6 The Egyptian Art of the *Tiraz* in Fatimid Times

Bernard O'Kane

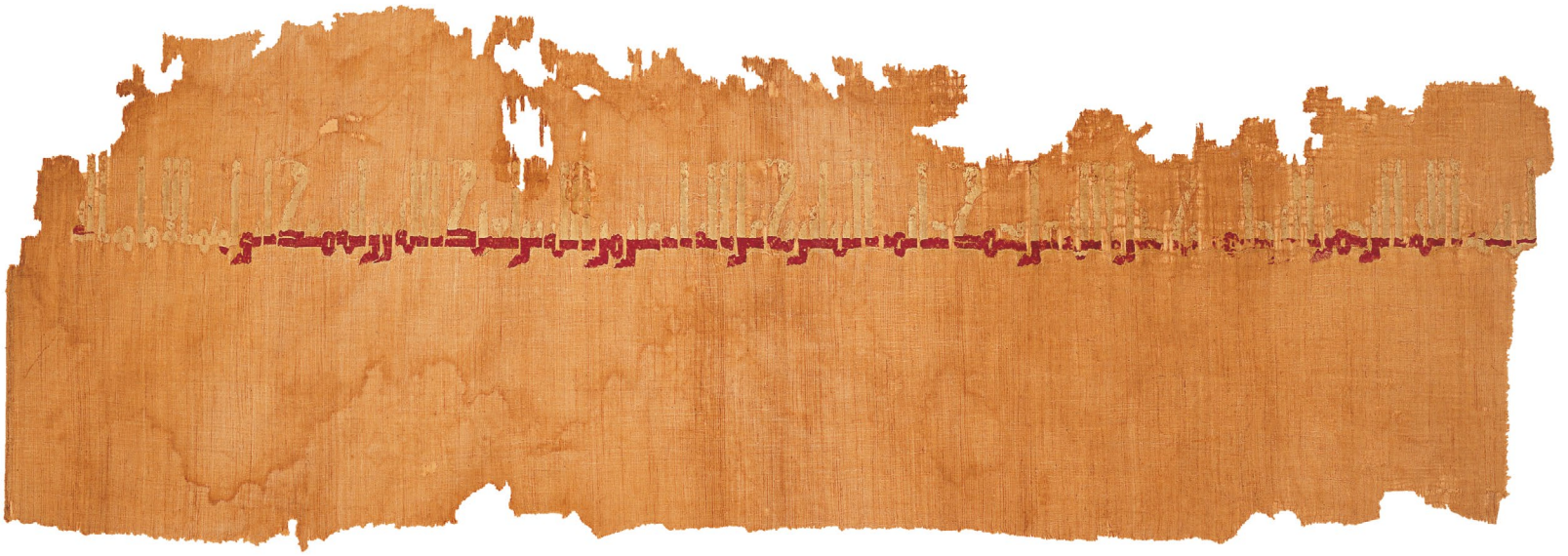
Known as the "granary" of Rome in Pre-Islamic times, Egypt's fertile agrarian base also enabled it to be the pre-eminent grower of flax in pre-modern times. In the Mediterranean and beyond, the country was by far the largest producer of linen, a commodity so vital that it not merely underpinned the textile industry but was also the linchpin of the whole economy.[1] Most surviving Egyptian textiles are made of linen, twenty-two varieties of which are known from the Geniza documents.[2] Linen, unlike silk or cotton, is dye-resistant, making painting on it difficult. Most inscriptions on linen were therefore embroidered, usually in silk,[3] in a simple chain stitch. The variety of embroidery stitching later expanded, allowing for more ambitious calligraphic details than were possible with the simple chain stitch.[4]

As the abundant survivals from Pre-Islamic Egypt show, weaving was also a major industry under the Copts, who continued to be active in the industry in Islamic times.[5] But the main institution that concerns us here, since we will be mainly looking at inscriptions on textiles, is that of *tiraz*. This refers to the factories, originally set up under the auspices of the Umayyad caliphs, to produce textiles for the court, both for the caliph's own wear, and particularly for the distribution of robes of honour (*khilʿa*)[6] as presents to members of the court and others deemed worthy of such distinctions. These should also be seen in the context of the importance attached to dress in general in medieval Islam. "Waste on your back, not on your belly," that is, be extravagant with your clothing rather than your food, is a saying that appears with many variations in Middle Eastern languages.[7] Linen was the main fabric used for these textiles, in which the embroidered inscriptions were normally made of silk.

