Fashion to die for: Children’s clothing from Mamluk Egypt

JACQUI HYMAN

The Textile Restoration Studio, Cheshire

In July 1933, a box containing six rare Egyptian Mamluk (1250–1517) children’s garments and two quilted silk caps was presented by the eminent Egyptologist Professor Percy Newberry to the Department of Textile Industries at the University of Leeds, for students to study. Due to their fragility, only occasional and limited access was available. In 2010 the opportunity arose for these extant garments to be sensitively conserved so that they could be safely displayed for short periods but also structurally analysed and their historical background researched.

From the mid-19th century, Egypt had become a treasure trove for archaeologists and explorers collecting well-preserved and colourful textiles, many of them from burial wrappings dating from the first millennium. With the introduction of Christianity into Egypt, burial customs changed markedly. Mummification was gradually discontinued, with the dead being buried fully dressed, sometimes in several garments, and wrapped and padded with a variety of textiles. Textiles are subjected to damage and degradation from the moment they are made and used. Many archaeological textiles become damaged or disintegrate by the presence of water, unfavourable temperatures or being discarded after continual use, often after being mechanically damaged by wear, patching and repair, and therefore rarely last their useful lifespan.

Owing to Egypt’s dry climate, burial textiles have survived – many remarkably well – to the amazement of the 19th century excavators. Several of these burial textiles were dug up and sold to museums, collectors and cultural institutions all over the world. It was also common practice for dealers and collectors to cut out the decorative elements from large fabrics and garments and sell them, piece by piece, to obtain the maximum profit. Unfortunately, the chronology of the finds is frequently obscure, either because of excavation difficulties or careless recording. These textiles were acquired by museums primarily to inform, inspire and promote the practice of design, also to be of artistic merit and to illustrate the products and techniques of the period. They were also collected as part of the 19th century concern to preserve ‘ancient cultures’ then being destroyed by modernisation and westernisation. It was commonly viewed that precious objects could be made more generally available the wider they were distributed, so today fragments from many individual cloths can be found scattered in different museums and private institutions.

Professor Percy Newberry and his wife Essie, whilst living in Cairo in the early 1900s, gleaned a remarkable collection of textiles mainly from graves and from the rubbish mounds of al-Fustat and Old Cairo in the southern quarter of the city. Fustat is the original Islamic site of what is now Old Cairo. It was an important medieval commercial centre, founded after the Arab Conquest in 641 CE. In 1168–69 it was intentionally destroyed by fire and briefly abandoned to avoid capture by the Christian Crusading army that tried to conquer Cairo. Fustat was resettled during Saladin’s rule but became largely abandoned by the end of the 13th century. Archaeological finds indicate that this urban populated area enjoyed the economic benefits of Islamic rule.

On returning to Britain from Cairo in 1932, the Newberrys’ textile collection started to attract scholars. The couple were generously hospitable; they frequently invited friends to stay at their home in Surrey and encouraged others to share their interest in historical embroideries and enjoy their unique and wonderful collection. Carl Lamm, after visiting them in 1935, refers to their collection in his publication on Mamluk embroideries. Nancy Britton, curator in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, also studied the material and was allowed to take portfolio sheets home for detailed investigation.

It was at this time that Professor Newberry presented the Egyptian garments to the University of Leeds. The departmental papers from the late 1930s provide only a brief outline of the garments with no further documentary evidence or details of their precise provenance.

The Department of Textile Industries at the University of Leeds was originally established as the Yorkshire College. In 1877 it became part of the Victoria University, together with institutions in Manchester and Liverpool. The first professors in the Department of Textile Industries collected fabric samples, pattern books and folios to use as teaching resources for students of woven textile design. By 1892, the items contained in the collection had increased in size and importance so much that a donation by the Clothworkers’ Company allowed for the provision of a museum, possibly one of the first of its type in the world. This was the precursor to the University of Leeds International Textiles Archive (ULITA) based at St Wilfred’s Chapel, Leeds. The Department of Textile Industries quickly gained a reputation as a thriving teaching department, addressing the needs of the local industry. Donating fabric samples to a university department would have appealed to the Newberrys with their keen attention to textile construction, patterning and stitch techniques and a desire for textile students to have original examples from which to study and learn.

The six children’s garments, given to the University of Leeds, are miniature versions of adult garments, appearing to have no style variation between male and female. Each illustrates evidence of differing methods of construction, a range of available medieval fabrics and the fine attention
to decorative detail. These fragile items, worn by deceased children at the time of their burial, are thus stained and damaged, mainly on their reverse side, from bodily fluids during decomposition and insect damage, but their former beauty is still discernable.

