



Chris Verhecken-Lammens

Piecing together a Roman linen tunic

Roman tunics were selected from various collections for the investigation in the Study Group (Colour and Dating) of the European Dress-ID project (see De Moor *et al.* in this issue). Among them is half of a tunic (ACO. Tx. 2477) from the Errera collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Up until now this object was in storage because of its very fragile condition. In the past the tunic seams were loosened, resulting in a long flat piece of linen fabric. The original shape is hence lost, but a photo in the catalogue (Errera 1916, cat. 48) shows half of a tunic cut from neck slit to the hem. This is rather unusual and reminded me of two half-tunics at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. I have analysed these tunics and one of the features that caught my attention was the way they were cut. The two tunics were cut not along the shoulder line but vertically leaving a right or left part of the tunic (Pritchard 2006, 77-78 fig. 4.25(a) inv. T.1994.130, and fig. 4.26(a) inv. T.1994.131). Because of the special shape, the suspicion arose that one of the tunics of Manchester could be the matching part of the one in Brussels. Since tunics Manchester T.1994.131 and Brussels ACO. Tx. 2477 both have the same special features, we were able to bring the two parts together virtually (Fig. 1).

Description of the tunic (Manchester T.1994.131 and Brussels ACO. Tx. 2477)

Originally the tunic was 128 cm high and 92 cm wide and was woven in three parts. The loom width of the fabric is 88 cm. Warp and weft are s-spun, unusually fine, glossy linen threads. The balanced tabby weave has 20-22 warp threads and 22-24 weft threads per cm with a simple selvedge. The decorations consist of narrow (0.5 cm) clavi ending above the waist tuck, double sleeve bands, shoulder medallions (5 x 5.5 cm diam) and 4 small medallions (1.7 x 2.2 cm diam) on the hem. To insert the tapestry weave, the warp threads were grouped to weave an extended tabby 2/3 (sleeve bands) or 2/4 and 2/3 (shoulder medallion: Fig. 2) with crossed and dropped threads. The weft, dyed with mollusc purple (see De Moor *et al.* in this issue), is a single (z-spun in sleeve bands) or

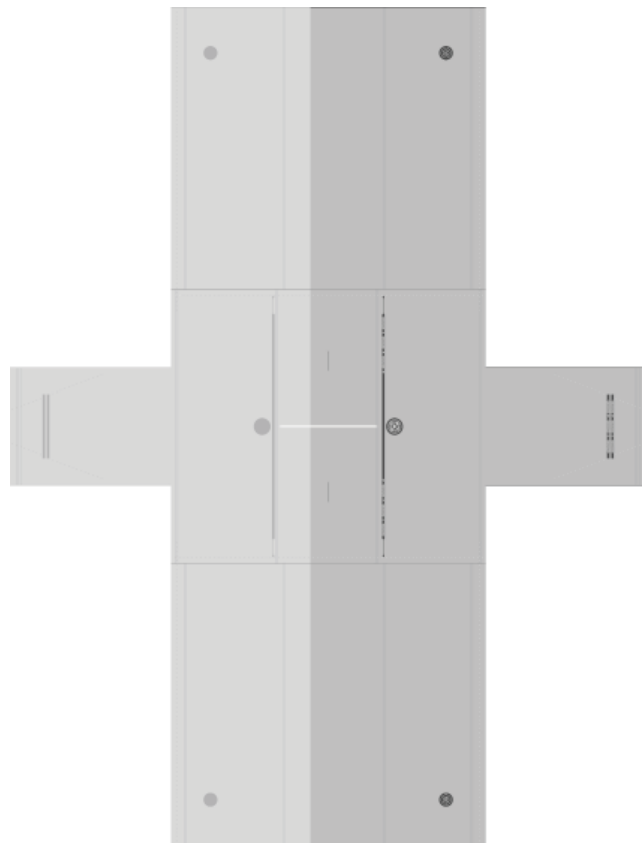


Fig. 1. Drawing of the original linen tunic: left side - ACO. Tx. 2477, right side - T.1994.131. ©Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester.

plied thread (Z2s-spun in medallions), and has 56-60 threads/cm. The flying thread brocading is executed with undyed s-spun wool and s-spun linen thread. The patterning is geometric in the medallions (Fig. 2), using woollen threads for the flying thread technique, but linen threads for the central part and the outer circle line. The clavi have a pattern consisting of two interlaced bands in wool, alternating with lozenges in linen. The linen threads are white and are better visible against the dark purple background than the very thin woollen threads.

