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Qasr Ibrim Study Season 2009

Qasr Ibrim in (Egyptian) Lower Nubia, once an acropolis but now an island in Lake Nasser, has more or less unbroken occupation from the 11th century BC to the 19th century AD. At first glance the site appears geographically isolated, but in fact it lies on an important north-south artery along the Nile. For much of its history, moreover, Qasr Ibrim found itself at the watershed between two major centres of power and cultural dynamism to North and South, a feature strongly reflected in its archaeological repertoire. Thanks to favourable climatic conditions many thousands of textile fragments survive at the site. Recording such a mass of archaeological textile without a precise research agenda could be a frustrating exercise. The philosopher-archaeologist R.G. Collingwood warned archaeologists not just to dig – but to set themselves questions and to dig for the answers. This advice applies equally to textile archaeology.

Two leading questions were set for the 2009 study season (5-27th February) on textiles from the excavations of 1990, 1992 and 1998 at Qasr Ibrim, now stored in the Supreme Council of Antiquities' depot at Shellal, Aswan.

The first concerned the character of the textile repertoire at Qasr Ibrim after c. AD 350. Our previous research (ATN 43, 16-19; 44, 16-18; 46, 3-6) had shed light on local textile manufacture in the Meroitic period (1st century AD to c. AD 350) and noted its dependence on cotton; but the decline of stable political authority in Lower Nubia in the 4th century AD and its replacement by more fluid conditions associated with nomadic peoples, the Blemmyes and Nobadae, in the Post-Meroitic or 'X-Group' phase might be expected to have affected the agricultural regime and thus the output of spinners and weavers reliant upon it. Was there continuity or discontinuity at the Meroitic/'X-Group' interface?

The second question was prompted by a last-minute visit to Bolton Museum, now the principal repository for the selected textiles brought to Britain by earlier excavators at Qasr Ibrim. Boxes there labelled 'X-Group' by Elisabeth Crowfoot and Nettie Adams contain a remarkable collection of bright wool tapestries, a striking contrast to the cotton monoculture of the Meroitic. When did such fine wool cloth appear at

Qasr Ibrim?

Closer scrutiny of the chronology of the archaeological contexts in which the textiles on which we worked in previous seasons were found suggests strongly that they were of Late Meroitic date (c. AD 200-350) (ATN 43, 16-19; 44, 16-18; 46, 3-6). That may explain why we encountered virtually no overtly 'Roman' textiles: the Roman military garrison had left the site two centuries earlier, and the political border of Roman Egypt was 250 km away.

Among the textiles from Early Meroitic deposits which we examined in 2009 were several distinctive union fabrics (1328-1334), weft-faced tabbies (two with 'purple' wool inserts (1300, 1331)) woven on strong s-spun (often over-spun) cotton warp with a paler weak s-spun wool weft. As Elisabeth Crowfoot once suggested, they may represent a stage in the process whereby local cotton weavers adopted some of the structural features, such as reinforced selvedges, typical of Mediterranean wool fabrics.

First impressions suggested that after c. AD 350 the resident population of Qasr Ibrim continued to practice the same textile technology as in the past, despite the changed political environment and possibly reduced population. Cotton remained almost the sole fibre in use, and medium to medium-fine half-basket weaves (warp singles, weft pairs) were exceptionally common. In the Late Meroitic flax was confined to the (spliced) fringe strands in tassels: after AD 350 cotton began to take over that role. Fewer fragments of elaborate Meroitic openwork fringes occurred; but in two examples (1500, 1519) the fringe was preceded by a tapestry-woven band in blue or 'purple', a feature not seen by us in the Meroitic. The familiar blue-piped Meroitic hems had disappeared, along with the blue embroidered 'sun-burst' flowers (ATN 43, 17 Fig.13). Fashion in 'X-Group' times under nomad influence may have been more drab than in the past.