The analysis of these garments using the Hitachi TM3000 Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) with elemental analysis and the Bruker hand held X Ray Fluorescence (XRF) device has aided confirmation of fibre structures and their fragility, and has identified metallic threads within the fabrics and the insects that have contributed to some of the damage. The information obtained contributed to the sensitive methods of conservation each required. To confirm the approximate dates of these garments, some were compared to other known Carbon-14 dated items and additional Carbon-14 testing has been undertaken on one silk garment. To identify the construction of the two silk quilted caps, both too fragile to handle, the construction of a purpose made supportive inspection stand was necessary which enabled viewing inside each cap for analysis. Outlined here is a very brief overview of the composition and construction of each garment and cap.

**Garment A (Fig. 1)**

This calf length, plain woven, linen ‘tunic’ styled garment is composed of eight rectangular panels, cut along the straight of the grain, with slight outwardly tapering sides from the underarm to hem. All the seams are ‘run and fell’ stitched with 2 ply, Z spun linen thread. The garment has straight sleeves and a centre front slit opening from the neck to the middle of the chest, faced with matching linen inside. Thread remains at the neck opening indicate a previous neck fastening. A double running stitched narrow border of a geometric lozenge design, worked in blue 2-ply, Z-spun lightly twisted silk, embellishes the sleeve and hem edges.

**Garment B (Fig. 2)**

This centre front opening garment is approximately knee length with very short, wide sleeves. It is constructed from seven cut pieces of plain-woven cotton, each finely seamed together, with triangular gathered/smocked gussets inserted into the side seams. A narrow twill woven, brown silk braid trims the sleeves, front and hem edges. The circular neckline is trimmed with a decorative blue and cream silk check fabric. The centre front fastens with five knotted cream silk cord buttons and loops. Cotton fabric internal facings and lining conceal all seam turnings. Loose linen tacking stitches, possibly used during construction, still remain around the lower hem edge. Part of the outer surface shows signs of a glazed finish to the cotton fabric.

**Garment C (Fig. 3)**

This straight-bodied, calf length garment has very long sleeves that widen towards their opening. It is constructed from 11 plain-woven linen panels with coloured fine silk warp stripes. The garment front has a short vertical slit opening, faced internally with an additional inner placket of matching fabric. The neck is trimmed with a matching stand-up collar. The collar and front opening fasten with three knotted linen cord buttons and cord loops. Two buttons secure the collar.
and one the front opening. All the seams are narrow run and fell seams with the hem and sleeve edges narrowly turned and slip stitched. Fold lines and the remains of linen running stitches, used to shorten this garment, are visible around the waist/chest area.

Garment D (Fig. 4)

This plain-woven linen garment is constructed from eight panels, forming an almost straight-sided body, long flared sleeves and a small stand up collar with neat run and felled seams throughout. The centre front opening has an inner placket of matching linen and fastens with three knotted cord buttons and cord loops. The hem and sleeve edges are neatly hemmed. The linen fabric has two small repair patches, applied prior to construction of the garment.

Garment E (Fig. 5)

This sleeveless and collarless waistcoat, similar in shape to Fig. 2, opens fully down the centre front and is composed of 11 striped silk fragments, all finely back stitched together to form larger pieces of silk. Detailed analysis revealed gold wrapped silk threads within the striped weaves. Gathered flared triangular gussets are set into each side seam, formed from similar striped silk fabrics pieced together lengthwise. The waistcoat has a plain-woven cotton lining and plain-woven blue silk facings to the front openings and armholes. The circular neckline is edged with striped silk fabric. Three knotted cord buttons and loops fasten the waistcoat at the neck and chest.
Garment F (Fig. 6)

This garment has short, wide sleeves with opening slits at front neck and hem edge. It is constructed from nine striped silk fabric pieces with gathered triangular gussets inserted into the side seams. A matching striped silk pointed pocket is appliquéd to the right breast area. The round neck opening is narrowly bound with plain blue silk and a separate blue and cream striped silk placket is attached to the left front opening. The front and hem edge openings are faced with a cream and blue silk check fabric. The front neck opening fastens with two red silk-knotted cord buttons and loops, and the breast pocket with one matching button and loop. The garment is lined with plain-loomed cotton and interlined with cotton fibrous wadding. Additional running stitches are worked, adjacent to the outer edge of each of the wide stripes, through the silk, cotton wadding and lining to provide a slight ‘quilted’ effect to this garment.

