

Textiles and Funerary Rituals. The Wrapping of Offerings at Meroe and el-Hobagi

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The study of Meroitic funerary culture has progressed considerably since its beginnings, thanks to our better understanding of Meroitic religion and the multiplication of cemetery excavations. According to F. Ll. Griffith, ‘the simple-minded Meroites laid in the graves some of the necessities of life in a concrete form’ (Griffith 1925, 25). This materialistic viewpoint is now greatly disputed, in particular in view of the prominent role of the funerary liturgy which came to be fully acknowledged in the assemblage of the grave furnishings (Lenoble 1991; 1996; 1998; Yellin 1995; Francigny 2012). This paradigm shift was set forth by a detailed re-examination of the artefacts, notably the ceramics (Francigny and David 2013). It shed light on the chief importance of Isiac rituals such as the libations, embodied in the tomb through the many liquid containers (bottles, cups, etc.) used during the funeral ceremonies and then interred alongside the body (Lenoble 1991; 1996; Francigny 2015).

The survey of funerary textiles, undertaken as part of the author’s doctorate, revealed their participation during these rituals. The role of textiles in Meroitic graves is more widely known in conjunction with the deceased: thick blankets were laid on the floor or the funerary bed to receive the body while others – reused items of clothing or common fabrics – wrapped it, hiding it from view and symbolically protecting it. However, it proves more difficult to trace the use of textiles among the funerary offerings due to the rarity of their preservation *in situ* and their fragmentary state. Even so, we can reasonably ascertain that textiles were not deposited in the grave for their own sake as a trousseau for the deceased, unlike the common practice in Pharaonic Egypt. On the contrary, they joined the funerary material fulfilling a specific function during the ceremony, especially in regard to the vessels used for food and liquid offerings.

To help define this function, this article will present two case studies: one from the Western Cemetery of Meroe and the other from el-Hobagi. The two graves, both exceptionally well preserved in their arrangement, provide us with the opportunity to reconstruct the funeral order of events and understand the role of textiles during the offering rituals.

Meroe, grave W308

Grave W308 is located in the Western Cemetery of Meroe and is dated by the ceramics to the period from the mid-1st century AD to the beginning of the 2nd century AD (Francigny and David 2013, 112-113.). It contained the inhumation of a child, aged 8 to 10 years old, whose body was laid in a slightly flexed position, head to the west, in a wooden

coffin. No organic material – wood or textiles – have been preserved in direct connection with this inhumation, which was discovered intact but only as a skeleton. The many objects furnishing this grave were however, well preserved and mostly undisturbed, which allowed the excavators to produce a sketch plan of its contents (Figure 1). Among the numerous containers and personal ornaments a significant quantity of textiles was found, of which several fragments are kept in the Sudan National Museum. Despite their carbonized state, their analysis suggests the use of 12 to 16 different fabrics for the layout of the burial equipment.

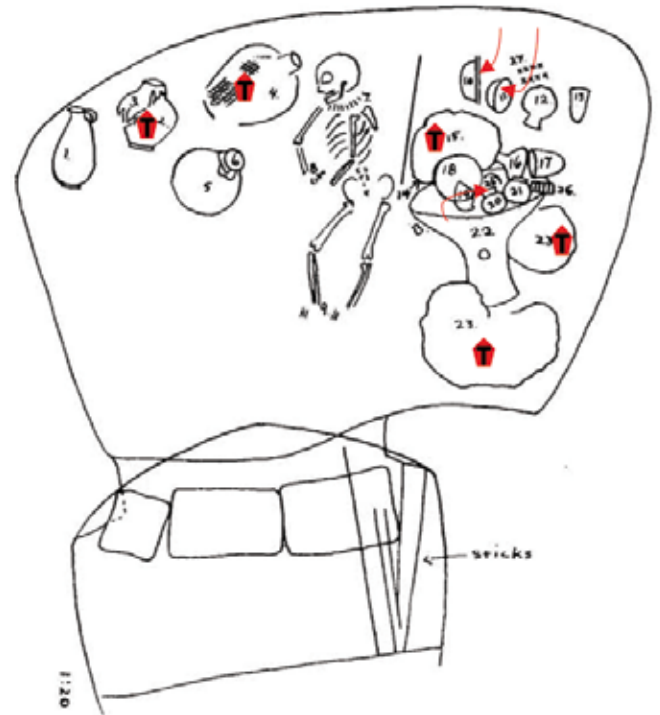


Figure 1. Sketch plan of W308 (Meroe) with localization of textile finds (after Dunham 1963, 145, fig. 105B).

