *Parallels between Dionysos and Christ in Late Antiquity*, 484.

eternal rest dressed in a silk tunic displaying scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. A fine wall hanging decorated with Dionysiac themes, reused as a shroud, was wrapped around the body. The fine fabric of both pieces of textile was most representative of the status and affluence of the deceased whose religious affiliation is difficult to discern.<sup>20</sup> Textiles from Egypt, such as the examples from the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade presented in this text, are always conducive to as well as instructive in questions related to cultural and religious syncretism of Late Antiquity.

<sup>20</sup> E. R. O'Connell, *Representation and self-presentation in Late Antique Egypt. 'Coptic' textiles in the British Museum*, in: *Textiles as cultural expressions. Proceedings of the Textile Society of America 11th Biennial Symposium*, September 24–27, 2008, ed. A. Svenson Perlman, Earlesville 2009.

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## Белешка о две необјављене коптске тканине из Београда

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У овом тексту представљена су два досад непубликована примерка из збирке коптских тканина која се чува у Музеју примењене уметности у Београду. Оба су првобитно била део одевних предмета, туника, употребљених у фунерарне сврхе. На оба примерка, а нарочито на медаљону, препознају се мотиви везани за култ и прослављање бога Диониса: Пан, менаде, нимфе, дивље звери (лавови или лавице и леопарди, тј. пантери), али и зечеви и патке, као и вреже и лозе, те други флорални мотиви. Уз то, на медаљону се јасно препознаје мотив такозваног коптског коњаника. Ови мотиви су типични за визуелну културу позне антике, а нарочито у Египту, и представљају традицију класичне антике која се реконтекстуализује у окружењу и околностима културног и верског синкретизма типичног за ову епоху и подручје. Будући да у овом периоду, а посебно у Египту, долази до повлачења паралела и извесног стапања култа Диониса, као бога који доноси ослобођење, исцељење и спасење и доживљава

тријумф и апотеозу, са хришћанском вером у Христа као Сина Божијег и Спаситеља, фунерарна уметност, нарочито текстил, тј. одећа и делови кућних застора и тканих украса у које су тела била умотавана при сахрањивању често су носили дионисијачке теме које су могле да функционишу како у паганском тако и у хришћанском контексту. О оваквом стапању, па чак и обликовању лика бога Диониса у оновременој поезији према моделу самог Христа, најбоље сведочи хексаметарска поема *Диниосијака*, дело Нона из Панополиса, данашњег Ахмима, једног од локалитета са којег потиче највећи број данас познатих примерака коптских тканина. Два таква примерка, досад непозната научној јавности и потпуно недокументована кад је у питању место настанка и датовање, налазе се у Музеју примењене уметности у Београду. Оквирно би се, поређењем са, на пример, туником са дионисијачким сценама из Метрополитен музеја у Њујорку, могли датовати у VI или VII век.