As early as the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Amin (r. 809–813), Egyptian factories were producing *tiraz* for the court, as an extant example shows.[8] Although the caliph's name was always written on the *kiswa* (the cloth that provided the covering of the Kaʿba and which was renewed annually),[9] the early sources do not make it clear that textiles produced in the *tiraz* factories invariably had inscriptions.[10] But by the 9th century, as with the *tiraz* of al-Amin mentioned above, it is clear that it was normal for them to have inscriptions that reflected caliphal prestige and authority to the extent that unauthorized change of them, as in the coinage and *khutba* (the sermon at Friday prayers), would be a signal of rebellion.[11]

Tiraz, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-ʿAziz (r. 975–996), plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen and silk, L 40 cm, W 40 cm, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 13015.

The formula is usually consistent, with the *basmala* followed by the caliph's name and a wish for God's blessing, the name of the *tiraz* factory, and the date. The occasional addition of the name of the caliph's heir is another indication of the socio-political importance of the inscriptions.[12] Later, other information could include the name of the wazir, the person who was the superintendent of the *tiraz* factories, and the place of manufacture. Sometimes it is specified whether the factory was a private (*khassa*) or public (*ʿamma*) one. The distinction between the private and public factories seems not to have been as critical as was previously thought. Both produced textiles of a wide range of materials and of equally fine quality; the most recent research suggests that while the private factories were exclusively tied to the court, the public ones,



Tiraz, Egypt, 10th century, linen, tapestry-woven silk, L 151 cm, W 51 cm, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Inv. No. AKM670.

in addition to independent commissions, could have also fulfilled court orders when the private factories were overstretched.[13]

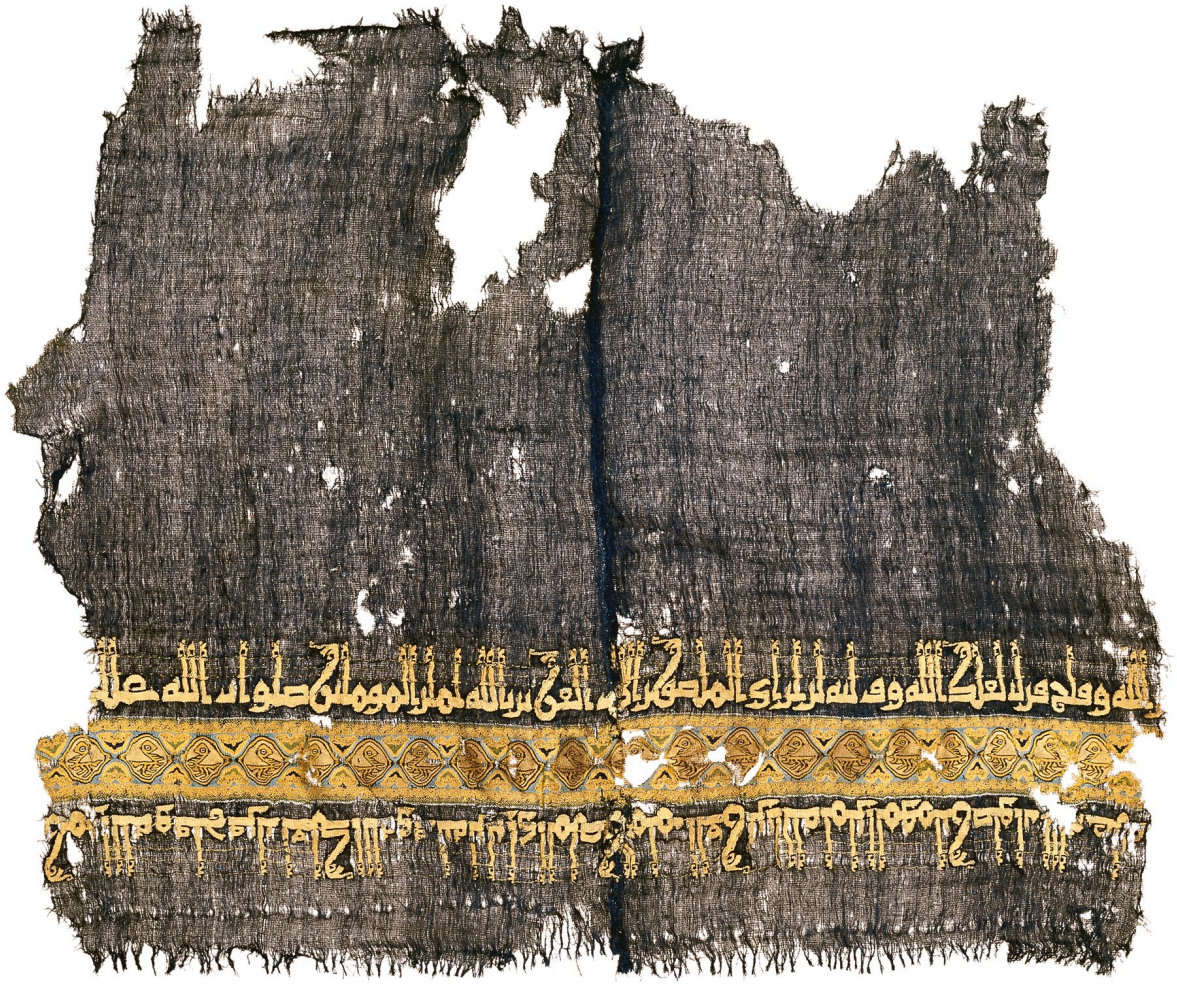
It is with the increasing political importance of *tiraz* that we find their inscriptions gain in aesthetic importance. Among the earliest period from which several examples are known is that of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861). Varying styles of Kufic can be seen, including short, thick forward-slanting letters; short, thin backward-slanting ones; or tall and thin letters with exaggerated curves below the main line.[14] But none was as yet of any striking aesthetic value. This had changed by the early 9th century when examples from Iraq or Iran add serifs to the uprights and extend the ends of letters into regular crescent shapes below the lines.[15] But a century later these same traits are encountered (in an Iraqi example) with extraneous letters to the point of obfuscation,[16] or in Egyptian-made examples (dated from 922–928) with crescent shapes added merely to create a rhythmic pattern.[17]

