

Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi

Threads and reused textiles as decorative items in Deir el-Medina, Egypt

Abstract

Yarns and textiles can be used and reused for multiple purposes other than as clothing and household furnishing. In this paper, four different objects from the village of Deir el-Medina (Egypt) are examined. Some of them were purposely made, while others were reused strips of textiles. All of them share an evident trait, which is their decorative function. Through a detailed analysis of these unusual artefacts, it will be possible to shed light on some little known aspects of ornaments in Deir el-Medina.

Keywords: Egypt, Deir el-Medina, threads, fringes, ornaments

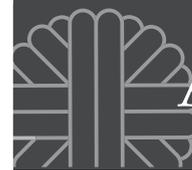
Introduction

The small village of Deir el-Medina is located on the west bank of the Nile opposite Thebes, the ancient capital of New Kingdom Egypt (1550–1070 BCE). It used to be occupied by a small group of craftsmen, administrators, and their families, whose purpose was to build and decorate the royal tombs in the nearby Valley of the Kings. Hundreds of spinning tools have been discovered in Deir el-Medina since the beginning of the 20th century by the Italian and French excavations (Bruyère 1933, 6–7; Moiso 2016, 80–87; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018).

The first impression given by these numerous textile tools is that a flourishing textile production industry was located on the site, although this is not attested in the written sources, where only a few mentions can be found (Toivari-Viitala 2001, 234). While these written sources offer little detail on who was producing textiles or how it was done, they are nonetheless rich in information that presents textiles as valuable goods for exchange, and their frequent mention as part of wages or for barter has been used to demonstrate their prices (Janssen 1975). However, these sources do not offer any description of the items, and thus identifying a term for an object is often difficult.

Other information can be inferred from the iconography, but even iconographic sources give only a partial picture. The available sources are mostly funerary stelae, tomb decorations or funerary/religious statues. Although in many cases these match the extant archaeological findings, they are limited to a specific range of outfits, linked to ritualistic purposes or conventional rules (Baines 2007, 303–304; Bazin Rizzo 2017, 85–91), which may not represent the full variety of textiles used in daily life within the village. It is not possible, therefore, to fully understand which types of textiles were present in Deir el-Medina without analysing the preserved items.

Thanks to the arid conditions in the village, some textiles have been preserved. Unfortunately, most of these come from funerary contexts, as is the case with the vast majority of textiles from Pharaonic Egypt. In most cases, they are funerary shrouds and mummy bandages, with a few exceptions of tunics and loincloths, for example from the tomb of Kha (Schiaparelli [1927] 2007, 92–100). Almost no textiles have been fully published, with only summary information in the publications of the excavation reports (Schiaparelli [1927] 2007, 92–100; Bruyère 1937, 44, 58–61, 137–138), and a few isolated items because of their special status (Donadoni Roveri 1987,



93, 95; Hallmann 2017, 92–94). All these reasons make a compelling argument for studying the textiles from Deir el-Medina, not only the most rich or beautiful pieces, but also those that seem to have belonged to ordinary people.

The Marie Curie EgYarn project studies different items made of thread in New Kingdom Egypt, including textiles but also fishing nets, small strings, and decorative objects, demonstrating that not all yarns were transformed into textiles. The aim of the project is to create a dialogue between the numerous spinning tools found in Deir el-Medina (and Gurob) and the different types of thread objects. During the selection of the corpus for the project, which consists mostly of four groups (textiles, balls of yarn, fishing nets, and strings), some objects appeared different to all the others and did not fit within any of the general categories mentioned.

This contribution presents four items, each unique in the corpus, which might not directly or entirely be ascribed to the aforementioned categories, but which were nonetheless made of thread. They seem to share a common trait of conveying a decorative rather than functional meaning. The aim of this paper is to offer an in-depth analysis of each unusual item and to explore their possible usage and meaning.

Since the author has not yet found comparable pieces in New Kingdom Egypt, the hope is that this paper might form the start of a quest into unpublished collections, and that more unusual objects might come to light.