In a large and deep chamber, the funerary deposit is organized on both sides of the body. On the southern side, the back wall was lined with liquid containers: one askos and three ceramic jars, one of them topped with an inverted copper-alloy bowl (Plate 1). Two of these large jars were wrapped in several layers of cotton fabrics. The first jar was covered with the remains of a loose fabric in open basket weave (Plate 2). The second jar, decorated on its shoulder with black and white bands, showed traces of two different fabrics: one is a rather coarse basket weave and the other a very thin tabby cloth finished by a decorative border (Plate 3). This particular fabric is characteristic of the finest examples of Meroitic textile production, with a high thread-count ground weave and an elaborated open-work finishing border. The geometric network of the lattice is created with a supplementary weft thread which tightly wraps groups of warp threads hanging from the main weave, regularly separated and regrouped according to a pre-established pattern. The border is then usually completed by a series of thin tasseled fringes



Plate 1. Jars in situ, southern side of W308 (Meroe)
(photograph January 28th, 1927, © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).



Plate 2. Coarse fabric in open basket weave, Meroe W308,
Sudan National Museum (photo: © Elsa Yvanez).

(Crowfoot 1984; Adams 1998; Yvanez 2012, 332-4). The specimen from W308 shows the succession of three friezes of cruciform motives separated by two bands of a small-scale checked pattern. It provides an exceptional example of this open-work technique unique to the Meroitic world, as well as its only attestation outside of Nubia. This valuable fabric seems to have been draped around the neck of the jar.

The northern side of the burial chamber was filled with a heap of various objects including several personal accessories in wood (a *kobl* tube and a mouse figurine), many amulets and items of jewellery, a small wooden pot with lid, a cylindrical copper alloy box, two glass containers, a footed ceramic offering tray, nine ceramic bowls and pots, and one copper alloy cup. Among these objects, three ceramic bowls contained textile and basketry fragments, as well as a few vegetal remains hypothetically identified by the excavators as seeds and dry berries (Dunham 1963, 143). The textiles are

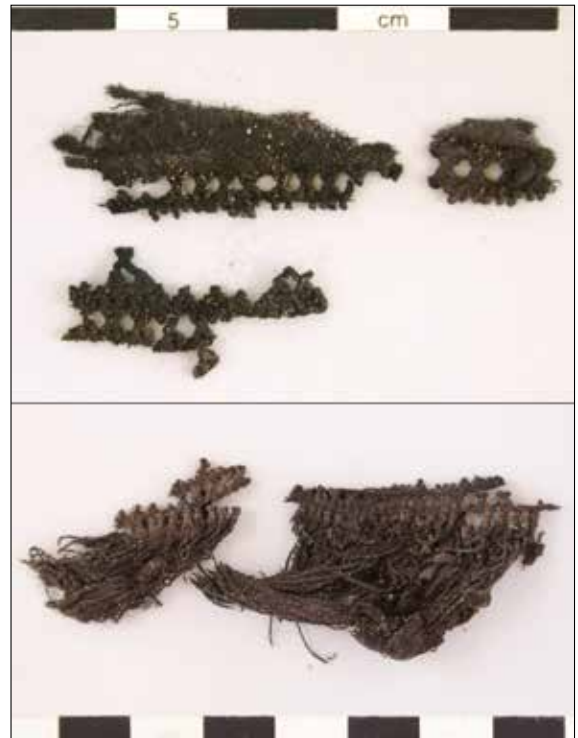


Plate 3. Fragments of a fine fabric with an openwork border finished by fringed tassels, Meroe W308, Sudan National Museum (photo: © Elsa Yvanez).

tightly woven with thin cotton threads and show evidence of reinforced selvages and textural effects. One fabric associated with these containers is a small fragment of blue tapestry weave with light brown (originally white) lozenges and stripes (Plate 4). Comparison with other tapestry fragments found on settlement sites such as Qasr Ibrim shows that this piece corresponds very well to other contemporary Meroitic tapestries, almost exclusively decorated in a blue and white colour repertoire (Adams 1987; Wild 2011). The textiles were likely used to wrap small items of food placed in the bowls or to cover the bowls themselves.