On the eve of the Fatimid conquest, in the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Muti‘, *tiraz* appeared in which the elements that became the cornerstone of early Fatimid design were already apparent: the script now is floriated, with discs decorating the tops of uprights. Many of these ascenders curve upward in swan-neck fashion.[18] Two lines of script, one inverted, are employed, and the band between them is decorated with Coptic-derived figural imagery, usually within medallions (Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 13015).[19] A *tiraz* belonging to the Aga Khan Museum from the reign (952–975) of al-Mu‘izz (Inv. No. AKM670) displays a very sober foliation but boldly emphasizes the baseline of the script with a deep red woven silk contrasting with the yellow used for the upper parts of the letters. However, the greatest impression one derives from the numerous examples preserved from the reigns of the Fatimid caliphs al-‘Aziz (975–996) and al-Hakim (996–1021) is that of the variety of scripts employed (Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 9344). These can range from

Tiraz, Damietta, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-Hakim, dated 387/997–998, plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen and silk, L 37 cm, W 50 cm, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 9344.

the unembellished,[20] to striking new varieties with unusually tall uprights,[21] to ones that are geometricized by shaping letters close to a 45-degree angle (Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 9445).[22]

As with the monumental inscriptions discussed in Chapter 4 of this book, this raises the question of who was responsible for the design of the inscriptions. It is not a case of a divide between the private and public *tiraz* factories, since both plain and bold designs are found in each.[23] At least the content of the inscriptions in the private factories is likely to have been determined by the chancery. Whether in pre-conquest Fatimid *tiraz* made in Ifriqiya or in early examples from Egypt, the epigraphic protocol was sure to mention a variety of phrases of Shi'i significance: the Prophet and his pure family, the pure imams, the caliph's pure ancestors and descendants, and blessings from God on his friend the imam.[24] Occasionally, particularly in *tiraz* of al-Hakim



Tiraz, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-ʿAziz (r. 975–996), plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen and silk, L 37 cm, W 50 cm, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 9445.

and later, the father or the son of the ruling imam is also mentioned.

