

THE EARLIEST CUT-TO-SHAPE TUNIC IN ISRAEL FROM THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD SITE AT NAḤAL ‘OMER

ORIT SHAMIR AND ALIZA BAGINSKI

The textiles unearthed at the Early Islamic-period village at Naḥal ‘Omer in the ‘Arava Valley (see Ben-Michael, Israel and Nahlieli 2017) display a remarkable variety of materials, techniques and dyes, suggesting diverse geographical origins (Baginski and Shamir 1995). Most significant are several cotton fragments decorated in the *warp-ikat* technique, which constitute the earliest documented occurrence of this type of textile anywhere in the world. The date of the material provided by its archaeological context has been confirmed by carbon-14 analysis (Carmi and Segal 1995; 2017).

The site (8.5 dunam) is situated on the eastern bank of Naḥal ‘Omer, c. 40 km northwest of Petra, on the western edge of the ‘Arava, near a natural spring. The site includes the remains of 16 rectangular dwellings, one of which is a mosque, and appears to have been a farming village near a crossroads of two major trade routes (see Ben-Michael, Israel and Nahlieli 2017: Fig. 1). One route joined Petra in the Edom Mountains and Gaza and el-‘Arish, the mercantile outlets on the Mediterranean Sea; this route also led to Egypt and to the Arabian Peninsula, to Yemen, to parts of the Persian Gulf and to India. Another route led northward to Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and from there all the way to China. The caravans moved along these routes, carrying a variety of trade goods during the Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. They also served pilgrims travelling to Mecca. These routes had existed earlier, during the Nabataean period (first century BCE–third century CE; Erickson-Gini and Israel 2013), and served mainly for the trade of spices and aromatics.

THE TEXTILES

We studied and catalogued 251 textile fragments (Baginski and Shamir 1995). Many of the pieces—discarded cut and torn—appear to have come from garments. The composition of the Naḥal ‘Omer assemblage is remarkable for its high proportion of cotton textiles—153 of the 251 items—as cotton textiles are rarely found at sites from this period. Three textiles are made of silk, the only silk textiles dating to this period discovered in Israel. The other textiles are made of wool or linen (Baginski and Shamir 1995; Shamir and Baginski 2014).

The textiles included a tunic (IAA No. 2003-9109; Fig. 1), which has not been published since it underwent conservation (by Raisa Vinitsky). The tunic is cut-to-shape, i.e., cut into shape and tailored. It has one triangular gore on each side of the central panel, forming a rectangular-shaped tunic. The tunic is made of unbleached linen

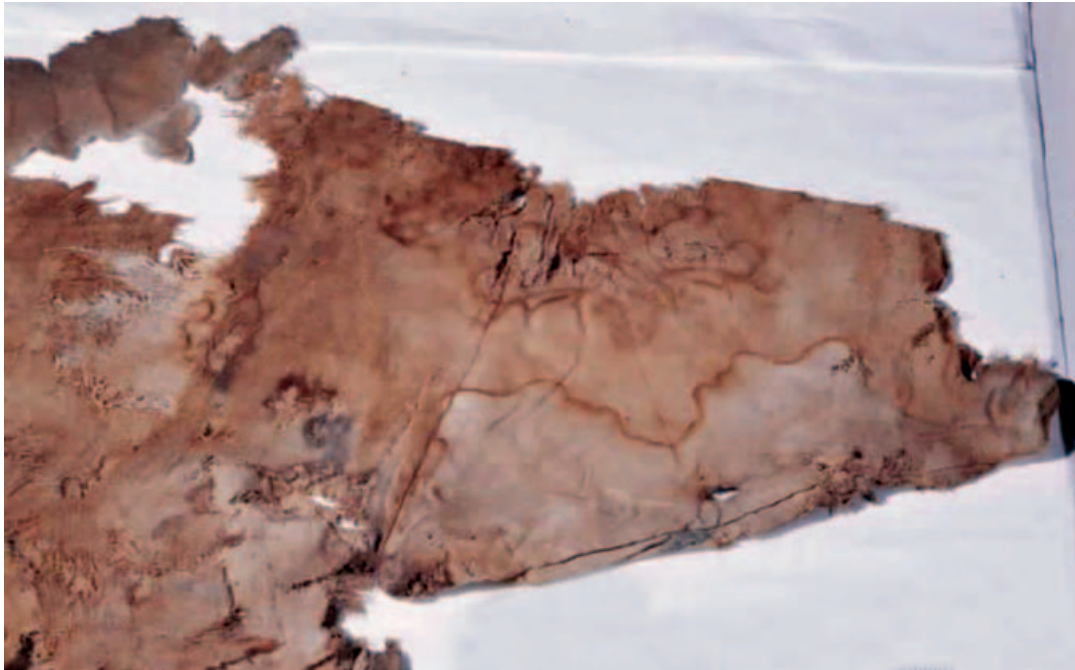
in S-spun plain weave, with each side (back and front) made of two layers: one is crude, probably the back of the tunic, 16/12 threads per cm, and the other is delicate, 21/14 threads per cm, probably the front of the tunic.