Based on the excavation photographs and notes, we can deduce that most of the northern side of the chamber was occupied by the offering deposit centred on and around the



Plate 4. Fragment of blue tapestry, Meroe W308,
Sudan National Museum (photo: © Elsa Yvanez).

footed ceramic tray which functioned as an offering altar (Plate 5). It was not set directly on the floor of the chamber but stood on top of a dense cotton textile in pile weave, very much carbonized today (Plate 6). This fabric, resembling a modern 'Turkish' towel, shows a basket ground weave with



Plate 5. W308, Northern side deposit with altar (Meroe)
(photograph January 28th, 1927, © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).



Plate 6. Fragments of a thick fabric in pile weave, Meroe W308,
Sudan National Museum (photo: © Elsa Yvanez).

long twisted loops on one side. These loops were created by the insertion of plied supplementary weft threads, pulled with a stick through the warps to a length of 20mm, and then twisted with the fingers. This technique, used repeatedly throughout the fabric, led to a very soft and thick textile particularly appreciated in the Meroitic kingdom as warm

and comfortable covers or blankets. Often laid at the bottom of the grave to receive the body of the deceased, this type of blanket was used in W308 to set up the offering deposit. Once the rituals were performed and the vessels arranged on the altar, the whole ensemble was covered by several textiles (at least five different ones), now aggregated in a confusing mass. Here we can recognize a few thick fabrics in half-basket or basket weave and another pile weave blanket, as well as a very thin cloth in weft-faced tabby weave (Plate 7), all made of cotton. The combined weight of all these textiles must have been great and possibly contributed to the collapse of the deposit. If our reconstruction is correct, before the closing of the tomb, the jumble of objects discovered by the excavators must have presented the aspect of a voluminous mound entirely covered by textiles.



Plate 7. Mass of various and very fragmented textiles, Meroe W308,
Sudan National Museum (photo: © Elsa Yvanez).

El-Hobagi, tumulus VI

Tumulus VI of el-Hobagi is one of the seven large tumuli with enclosures excavated by Patrice Lenoble in the Shendi region (Lenoble 1989; 1994b; 1994c; 1999). Under the mound, a wide trapezoidal descendery led, after a platform of wooden logs, to a vertical pit and an open chamber. The grave is dated to the 4th century AD and held the inhumation of a male of royal rank. Barely touched by plunderers who concentrated their intrusion on the skeleton and its ornaments, the burial contained very rich material (Figure 2). The body of the deceased was laid on a funerary bed, made of a wooden frame covered with a hide, and surrounded by weaponry comprising ten spears, two swords, one bow, and seven quivers containing 77 arrowheads. A sort of 'religious kit', consisting of six copper-alloy containers, was stacked on top of the spears. The rest of the chamber was filled with big ceramic jars and bottles, sometimes topped with an inverted copper-alloy bowl. The cavity was then closed by a

