

Kristin H. South, Joyce Y. Smith, Giovanni Tata and Charles Wifred Griggs

“Face bundles” in early Christian burials from the Fayum, Egypt

The Ptolemaic to late Byzantine cemetery of Fag el-Gamous is situated on the eastern edge of the Fayum, about 100 km south of Cairo, Egypt. It lies just past the modern limits of irrigation and extends eastward into the desert. Fag el-Gamous has been systematically excavated by Brigham Young University, USA, since 1981, with a resulting plethora of textile finds. The burials are packed into shafts dug directly into the hard sandy substratum, often with many layers of burials within the same shaft. These shafts consistently lie on an east-west axis, varying slightly in keeping with expected seasonal variations in solar alignment. The oldest burials have a westward-facing orientation, but after one or at most two layers of such burials, the higher (later) burials switch to an eastward-facing orientation. We believe that these burials belong to a Christian population, based on associated objects and burial patterns (Griggs 1988). Small crosses appear intermittently, either on necklaces, as stand-alone finds, or woven into the textiles. We estimate the dates for the Christian portion of this cemetery to fall within the range of AD 200-600.

The burials employ only textile wrappings with no wooden or stone sarcophagi (Fig. 1a); nevertheless, they often mimic the shape of earlier Egyptian sarcophagi by the addition of extra padding material to create an exaggerated height at the head and foot areas (Fig. 1b).



Fig. 1a. Mummies 2006-SE 15, 16, and 17



Fig. 1b. Mummy 2000-SE 25

This created shape must be intentional and may serve in part to emphasize the human shape of the wrapped body: without additions at head and feet, the prone body resembles nothing more than a puffed cylinder. The superstructure over the foot area is often composed of the fringes and ends of the sheets used to wrap the body; they are folded up and over the feet. Sometimes additional

sheets are folded and placed directly over the feet as additional padding¹.

The head area, the focus of this article, can be built up using various materials. Typically, these materials include the following:

- 1) Tunics or plain sheets of linen folded over the face.
- 2) Small wads of cloth, reeds, flax tow and/or wool roving.
- 3) Rectangles of linen folded into strips and supported in place by smaller folds or wads of linen.

The first and second types of face padding are frequently but not consistently present. The third, in contrast, occurs on almost every head-west burial that is well-preserved enough to display it. This includes burials of men and women, adults and children.

In the 2009 season of excavation, 25 burials definitely included these “face bundles,” while two others may have had one. Thirty-nine additional burials were incompletely preserved in the head and face area, making it impossible to determine if a face bundle was originally present. Only one burial with the head area intact did not include a face bundle (NE 2), and the photographs of this burial indicate that much of the body was indeed skeletalized, suggesting that incomplete preservation may have been a factor in the face bundle’s absence. Thus, in every case where it could be stated definitively, a face bundle was present. In cases where a face bundle was not found, its absence could be explained in almost every instance by

the preservation index of the burial. Some variation in the contents of these face bundles occurs, but the general pattern is unmistakable. They usually consist of linen strips laid over the face area and many include a linen twist as the furthest layer from the face. They are made of torn strips of linen (no wool and very rarely any color) even on burials that otherwise include brightly colored textiles. The most common weaves are 1/2 and 2/2 basket weave. The strips are folded 3-6 cm wide and doubled lengthwise to make the strips 13-20 cm long. When a deliberately prepared twist of linen is present, it always comes as the outermost layer (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Prepared twist of linen (2005-SW 26)

The twist is tight and secure, often with visible stitching to hold it in place. The number of layers below the twist (*i.e.* between the twist and the face) can vary but usually amount to a depth of around 10 cm.

These face bundle finds differ from hanks of linen thread in that they are torn strips that have been twisted into shape after weaving rather than plain unwoven linen thread. When thread and other unspun fibre does appear in the head superstructure, it functions as padding in a smaller area. A rare exception, found in 2005 (SW 19) was a twist made of non-woven palm fibre (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. A twist made of non-woven palm fibre (2005-SW 19)

Of the 2009 finds, twelve of the twenty-five with face burials have been studied. Six included only folded strips of linen with no twist. Three included a twist turned in the Z-direction, and two included S-direction twists. The final number of this twelve contained a cylinder of cloth, in the position of a twist, rolled and stitched to keep its shape (Fig. 4). This type of find is not typical. Another unusual find, unique to this year's excavations, was a burial (NE 10) that included two twists instead of one (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. A burial with two twists instead of one (2009-NE 10)

With such a small sample, we prefer not to make generalizations about the frequency of each of these inclusions (no twist, s-twist, and z-twist), but we do find it striking that the two s-twist burials were found close to each other at the greatest depths (150 and 185 cm) of any of the face bundle burials studied so far. One of these burials (NE 49) had a 4th century AD potsherd associated