Materials and methods

Each item will feature in a discussion of its possible use and correlation with other objects, in order to show the similarity of the techniques, and see whether this might offer some clues as to their function. They will also be discussed as a group of decorative items, trying to find their place in Deir el-Medina and, more generally, in the New Kingdom tradition. All of them were found in Deir el-Medina and are stored in the collections of the Louvre Museum in Paris, France and the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy.

Each object has been analysed following the basic methodology for textile studies carried out in textile archaeology (for example Price and Gleba 2012, 2). Each item has been recorded in a specifically designed database, which records context and excavation information, technical features, decoration, and use (or reuse). The technical features studied include dimensions, construction, weave, thread count (where relevant), yarn details and construction (splicing), and twist angle, depending on the condition of

preservation. Objects have been photographed for study purposes and analysed with the help of a USB microscope (Dino-lite AM7515MZT).

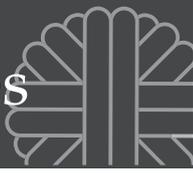
Descriptions

Band with decorative braids (Louvre E 14479)

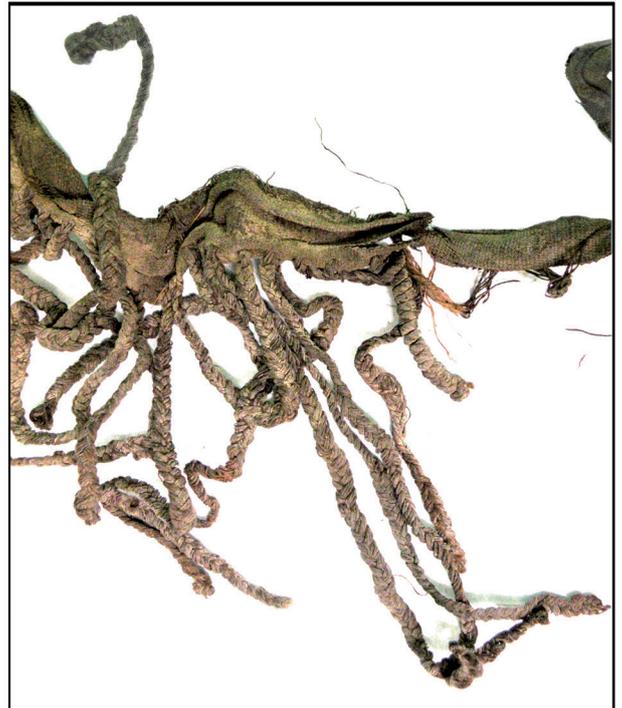
This object is made up of two strips of textiles knotted together and decorated with braids (fig. 1). It was found in Deir el-Medina in the Eastern Cemetery, where burials from the first part of the 18th dynasty were located. It was discovered in Tomb 1382, and dates to the reign of Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BCE) (Bruyère 1937, 184–185). It was placed inside a basket as a grave good, apparently together with other unknown textiles. Despite the basket being well preserved, this piece is fairly poor. It is dirty, stiff, and rather fragile. Textiles from Deir el-Medina which were in direct contact with a body or found lying in the ground with no protection are in similar conditions, although the piece does not seem to be congruent with being stored in a basket (with no body in it). The basket contained a handwritten note left by the excavator, through which it was possible to connect it to its place of discovery. The excavation report and diary mention the basket, but



Fig. 1: E 14479, Louvre Museum in Paris, France (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)



a



b



c



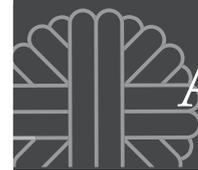
d

Fig. 2: Details of E 14479: a – large braids at one extremity; b – small braids along one of the two strips; c – highly twisted element at the beginning of braids; and d – braids inserted into the strip (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

do not contain any reference to this piece of textile in particular. The possibility that it came from elsewhere in the tomb, and that it was added to this basket by the excavators, must therefore be considered.