Cotton weavers in Lower Nubia depended on the warp-weighted loom (ATN 43, 19; 44, 17). Finds of flat-woven starting borders (typically linked to the warp-weighted loom in Europe) were commoner in the 'X-Group' period than the Meroitic, though that may be an accident of survival. The borders were constructed on 5 or 6 stout plied warp-threads, and their sheds contained a pair of the main web's warp-



Fig. 1. QI90 1534: scrap of selvedge on wool textile with 'bunch-of-flower' inserts from Qasr Ibrim (© P. J. Rose).

to-be. They were associated with various types of reinforced selvedge. Finds of ovoid mud loom-weights with a single suspension hole were again commoner than in the Meroitic. However, a single early 'X-Group' example of a simple twined-cord starting border in cotton was recorded (1384): the Mediterranean two-beam loom may also have been known. There is no dilution of cotton's pre-eminence at Qasr Ibrim before c. AD 550, an horizon based on pottery evidence which we took as our cut-off point for the detailed recording of every textile in a particular layer. We await Nettie Adams' report on the material from later deposits (see Adams 1986). It is argued that in the century before AD 550 cultural influence from Upper Egypt was beginning to be felt, not least in the progressive penetration of Christianity into Nubia. That influence may be reflected in the appearance at Qasr Ibrim for the first time on a significant scale of fine wool fabrics, initially presumably imports. While wool textiles, particularly some with decorative features, have been published from graves upstream of Qasr Ibrim which are dated (it is said) to the Meroitic and/or 'X-Group' periods (Bergman 1975; Williams and Mayer Thurman 1979; Maik 2007), there may be a discrepancy between contemporary assemblages from funerary contexts and those from

settlement sites, as is the case in Roman Egypt. Hence the first occurrence of fine wool textiles in quantity at a settlement like Qasr Ibrim may be an event worthy of comment.

In reviewing the textiles from Kulubnarti (c. AD 600-850) Nettie Adams has already drawn attention to some narrow wool fabrics distinguished by a series of small tapestry-woven 'bunch-of-flowers' motifs set at intervals opposite one another along both selvedges (Adams 1999, 55, 68, figs 9-10). Ingrid Bergman discussed the same phenomenon on wool fabrics from graves in Lower Nubia which need not be much earlier in date (Bergman 1975, 48-49, fig. 52 B1A). At Qasr Ibrim we have recorded two examples (1534, 1724) dated to the Early Christian period (AD 550-750/800) (Fig. 1). These scarf-like items (15 cm to over 80 cm wide, selvedge to selvedge: Bergman 1975, 48) may be a new fashion trend. They are quite different in character and quality from a group of coarser wool tabbies woven from a variety of natural brown yarns (e.g. 1708), occasional scraps of which have been noted back into Early Meroitic times.

While the small scraps of textile recovered from well-stratified and dated layers during relatively small-scale excavations since 1990 have their own statistical value, they are a visual disappointment when compared to the larger, better preserved, more decorative pieces recovered in the earlier excavations. Nonetheless, one item studied in 2009 (QI98 1341) is of particular interest. It is a tiny complete garment (70% complete at any rate), a sort of 'tabard' for a small child and Early Meroitic in date (c. AD 100-200) (Fig. 2). It is of undyed cotton in tabby weave, measuring 71cm long overall (warpways) by 43 cm wide (weft-



Fig. 2. QI98 1341: cotton 'tabard' from Qasr Ibrim (© P. J. Rose).

ways). The warp at both ends is twisted into fringes and converted into small bobbles wrapped with blue yarn. In the centre of the 'tabard' the warp is cut to make a neck slit, the raw edges hemmed and decorated with blue piping. The garment would be about 33 cm long when worn, and the neck hole, which shows signs of wear and strain, has a circumference of 49 cm, the right size to slip over the head of a toddler of about 1-2 years.

2009 was the last of our four study seasons on Qasr Ibrim textiles in Aswan, but much material in the SCA depot remains unrecorded. Our original agenda was inter alia to explore the possible source of some of the cottons at Berenike (ATN 28, 22-23; 31, 18-20; 33, 17-19), and that we have hopefully achieved. At the same time light has been shed on the whole 'cotton culture' of Lower Nubia and its possible extension northwards into Egypt. Solving the broader contextual problems, however, which our research has thrown up is a different exercise!

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