The analysis of these extant six garments, constructed after the first millennium from linen, silk and cotton cloth, cut as straight simple pieces, represents a radical change in style, shape and manufacture from the earlier, mainly woollen Coptic garments, woven as one piece on wide looms and decorated with tapestry-woven ornaments. Detailed analysis of the evolution of garment shape up to the 10th century is lavishly illustrated in Frances Pritchard's book *Clothing Culture: Dress in Egypt in the First Millennium AD.* These garments represent fine attention to constructional detail, their overall appearance and comfort, with inset side gussets, elaborate smocking and gathering to provide ease of movement when being worn (see Figs 2, 5 & 6). The luxurious, expensive coloured striped silk fabrics, often dyed with costly pigments, beaten gold wrapped silk threads within their weave, would have been greatly admired and therefore every fragment saved for use. Precise positioning of the woven stripes has been observed in each garment. Although these garments were for children, it is presumed that similar garment construction expertise would have been lavished on adult clothing. With their economic value, these silk fabrics would have served as a status symbol and were worn by the wealthy and their offspring, whereas the linen garments would have been for the less well off. The silk embroidered borders (Fig. 1), worked on a linen ground, illustrate the introduction of counted stitch decoration, in particular counted running stitch, which appeared during the Mamluk period along with counted satin and herringbone stitches. Many similar designs can be seen in the embroidered fragments and samplers collected by Newberry in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

The two blue silk quilted caps complete the Newberry collection. Brief details of their construction are listed here with their method of quilting being of particular interest.

Cap A (Fig. 7)

This cap is composed of four separate layers all decoratively back stitched together: The top outer fabric is of plain-loomed silk with a repeating cream stripe formed within the warps. Beneath the silk is a fibrous cotton paper interlining with black ink inscriptions, then a wadded layer with a final lining of plain-loomed silk. Six individual triangular sections, formed from the layered fabrics, are joined to create the upper crown of the cap and seamed to a headband. Each triangular section is quilted with tiny individual rolled bundles of cotton fibres, held in-between rows of blue silk back stitches, forming geometric quilted designs of six pointed stars and repeating diamond shapes. The headband has three rows of quilted diamond shapes. There are small holes, surrounded with silk buttonhole stitches, at the centre top of the cap, with a small decorative knot of threads to trim the crown. Two tiny red linen fragments, stitched to the lining, appear to be the remains of securing ties.

Cap B (Fig. 8)

This cap is constructed in a similar way to Cap A but is composed of five separate layers with two different plain-loomed blue silk fabrics forming the top covering. Beneath the silks is a cotton fibrous paper layer with a wadded layer of individual rolled cotton fibres followed by a plain-loomed linen lining. Six triangular sections, quilted similar to Cap A with tiny diamond shapes, form the cap's crown, which is

![Fig. 7 Silk quilted Cap A. © Jacqui Hyman 2011.](image-url)
attached to a matching quilted headband. Blue silk buttonhole stitched holes decorate the upper point of each triangular crown section. This cap has an additional decorative element of very narrow strips of gilded membrane incorporated into the plain weave of the outer silk fabric. Only two small areas remain.

The Newberrys collected textiles for their own private enjoyment, intellectual curiosity and affinity for the materials used, with particular interest in the method of applying design to plain-woven fabric. Their ‘Egyptian’ collection, largely of fragments, was deposited in 1941 with the Ashmolean Museum. As evidence of textiles used in Egypt during the medieval Islamic period, their collection, including the garments given to the University of Leeds, represents and provides an important part of the material culture, evidence of social history, international trade, artistic trends and technological weaving advances during the Mamluk period. The detailed analysis of the six garments and two caps provides an additional insight into Mamluk garment style and construction, with the evidence that medieval Islamic Egypt could afford good quality clothing with finely embroidered and quilted decoration. The quality of the silk fabrics, with their gold threads and fine attention to constructional details, indicates that they were produced professionally and are likely to have been woven and stitched in workshops, some obviously supplying the court.

Fortunately the Newberrys’ textile collection was not widely dispersed during their lifetime or upon death, with items today found in the Ashmolean Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, The Embroiderers’ Guild and The University of Leeds.

Upon completion of my Masters Research Degree, a copy of my thesis will be available for consultation at ULITA, based at St. Wilfred’s Chapel, Leeds. Additional detailed images of the garments and caps are available on the ULITA website: http://ulita.leeds.ac.uk/wikimediawiki-1.10.1/index.php/ Collections. I am grateful to ULITA for permission to publish the images and to my supervisor, Professor Michael Hann, for his comments on the text.

NOTES
2. E. Newberry, 'Embroideries from Egypt', Embroidery (Vol.8, No.1, 1940), pp. 11–18.