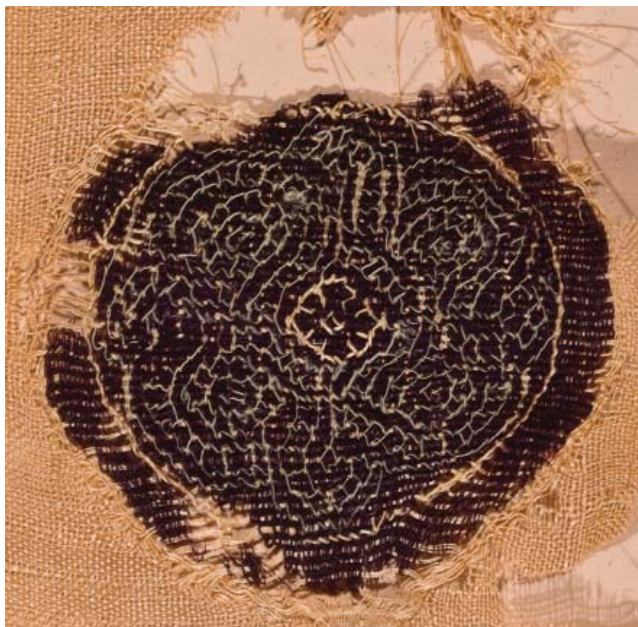


Fig. 2. Shoulder medallion of ACO. Tx. 2477. ©Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Thanks to the remains of weft floats at the back side of the shoulder medallion, we know that the part from Brussels (ACO. Tx. 2477) was woven first. The weaver started with the sleeve 36 cm wide in the central part of the warp. Two lines of self bands mark the wrist. Two sleeve bands 24 cm wide, in tapestry weave, have open warp threads at both sides near the selvedge. This part was intended to be hidden in the tapered seam of the sleeve. The end of the sleeve (44 cm high) is followed by the start of the upper part of the tunic. In the first picks, a strengthening of the underarm was made by a twined weave over 9 cm (4 cm along the sleeve, the rest on the body side). This is a feature typical for woollen tunics but rarely found in linen tunics (see below). In its present condition, this place has darning stitches of thicker linen threads. The side edges are finished by a wrapped interlocking thread. Two self bands (three sheds of tabby with extra two s-spun linen weft, with 6 tabby sheds in between) are woven from selvedge to selvedge at the side. On the shoulder line, in the middle of the fabric, a medallion has been woven followed by the first clavus.

In the central part next to the clavus are selfbands running along the full width of the fabric. Two of them are shorter and end 20 cm at both sides of the shoulder line. They mark the limit of the neck slit (+/- 30 cm). The neck opening is not woven but cut and hemmed with whipped edges, overcast with a linen Z2s-ply yarn, sewn on the edge along the neck slit. This part of the tunic ends a few cm from the centre.

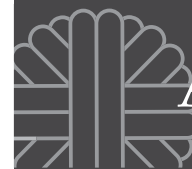
The two lower parts are woven on top of each other on the same 88 cm wide warp. In both parts, two small medallions (c. 2 cm in diameter) are woven along one side of the fabric, near the selvedge of the bottom edge of the tunic. Here too, linen and wool threads are used for the flying thread brocading. Stripes of selfbands in the central part would be regarded as extensions of the clavi. At the waist is a small seam, selvedge to selvedge, joining the upper and lower parts together.

The tunic half Manchester T.1994.131 is the other part of the tunic. It has the same features as the first half, but with a few cm more of the central section with a short red woollen thread in the centre of the tunic below the neck. This part of the tunic still has the original side seams from the lower edge up to the waist tuck. From there, the warp threads of the edges are secured from unravelling by a wrapped, interlocking thread.