As mentioned, this piece of textile is made up of two strips of a tabby-woven fabric knotted together. It measures 88 cm in length and 4 cm in width. The weave is a warp-faced tabby with a count of 22 to 23

warp threads and 10 weft threads per cm. One strip is 48 cm long before the knot, and the other part is 35 cm long before the knot. Originally, the two strips might have formed a single piece that was joined where they are now broken, but this is impossible to say with certainty. One side of the strips has a plain selvedge, while the other presents a raw edge resulting from a tear in the warp direction. It is interesting to note that



the part which is knotted is also torn, so the knot was made after the rest of the textile had been sectioned off. Starting and finishing borders are not present, indicating that the strip was originally longer than its current size. The fibre has not been analysed, but it is a plant fibre, probably flax.

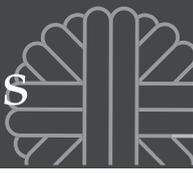
Both strips are decorated by the insertion of 22 small braids (fig. 2b, d), but the longest strip also has three large braids and an additional, thinner braid at its end (fig. 2a). Each braid is closed by a knot. The braids vary in thickness (ranging between 5.3 and 6.8 mm). Both strips show a similar arrangement of the braids: the first element after the knot is not an actual braid but a cord forming a tight helix with a Z direction, made of multiple yarns twisted in S direction, while the single (?) yarns are s-twisted (fig. 2c). On the other side of the textile, a similar, although thinner, Z-twisted cord is positioned. The braids are inserted

in the textile alongside the selvedge. The wider braids are 20 cm long, while the thinner ones measure 17.5 cm on average.

Although simple in its conception, construction and materials, this decoration appears consistent and well-structured. It is not clear what this item's function was, nor whether the braids were inserted before the fabric was torn (and reused to preserve their decorative value) or if they were inserted into a strip of textile to create a belt-like item. Its current measurements would be consistent with its use as a belt, or as a decoration for items such as vases, baskets etc. It was not used as wrapping material for the mummy because, as mentioned earlier, it was found in a basket (assuming that this was its primary context). Whatever its original purpose and shape was, its final appearance is that which we see today.



Fig. 3: S. 7639, Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)



Band with decorative fringes (Museo Egizio S. 7639)
This object is characterised by long fringes interwoven on a narrow band (fig. 3). The two short edges appear incomplete, so it is not possible to assess its complete measurements, nor interpret its function with certainty. It was found during Ernesto Schiaparelli's

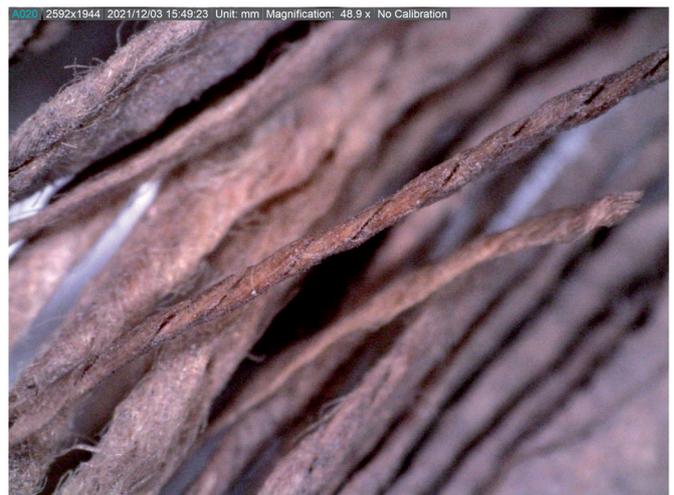
excavations in Deir el-Medina (Del Vesco and Poole 2018), but the precise place of discovery is unknown (as is the case with the other objects from the site in the Museo Egizio). The overall condition of preservation is good, although the material appears extremely stiff and dirty, which



a



b



c

Fig. 4: Details of S. 7639: a – knotted fringe; b – detail of the woven band; and c – detail of the fibres (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

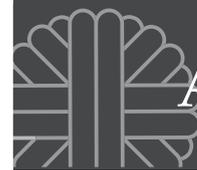


Fig. 5: S. 7799, Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

makes studying the object difficult. The fringes cannot be moved or opened in any way to check the structure underneath.