The practice of distributing robes of honour (*khilʿa*) was perhaps even more assiduously adopted by the Fatimids.[25] They understood the political potential of *tiraz* at an early stage, and like the Abbasids, the importance of displaying it publicly. The traveller Naser-e Khosrow, for example, mentions the processions at the festival of opening the canal in Cairo when 10,000 horses accompanied the caliph, each with saddlecloths of Byzantine and *buqalamun* brocade in which were woven the names of the ruler.[26]

Not just the prestige but also the wealth of the Fatimids was bound up with fabrics, for many of these contained gold thread and were preserved in the treasury along with jewellery and other precious commodities.[27] But in times of civil unrest and economic deprivation, such as the famine and army mutiny under al-Mustansir in the 1060s, the treasures were sold or plundered, and as *The Book of Gifts and Rarities* informs us, "Everything woven with or fashioned from gold and silver was burned and its gold melted down."[28]

Some notable exceptions with gold thread now in the Cleveland Museum of Art have been preserved.

Tiraz, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen, silk, and gold wire, L 62.3 cm, W 23.5 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, Inv. No. 1950.549.

In one,[29] from the reign of al-Hakim, the gold thread is used for the background of the inscription and for the birds that appear in two ornamental bands. But the surprise is the poor quality of the inscription with an irregular baseline and crabbed letter forms. In another example, also attributed to the reign of al-Hakim, gold is used for a large band of arabesques.[30] Its inscription is finer but is reduced to a repetition of *al-mulk li'llah* (sovereignty is God's). This heralds the appearance of pseudo-Kufic inscriptions in *tiraz* of the middle of the 11th century, forming a simple repeat on either side of figural medallions.[31]

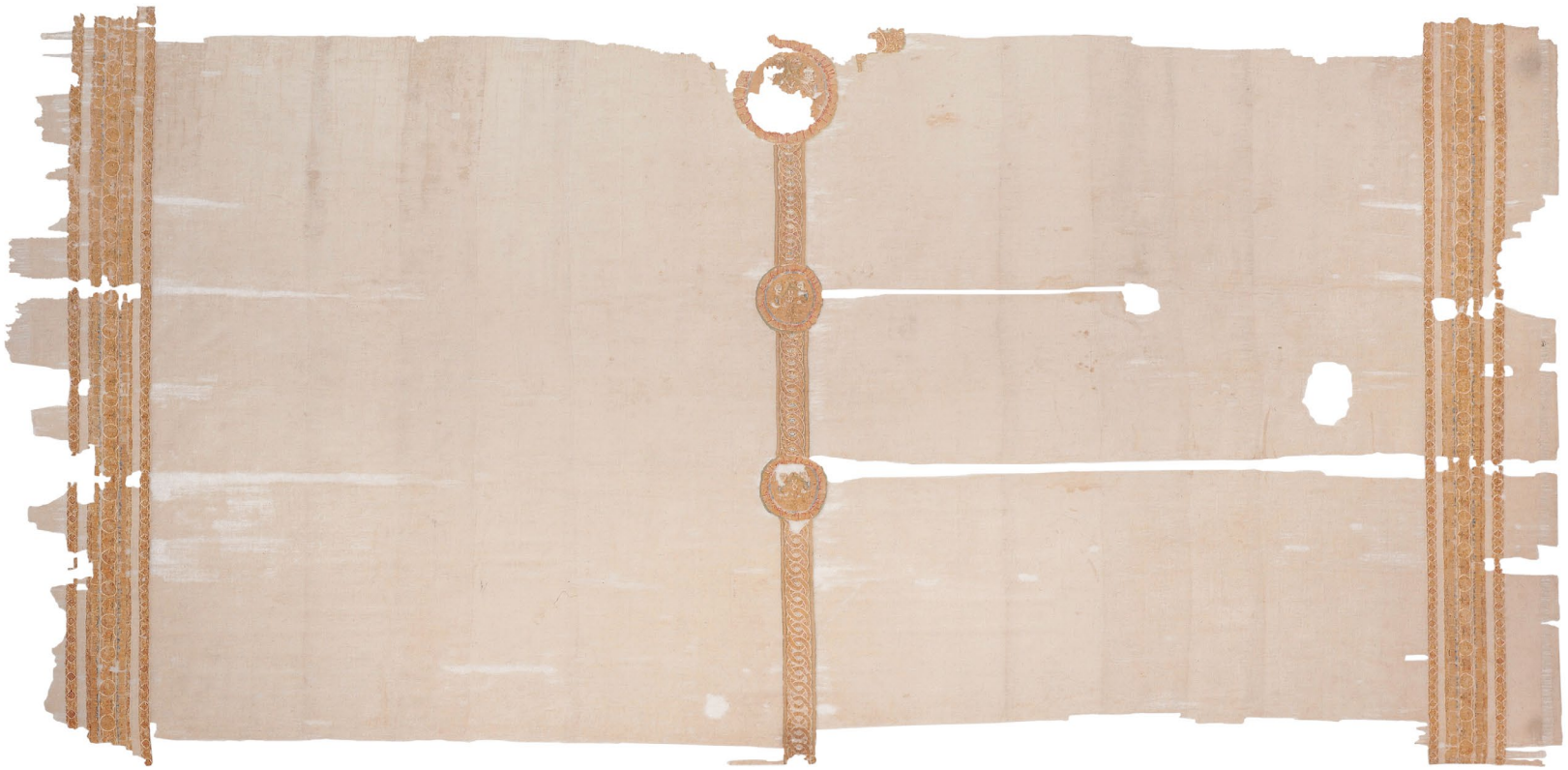
From the reign of al-Zahir onward, the letters of the inscriptions seem to have mattered less to the designers than pattern-making, either by a revival of the spade-shaped lower terminals encountered in the Abbasid period (Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 14546),[32] or more frequently, by thinning the letters and emphasizing arabesques, often in mirror-image, between the uprights (Cairo Museum, Inv. No 9751).[33]