The gored tunic consists of a central panel made of a vertical piece of cloth (preserved length 73 cm, 23 cm wide) and side panels, which include triangular panels and sleeves. Each edge of the triangular panel (preserved length 47 cm, 23 cm wide) is seamed to the central panel of the tunic, folded and sewn together. One of the sleeves is cone-shaped (21 cm wide at top, 11 cm wide at the bottom; Fig. 2); its weaving is not dense: 12–17 threads per cm at the warp and 12–13 threads per cm at the weft. The other sleeve is a plain selvedge, preserved in only one fragment that is now separated from the tunic.

Some parts of the tunic are missing or not preserved. It is stained and bears several burn marks. It was probably used until it wore out; the missing parts were possibly cut and used for other purposes.



Fig. 1. The tunic.



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Fig. 2. The tunic: a sleeve.

DISCUSSION

Cut-to-shape tunics can be divided into two groups according to their cut: straight tunics, which were cut and sewn to form a cylindrical tube of cloth (e.g., at Naqlum: Czaja-Szewczak 2002:177); and tunics with gores forming a cone-like shape (e.g., at Arsinoe—Fluck 2014:15; Qaṣr Ibrim—Crowfoot 2011:13, 22; Halabiyeh—Pfister 1951:7–13; West Africa—Bolland 1991). Triangular gores were used in the lower parts of the side seams, each usually composed of two triangular panels made of the same cloth as the ground weave. The sleeves, if any, were made from separate pieces (Czaja-Szewczak 2002:182; Shamir 2005; 2015).

Cutting cloth to shape is not necessarily a later technique than weaving to shape. Alongside chronology, geography and culture were also factors of influence. Minoan Cretan Bronze Age women based their clothing on cutting and tailoring (Barber 1991:315; 1994:141). During the Bronze Age in northern Europe there were also garments cut-to-shape; Hald (1980:338) suggests that the colder northern climate required clothing that fit more closely than in the sunny south.

The classical Mediterranean tradition of weaving clothes to shape lingered on in Egypt until well after the Arab invasion (Granger-Taylor 1982:22; 1983). Cutting-to-shape can be seen, for instance, at the beginning of the seventh century CE at Halabiyeh, and at Krokodilopolis during the seventh–eighth centuries CE (Pfister 1951:9,

Nos. 4, 5; Fluck and Mälck 2007:153; Shamir 2015:54). It became more common following the Arab expansion, and within two hundred years it became predominant (Granger-Taylor 1983).

The tunic from Naḥal ‘Omer is the earliest evidence in the Land of Israel of a cut-to-shape tunic, representing a transition from the ‘woven-to-shape’ tunics of the Roman and Byzantine periods (Shamir 2013) to the ‘cut-to-shape’ tunics of the Early Islamic period and onward.

Twenty-Five cut-to-shape tunics are known from the eighth–ninth centuries CE at Qaṣr el-Yahud, situated along the Jordan River, near the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist; the sleeves of these tunics, if any, were also made from separate pieces (Shamir 2005; 2015). ‘Cut-to-shape’ tunics with gores and narrow panels from a later date—the early ninth to the late thirteenth centuries CE—were found at Jebel Qurunṭul (Qarantal), Cave 38. These belong to an assemblage of cut and sewn Medieval textiles found in the Judean Desert (Baginski and Shamir 2001; Shamir and Baginski 2012; 2013).

SUMMARY

Preserved by the arid climate, most of the textile material, much of which had been cut into small pieces, were discovered in middens (waste dumps); basketry and cordage items were also found. Only a few samples were recovered from the ruins of the buildings. The small number of textiles and other artefacts, including simple and poor ceramic vessels found in association with these buildings, indicate that the site was used only for a limited period, the Early Islamic period (see Ben-Michael, Israel and Nahlieli 2017); the village was abandoned when the route from Petra to Gaza changed its path, moving away from Naḥal ‘Omer. It is probable that the site provided caravans with shelter, water, fodder and other amenities. This village probably offered a welcome relief, as long-distance caravan trade was fraught with dangers, such as winter torrents, intense summer heat and limited water sources (Erickson-Gini and Israel 2013:25). The various types of fabrics reflect the clothing used not only by the inhabitants of the site but also those worn by the travelers.

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