The piece measures 55 cm in length and a maximum of 9 cm in width, including the fringes. The woven part is a narrow ribbon, with both selvages preserved, and is 1.2 cm wide. The structure of the woven part is rather simple (fig. 4b). It is a warp-faced tabby in which every second weft is supplemented by a group of threads passing from one selvedge almost to the other selvedge. Each group of threads is inserted in the band at its mid-point, while the extremities are left free. At this point, one of the extremities is knotted with the other, passing over one face of the band (fig. 4a). In this way, the woven textile is visible on only one side, while the other side is covered by supplementary weft threads, forming a series of knotted fringes. The insertion of the fringes and the execution of the knots are very consistent, seemingly indicating that covering one side with the fringe was intentional. The thread count is 32 in the warp and 6 to 7 per cm in the weft.

The fringes are made of twisted threads (fig. 4c), although some have opened and lost most of their twist. Each thread is formed by two single threads with no clear twist (spliced roves?), plied together in S direction (S, 2i; notation after Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 58–59). In at least two cases, a third thread is visible, creating a 2-ply yarn cabled with an extra thread. On average, each fringe is made up of five threads; some have up to six threads while others only three, although this variation could be due to the

state of preservation, which led to the unravelling of some of the fringes.

The structure partially resembles that of the weft fringes inserted alongside one of the selvages of large rectangular fabrics (Cortes 2015, 199–218; Durand and Saragoza 2002, 30), which was still fashionable during the New Kingdom (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 123–132; Cortopassi and Dallel 2021, 147, figs. 5–6). In some cases, the border close to a selvedge is decorated with a group of supplementary weft threads, which are sometimes inserted continuously, and sometimes as separate elements. It seems, therefore, that there has been some adaptation of the traditional weaving technique known for garments and shrouds to create a standalone ornament.

As previously stated, this object is incomplete, and it is therefore impossible to determine its function. At first glance, it would seem reasonable to consider it a belt. Another option, assuming that only a small part is missing, might be that it was a headdress. The length of the fringes would not prevent its use in this fashion, and one can hypothesise that the ribbon-like base could have been used to support the insertion of flowers, a frequent motif in the head ornaments shown in New Kingdom iconography (for example, the female head decoration represented in the banquet scene of the tomb of Nebamon; Strudwick 2006, 172–173). However, there is also the possibility that the object was originally much longer than its present form, and other functions should thus be considered, such as the decoration of objects or furniture. Finally, since the findspot is unknown, a funerary use cannot be excluded.



Fig. 6: Details of S. 7799: a – main knot at one end of the necklace; b – lark's knots; c – pendants decorated with black substance; d – detail of a broken "bead" (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

Necklace decorated by strings and black lumps (Museo Egizio S. 7799)

An entirely different item is a beautifully well-preserved necklace made of plant fibres (fig. 5). The necklace is made of a string whose ends are knotted together, to which multiple groups of threads are attached. The string is a cabled cord, consisting of two cables twisted in s direction, each made up of four threads slightly twisted in Z direction. Each yarn is plied in a Z direction and the single thread is s-spun (S, 4Z, Z, 2s). The string has a double knot as a closure (fig. 6a), but two other small knots are visible on one side. It measures 47 cm in diameter.