The most complete surviving Fatimid textile is the Veil of St. Anne from the Treasury of the Cathedral of Apt in France. It was probably brought back as a trophy by Raimbaud de Siminae, the Lord of Apt, who participated in the First Crusade.[34] Measuring 310 by 152 centimetres, it would have been an *'aba'a* or overgarment. Its materials were of the finest, a linen ground decorated in tapestry weave with gold and silk thread. Its text states that it was made in the private *tiraz* in Damietta in … 9 (489 or 490/1096 or 1097) and gives the names of the caliph al-Musta'li and his wazir, al-Afdal.

In addition to the identical decorative and inscription bands at either end of the garment, it has a central band with three roundels. The roundels are decorated with sphinxes wearing three-pointed crowns addorsed

Tiraz, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-Zahir (r. 1021–1036), plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen and silk, L 380 cm, W 60 cm, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 14546.

Tiraz, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-Mustansir (r. 1036–1094), plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen and silk, L 35 cm, W 12 cm, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 9751.



Veil of St. Anne and Detail, Damietta, Egypt, in the name of the imam al-Mustaʿli, datable to 489 or 490/1096 or 1097, plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen, silk, and gold wire, L 310 cm, W 150 cm, Cathedral of St. Anne, Apt, France.

between a tree of life motif. The plainly rendered text around them contains the names and title of the imam and wazir. What is also new in this instance is the extra weight given to the wazir's titles, paralleling earlier monumental inscriptions noted in Chapter 4 of this book, a clear indication of the power shift at the time from imam to wazir. This is even more marked in the Shroud of Cadouin, another large Fatimid *tiraz* from the same patrons in an exceptional state of preservation thanks to its use in a reliquary in the Abbey of Cadouin in Périgord, France.[35] Here, al-Afdal's titles are given more space even than those of the imam.

Tiraz, Egypt, 12th century, plain weave with inwoven tapestry weave, linen, silk, and gold wire, L 63.2 cm, W 27 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, J.H. Wade Fund, Inv. No. 1982.291.

A radical change occurs in *tiraz* of the 12th century. Historical inscriptions become rarer (the repeated phrase *nasr min Allah* being the most common), and the change in script is equally profound (Cleveland Museum of Art, Inv. No. 1982.291). It is frequently in *naskh*, although some examples have been referred to as debased *naskh*, in that they display a hybrid form of Kufic and *naskh*.[36] This decline in calligraphic quality has been attributed to the concomitant decline in the dynasty's fortunes, especially following the assassination of the imam al-Amir in 1130.[37] The piece (AKM675) in the Aga Khan Museum exhibition from this period at first looks like an exception, with the phrase *nasr min Allah* forming an elegant repeat pattern. However, this is achieved only by distorting the usual proportion of the letters of *nasr*. As with most other *tiraz* from this period, it is accompanied by decorative bands adjacent to the inscriptions.[38] This could be attributed to a variety of factors: the realization by official patrons that many recipients of *khilʿa*, or more likely purchasers of *tiraz*, would be unable to read the script and be more impressed by the wealth of decoration, or an increase in the output of public factories whose main clients privileged decoration over inscriptions.