Discussion

The tunic part Manchester T.1994.131 has been considered to be from the Byzantine period (Pritchard 2006, 80). This is not surprising because until now linen tunics woven in parts on a small loom have been dated to c. 5th century AD. The balanced tabby ground weave of the tunic, the cut rather than a slit-woven neck opening, as well as the inwoven red threads are all features attributed to this period. An unusual characteristic for linen tunics is the underarm reinforcement. Tunics with similar features are known from other collections:

- 1) Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels: ACO. Tx. 2482, a tunic woven in three parts, has underarm strengthening and tapestry decoration with s and z-spun purple wool.
- 2) Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester: T. 1992.5, a child's linen tunic with underarm strengthening, red thread marks but applied decorations.
- 3) Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester: T. 1994.130, a tunic woven in one piece, balanced tabby weave, starting border at the side, underarm strengthening, red thread marks, purple z-spun wool and wool and linen threads for the flying thread brocading.
- 4) Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 631-1886, a tunic woven in one piece, with underarm strengthening, red thread marks and purple z-spun wool.
- 5) Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 530B.1974, a tunic woven in one piece, underarm strengthening, red marks and



- 6) purple z-spun wool.
- 7) Katoen Natie, Antwerp: of the 8 the complete linen tunics only 1 has underarm strengthening (inv. 1143) and red thread marks on the shoulder line.

Tunic part Brussels ACO. Tx. 2477 was selected for the dating and dye analysis. Although already in 1916 Isabella Errera dated it to the 3rd-5th century AD (Errera 1916, 19-20 cat. 49) the fragmentary tunic has been registered as part of the textiles from the tomb of Colluthos and his wife, dated on the basis of papyri to the middle of the 5th century AD. Gayet's description, both in his exhibition catalogue (Gayet 1900, 9) and his auction catalogue (Gayet 1901, 11) is rather vague, but it is possible that we may identify our tunic with the one Gayet describes as following: "D'autres suaires, à médaillons foliacés, violets avec esquisse nervée blanche, complètent l'ensemble. Pour Cécilia (sic), la tunique est de mousseline de lin à ornements bleus. La robe, de fine laine jaune, porte un décor à peu près semblable, petits médaillons posés sur les épaules et le bas de la jupe, enfermant des entrelacs, profilés en blanc". The tunic is indeed woven in very fine linen which at first was thought to be wool, also by us, because of its texture and colour.

Conclusions

The special shape of the half-tunics in Brussels (ACO. Tx. 2477) and in Manchester (T.1994.131) was the first hint to link them together. Indeed, the technical features proved that the two parts originally belonged to the same tunic. The Brussels part (ACO. Tx. 2477) has been dated to the Roman period (see De Moor *et al.* in this issue). This indicates that technical features such as the balanced tabby weave, the cut neck slit and the in-woven red threads, until now regarded to be of the Byzantine period, were already applied in Roman times. The Manchester half-tunic (T.1994.131) has found its counter-part in Brussels (ACO. Tx 2477). But where is the other part of the second Manchester half-tunic (T.1994.130)?

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Frances Pritchard who invited me to study the tunics at the Whitworth Gallery in 1997. My sincere thanks to Mieke Van Raemdonck, curator of "Islam and Christian Art from the East", RMAH, Brussels, for her support and for the information on the history of the garment.

c.verheck.lam@telenet.be

Bibliography

Errera, I. (1916) *Collection d'Anciennes Étoffes Égyptiennes*. Bruxelles.

Gayet, A. (1900) *Notice relative aux objets recueillis à Antinoë pendant les fouilles exécutées en 1899-1900 et exposés au Musée Guimet du 12 décembre 1900 au 12 janvier 1901*. Paris.

Gayet, A. (1901) *Antiquités égyptiennes. Nécropole pharaonique. Nécropole romaine, vente aux enchères publiques, Musée Guimet, 17 Juin 1901*. Paris.

Pritchard, F. (2006) *Clothing Culture: Dress in Egypt in the First Millennium AD*. Manchester.