Opposite the knot, in the central part of the piece, 75 cords are attached in a simple style. They cover 12 cm of the total circumference of the necklace and are

on average 28 cm long. Each cord is made of three or four threads held together by a blackish substance (bitumen?) that forms small bead-like lumps (fig. 6c, d). These "beads" are regularly placed along each cord, every 5 to 6 mm or so, producing an effect that is both harmonious and animated. A similar technique can also be observed on S. 10039 and S. 7798, discussed below. Each cord is attached to the necklace by a lark's head knot (fig. 6b). These threads do not have a consistent structure: some are plied (S, 2s), while others appear as single s-spun threads (but sometimes it is extremely hard to see the ply in Egyptian material without opening the thread and here it was not possible). This mixture of different threads is frequently seen in other Deir el-Medina textiles (according to the author's unpublished examinations).



Fig. 7: S. 10039, Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

Bobbled fringe (Museo Egizio S. 10039)

Due to its state of preservation, item S. 10039 is difficult to analyse and interpret (fig. 7). Although well preserved overall, the threads are completely entangled, and the artefact will be impossible to open before a proper conservation treatment. This object comes from Deir el-Medina, where it was discovered during the 1908 to 1909 excavations. That year, the Italian mission focused primarily on the village (Del Vesco and Poole 2018, 111), so this object may well have come from there.

It is difficult to gain an overall idea of the artefact. Some elements are clearly visible, while others may or may not belong to the object. One end of the object consists of a woven textile, apparently knotted (fig. 8a). It seems to be a plain tabby (1/1) with self-bands, as is common near the starting or finishing borders of New Kingdom textiles (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 109–117). From this end, a group of braids and a piece of the woven textile continue towards the centre of the object (fig. 8b), which is formed by a mixture of braids, textile, and single threads. What is clear is that each braid ends with a rounded element, likely unbaked clay, which acts as a stopper and as decoration (fig. 8c).

Although it is impossible to ascertain the function of this object, the possibility that it is a finishing border with warp threads grouped into braids appears reasonable. Besides its manufacture, it is the presence of these small clay bobbles at the end of the long braided fringes that makes this object unusual.

Although unusual, it was possible to find one parallel in the collection of the Museo Egizio (S. 7798), which was also from Deir el-Medina. At the time of the author's visit to the museum, S. 7798 was not available for study, but the Museo Egizio provided a good photograph (fig. 9). It shows a necklace composed of a textile that has been torn apart, as is the case for the first item discussed here (Louvre E 14479). The warp threads of the finishing border have been grouped in braids, which show – when complete – extremities finished by a blackish substance acting as a decorative stopper.

The available documentation on Deir el Medina textiles is too limited to permit an accurate comparison with any textile tradition potentially established on the site. Further, it has not been possible to identify any similar finishing edge within the corpus, nor within the larger group of known New Kingdom textiles. This therefore raises doubt on its dating. Since the precise context of



Fig. 8: Details of S. 10039: a – knotted portion of a textile with self-bands; b – close up of the braids and of the textile underneath; c – decorative elements at the end of the braids; x48.9 magnification (Image: Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi)

its finding is also unknown, S. 7798 may belong to a later phase of occupation of the village.

Discussion

Although unusual, these finds testify to the use of simple threads and reused textiles to create ornamental items in Deir el-Medina. These can be decorated with fringes and braids, and both techniques are typical of New Kingdom textiles, including those coming from elite burials (Schiaparelli [1927] 2007, 92–100; images in TT217 in Deir el-Medina show fringed cloths, both while washing and worn by a woman: Donadoni Roveri 1999, 132). It is therefore interesting to see that the same type of decorations are used on both textiles and ornamental objects.

It is difficult to assess their purpose, since the find context is known in only one case, and this does not shed light on its use. If these items were found inside tombs, as grave goods or decorations, or in chapels, they might have offered a clearer indication of a ritual function, while their presence in houses could have been interpreted as a hint of everyday use. The lack of context also creates a problem of chronological uncertainty. There is only one case where we can be (almost) certain that the object comes from a New Kingdom grave, while in all other cases a later date cannot be excluded. Except in the case of S. 7798, where there is evidently a remarkable difference in what is so far known from Deir el-Medina textiles, all the other objects could be ascribed to the New Kingdom on the

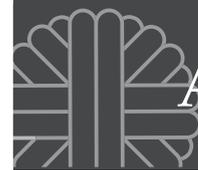


Fig. 9: S. 7798, necklace made of a reused strip of textile (Image: courtesy of the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy)

basis of technical features alone (such as fringes and braids). However, these features are unfortunately not exclusive to the New Kingdom, and thus leave the question of their dating open.