One final matter should be mentioned: the use of *tiraz* as burial shrouds. The Geniza documents tell us that even the poor set aside money for multiple layers of shrouds.[39] The increased value of clothing actually worn by the imam is known from some telling anecdotes, one where a landholder specified that he wanted not just a *tiraz* but one that the caliph had actually worn,[40] and another where Jawdhar, the private secretary of

Tiraz, Egypt, 11th–12th centuries, linen, embroidered, L 40.2 cm, W 11.2 cm, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Inv. No. AKM675.

al-Muʿizz, asked for a garment of the imam to use as a shroud because of its inherent *baraka* (blessings).[41]

Tiraz thus had a multiplicity of functions beyond mere clothing, relaying the imam's authority by their luxurious decoration and particularly by their proclamation in script of the imam's legitimacy. They also functioned as the equivalent of bullion in the state treasury, as a symbol of the wearer's rank and status, as a sign of largesse from the giver, and ultimately in many cases, as a *baraka*-imbued shroud. Messages of adornment and power were conveyed by their inscriptions and surrounding decoration in a variety of styles whose changes mirrored those of the Fatimid state that sponsored them.

NOTES

1. Gladys Frantz-Murphy, "A New Interpretation of the Economic History of Medieval Egypt: The Role of the Textile Industry," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1981), 274–297; S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967–1988), vol. 1, 104–105.

2. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, 104.

3. Silk is less abrasive than wool and can be threaded through the warps more easily. It is therefore more suited to embroidery on a linen ground: Louise Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th–21st Century* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2015), 91.

4. Irene A. Bierman, "Art and Politics: The Impact of Fatimid Uses of Tiraz Fabrics," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1980, 36.

5. Bierman, "Art and Politics," 70.

6. N.A. Stillmann, "Khilʿa," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., accessed 5 June 2017 at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0507.

7. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 4, 151.

8. Inv. No. 3084, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo: Ernst Kühnel, "Tirazstoffe der Abbasiden," *Der Islam* 14 (1925): 83; Etienne Combe, Jean Sauvaget, and Gaston Wiet, eds. *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (hereafter *RCEA*), 17 vols. (Cairo, 1931–1991), vol. 1, 75, fig. 95.

9. Yedida Kalfon Stillman and Norman A. Stillman, *Arab Dress, a Short History: From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 2003), 126.

10. Bierman, "Art and Politics," 5.

11. Bierman, "Art and Politics," 15–16; Jochen Sokoly, "Textiles and Identity." In Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu, ed., *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ, 2017), vol. 1, 278. We are fortunate that the dry climate of Egypt preserved many textiles that were used as burial shrouds; it is from uncontrolled excavations that the majority of examples found in museum collections around the world come. Marzouk mentions the excavations on behalf of the Museum of Islamic Art at ʿAyn al-Sira (near Cairo) where "each dead body was wrapped in a series of linen shrouds. Sometimes there was a silk over the linen ones, and this silk, in many cases, fell into dust at the first touch": M.A. Marzouk, "Five Tiraz Fabrics in the Völkerkund-Museum of Basel." In Richard Ettinghausen, ed., *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst: Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel zum 75. Geburtstag am 26.10.1957* (Berlin, 1959), 283, n. 3.

12. See Ernst Kühnel and Louisa Bellinger, *The Textile Museum Catalogue of Dated Tiraz Fabrics* (Washington, 1952), 36–37, Inv. No. 73.12, mentioning the caliph al-Mutawakkil and his son, Abu ʿAbd Allah.

13. Jochen A. Sokoly, "Towards a Model of Early Islamic Textile Institutions in Egypt," *Riggisberger Berichte* 5 (1997): 115–122.

14. Compare the illustration of four examples in Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, pl. 2.

15. For example, in a *tiraz* dated 932: Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. No. 73.368, 32, pl. 13.

16. *Tiraz* from the reign of al-Qadir, 991–1031, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Acc. No. 31.106.56a, accessed 8 June 2017 at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/448637.

17. Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. Nos. 73.648, 73.15, 29–30, pl. 14.

18. Muhammad Abdil Aziz Marzouk, "The Evolution of Inscriptions on Fatimid Textiles," *Ars Islamica* 10 (1943): 164–166.

19. Ernst Kühnel, "Four Remarkable Tiraz Textiles." In George C. Miles, ed., *Archaeologica Orientalis in Memorium Ernst Herzfeld* (New York, 1952), 144–145; pl. 26, fig. 1 (private collection); Bierman, "Art and Politics," 47. For examples from the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-ʿAziz, see Bernard O'Kane, ed., *The Treasures of Islamic Art in the Museums of Cairo* (Cairo, 2006), fig. 55 (the caption is mistakenly transposed with that of fig. 37); Kühnel, "Four Remarkable Tiraz," pl. 27, fig. 1, and for two from the reign of al-Hakim, ibid., pl. 27, figs. 2–3.

20. Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. No. 73.370, pl. 24 (private factory); Inv. No. 73.38, pl. 26 (public factory).

21. Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. No. 73.641, pl. 27 (private factory, al-ʿAziz); see also Claus-Peter Haase, "Some Aspects of Fatimid Calligraphy on Textiles." In Marianne Barrucand, ed., *L'Égypte fatimide, son art et son histoire* (Paris, 1999), 341.

22. Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, fig. 3, and also Inv. No. 73.544, pl. 27 (al-ʿAziz).

23. For example, see the range in the four examples each of private and public *tiraz* from the reigns of al-ʿAziz and al-Hakim, Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, pls. 24, 26–30.

24. Sokoly, "Textiles and Identity," 282. For example, on a linen *tiraz* in a private collection dated 359/969–970: *RCEA*, vol. 5, 91, fig. 1814.

25. Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, NY, 1994), 30.

26. Text, 76; trans. Thackston, 48. This also reflects Abbasid practice when at the time of a visit by a Byzantine embassy in 917 the palace in Baghdad was decorated with 8,000 items inscribed with the commissioner's order and the names of past caliphs: Ibn al-Zubayr, the *Kitab al-Hadaya wa'l-Tuhaf*, translated by Ghada al-Hijjawi al-Qaddumi as *The Book of Gifts and Rarities* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 151.

27. The rigorous state security associated with this is detailed in Stillman and Stillman, *Arab Dress*, 131.

28. Ibn al-Zubayr, *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, al-Qaddumi, trans., 230–231.

29. Louise W. Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th–21st Century* (New Haven and London, 2015), 99, fig. 3.14.

30. Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 101, figs. 3.15–16.

31. E.g. Acc. No. 27.170.28, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, a piece from Egypt in resist-dyed (ikat) technique imitating Yemeni textiles: accessed 14 July 2017 at www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/27.170.28.

32. For examples see O'Kane, *Treasures of Islamic Art*, 66, fig. 53, from the reign of al-Zahir (1021–1036); Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 104, fig. 3.20, from the same period; Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. No. 73.461, pl. 37, attributed to 466–487/1073–1094 in the reign of al-Mustansir.

33. For examples see Kühnel and Bellinger, *Textile Museum Catalogue*, Inv. No. 73.474, pl. 32, from the reign of al-Zahir (1021–1036); Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 106, fig. 3.23 (from the reign of al-Mustansir, dated 440–441/1049–1050; O'Kane, *Treasures of Islamic Art*, fig. 57, also from the reign of al-Mustansir.

34. See Georgette Cornu, "Les tissus d'apparat fatimides, parmi le plus somoptueux le 'voile de Sainte Anne' d'Apt." In Marianne Barrucand, ed., *L'Égypte fatimide, son art et son histoire* (Paris, 1999), 331–337; Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 113–115.

35. Cornu, "Les tissus," 332; Gaston Wiet, "Un nouveau tissu Fatimid," *Orientalia* 5 (1936): 385–388.

36. Nancy Pence Britton, "Pre-Mameluke Tiraz in the Newberry Collection," *Ars Islamica* 9 (1942): 163.

37. Bierman, "Art and Politics," 76.

38. See in the four examples in Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 118–119.

39. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 4, 160, 188.

40. Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City*, 29–30.

41. Jochen Sokoly, "Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles," *Riggisberger Berichte* 5 (1997): 76. See also note 11 above for the funerary context in which most Fatimid textiles have been found.

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