Fig. 5. A cylinder of cloth (2009-NE 36)

with the burial. Each of the other types of face bundles were scattered throughout the square and at the full range of depths. Of the twelve burials with face bundles, two were child burials; both of these burials had folded strips but no twist. No face bundles have

ever been found on a head-east burial. The inclusion of the face bundle can create the impression of a grotesque, non-naturalistic shape as one views the wrapped mummy; this may be the result of over-zealousness on the part of the preparer, if indeed the purpose of the face bundle is as a cosmetic addition designed to make the mummy appear lifelike. Alternatively, the contents of the face bundle may have served another, more symbolic purpose. There are very few

indications that any of these burials went through the formerly requisite process of mummification². These burials are somewhat later than the portrait mummies found in the Fayum (see McGhee in this issue), including at least one from an unrecorded part of this cemetery, excavated in 1901 by Grenfell and Hunt (Bierbrier 1997, 17). The pointed, almost triangular shape created by the face bundles, however, makes it clear that a flat portrait would not have fit over them and thus we conclude that the population represented by this section of the cemetery (separate in time or space or both from the portrait mummies) had no expectation of portrait inclusion in their burials. Likewise, there are no signs of masks or cartonnage in these Christian burials, although, like the mummy portraits, that element has been found in a few of the earlier Roman burials at this site.

A cursory search through studies of burials from this period has not resulted in any direct parallels, although there are some tantalizing hints. Beatrice Huber's careful recent examination of a 4th to 6th century AD Christian burial from Kom el-Ahmar/Sharuna, located in the Nile Valley about 100 km south of Fag el-Gamous, reveals an external parallel: the area over the face is built up into a pointed, triangular shape, but the contents of the face bundle differ greatly. Huber describes a superstructure of seemingly randomly placed wads of linen and palm sticks that together create the shape needed for the external decoration of the head portion of the mummy (2006, 65-67; 2007, 41-45). She mentions one internal layer that was "folded several times" and fitted around the head (2006, 67), but this description does not sound like an exact match to the numerous layers of folded linen found on the burials at Fag el-Gamus.

Ulrike Horak's article summarizing burial practices in the early centuries of our era (1995, 39-71) also comments generally that superstructures occur over the face and feet in some burials; in most cases, though, their contents include bunches of plant material that she sees as having a protective function. The finds from Qarara (Horak 1995, 65) do correspond to those from Fag el-Gamus on the surface. They have a similar triangular shape over the head and another structure over the feet. The ribbon bindings are brightly colored in red, black, and undyed linen. The internal structures at Qarara, however, are not described as similar to the rectangles and twists of linen that we see at Fag el-Gamus, even though the Qarara burials, dating to the fifth to seventh centuries, overlap with the most recent of the Fag el-Gamus burials.

The community at Kellis in Dakhleh Oasis was geographically separate from the Fayum, but its exact chronological parallel makes it an important comparison population. Although both pagan and early Christian burials have been found and studied there (Bowen 2003), no similar face bundles have been found in either population (Bowen, personal communication).

The 6th to 7th century AD burials at the monastery of Epiphanius provide a possible but somewhat late paral-

lel. For the well-preserved burial in Grave 7, I repeat Winlock's (1926, p. 48) own description: "over the face were thin pillows of folded cloth between the [four] different layers [of sheets used to wrap the body]." How these "pillows" exactly appeared is unstated, but these words certainly could stand in for a description of the pieces at Fag el-Gamous. The pieces at our cemetery, however, are not interleaved between full sheets that cover the body but rather lie together over one of the layers closest to the body.

The photographs of the Theban monk from Grave 7, shown in Plate XII of Winlock and Crum (1926), show five stages of unwrapping the burial. A spiral bump over the face does appear to be a positive match to the Fag el-Gamous burials, but the photography does not show the "thin pillows of folded cloth" that are removed from this area. As the photographs proceed from left (fully wrapped) to right (the skeleton), it becomes apparent that the appearance of a twisted column comes at least in part from one sheet tucked across the front much like the French twist hairstyle (in the second photograph from the left), and in a lower layer from the end of one of the sheets having been twisted together and aligned down the middle of the face, then tucked in under a rope around the neck to hold it in place (the fourth photograph from the left). The exact alignment of the twist down the middle of the face may be entirely coincidental, but it does make us wonder if it intentionally evokes an earlier face bundle practice.

In the nearly thirty years of excavation at Fag el-Gamous, hundreds of burials have been exhumed. A large percentage of well preserved head-west burials includes face bundles, most of which follow the formal description given above, with a stack of folded linen placed over the face area and often followed by a twist of linen. As the two exceptions from this year's excavations show, there can be interesting variations from this pattern.

We do not assume that face bundles are unique to the necropolis of Fag el-Gamous, but they seem not to have been found or noted in many of the other burial sites of the same period in Egypt. Although this study has by no means been exhaustive, it does suggest that these finds are unusual. It is our hope that more information about these curious finds will emerge with future work, both at our site and at others throughout Egypt.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, the second layer of linen on the burial described in K. South (forthcoming).

² Only two burials in the 2009 season were authentically mummified (NE 4 and NE 57); the remainder were naturally desiccated after burial.

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