In the band with decorative braids from Louvre (E 14479) and Museo Egizio (S. 7798), a portion of the textiles has been saved and reused. In both cases, it is not a painted or woven decoration, but there is a focus on fringes and braids. The same use of hanging elements can be seen in all the other objects studied here. These hanging or dangling elements enhance movement when worn, which is why they have been interpreted primarily as dress accessories here. Fringes are common on textiles used as decoration, as can be seen in the earliest Egyptian example, the Tarkhan dress from the the Fayoum region (Hall 1986, 27). Furthermore, their original use as part of a textile – not as standalone pieces – indicates that these decorations were manufactured and used. The decorative borders may very well have been torn from the original fabric and reused to adorn people's attire (also considering the measurements of these objects). Further, the possibility that they had other functions, such as decorating objects or furniture, cannot be ruled out. It is a known tradition in funerary contexts that statues, coffins, mummies, and other small objects can be decorated with floral garlands (as with those

found in the tomb of Kha in Deir el-Medina; Ferraris 2018, 57 fig. 69, 150). In these cases, however, the funerary purpose is explicit, underlined by the choice of specific flowers, such as lotus and melilot, which have a meaning of rebirth. The decision to decorate both garments and objects with fringes, garlands and cords might therefore not be connected to the idea of movement. One could argue, however, that garlands were also worn by the living, and their position on the wooden statues, coffins and *ushabti*, all of which bear images of the dead person and act as substitutes for the dead, recall their use in life and in the afterlife, rather than being purely decorative elements. They would thus still convey their original significance, perhaps to be found in an apotropaic purpose, as has recently been suggested for other Mediterranean areas (Olson 2022, 156).

Another interesting aspect is the question of their place of manufacture. In reality, it is not possible to know if they were produced in Deir el-Medina or elsewhere, but this is also true for all the other textiles at the site. The written sources clearly show that textiles were included in the wages received by the workmen, but they were also exchanged, both internally and externally, and, at least in some cases, homemade (Eyre 1998, 182). It is therefore impossible, given the present state of knowledge, to



distinguish a local or non-local production. However, the uniqueness of these pieces, suggests they were not part of a standardised production, and their simplicity, at least in some cases, make them good candidates for homemade items. The next phase of the EgYarn project is currently underway, developing experimental testing protocols for spinning tools and techniques. It may in the future add other information which helps to assess what could have been produced locally, and what could not.

To conclude, the items examined here appear significantly unusual among Egyptian decorative items. They suggest the possibility that some parts of textiles were reused for decorative purposes, a practice that is well known in Late Antique Egypt (for example with the decorative inserts - orbiculi, tabulae, clavi), but not yet documented for Pharaonic textiles. They also give other possibilities for how the threads were used, such as the creation of necklaces or fringed bands, which cannot be ascribed to utilitarian items such as nets and strings. They pose many questions, primarily about their function, including whether they should be researched in terms of everyday use or if they could be linked to some ritual or sacred space/object. If they were meant to decorate bodies, it would be natural to ask what their relationship is with more expensive materials, such as jewels and beads. This is particularly relevant in the case of Louvre E 14479, as this braided strip of textile was found in a tomb that also contained jewellery made of gold and beads (Bruyere 1937, 187). If the textile's findspot is correct, then clearly the tomb owner(s) could afford expensive ornaments, yet it was deemed relevant to add this reused item to the burial assemblage. Beyond material value, its importance must have therefore resided in a ritual significance or a personal meaning.

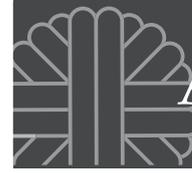
Acknowledgments

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