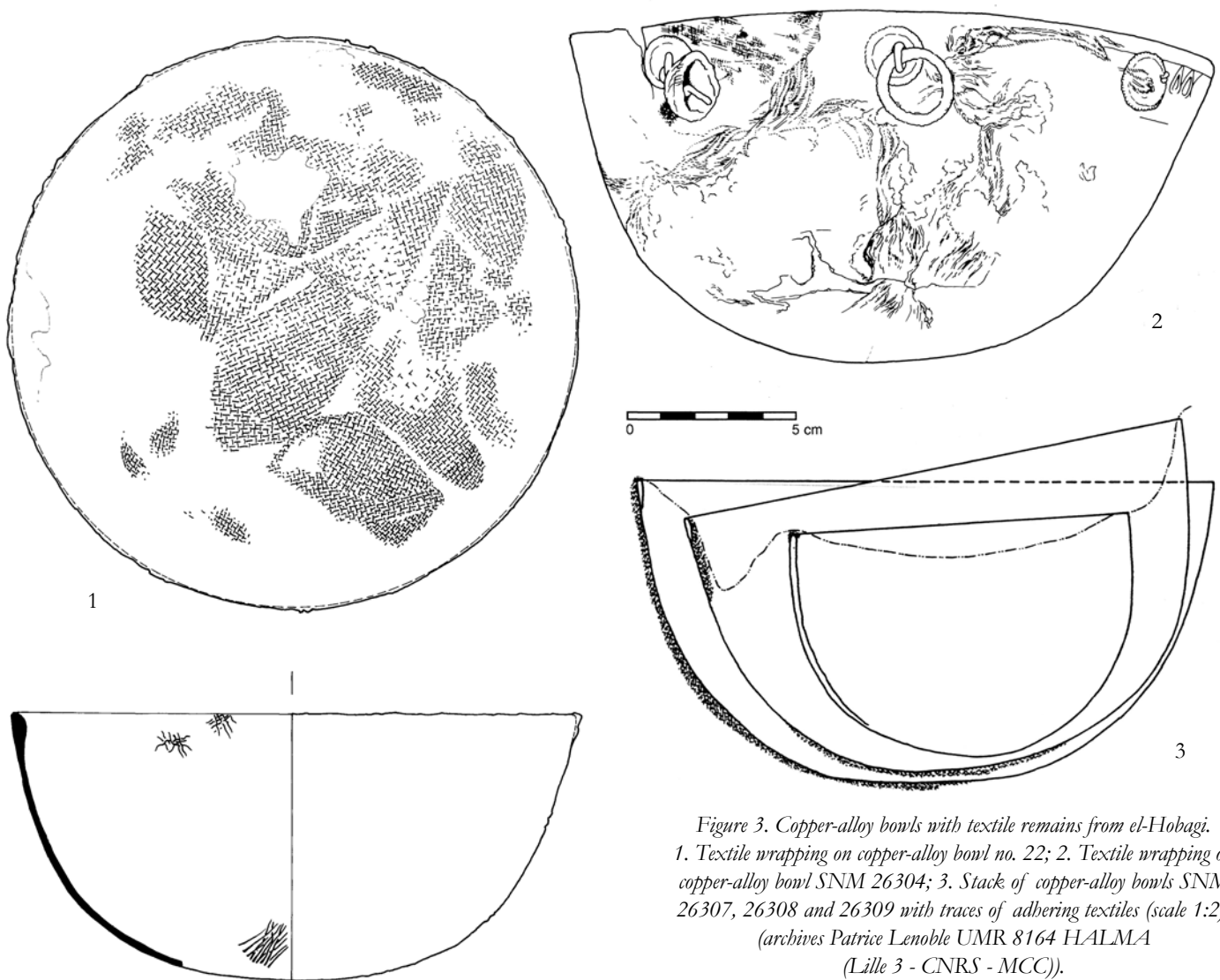


Figure 3. Copper-alloy bowls with textile remains from el-Hobagi. 1. Textile wrapping on copper-alloy bowl no. 22; 2. Textile wrapping on copper-alloy bowl SNM 26304; 3. Stack of copper-alloy bowls SNM 26307, 26308 and 26309 with traces of adhering textiles (scale 1:2). (archives Patrice Lenoble UMR 8164 HALMA (Lille 3 - CNRS - MCC)).

piece of fabric was used to wrap the piles of basins (SNM 23310, 23310, 23311), which were not enveloped separately. Several textiles however, were used to wrap the bowls (SNM 26307-26308, 26309, Figure 3.3). Two different fabrics can be distinguished on the drawing: the first fabric is a thin gauze that clearly isolates the bigger bowl from the middle-sized one; a second textile wraps the bottom of the bigger bowl, up onto the rim, and then covers the top of the group while lining a small part of the middle-sized bowl. A third fabric possibly existed but remains undocumented. The 'religious kit', accordingly piled and wrapped, was finally concealed under a final textile.

Discussion

Similar wrappings are attested on other metal objects. On the same site of el-Hobagi, the tomb under tumulus III contained 30 bowls, two beakers, and one basin made of this material with remnants of a textile envelope. A copper alloy bell, likely belonging to an animal harness, was also wrapped (Lenoble 1999, 178-180). In general, during the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods, textiles and funerary equipment are

frequently associated in conjunction with metal artefacts, sometimes with small personal ornaments or accessories such as tweezers or *kobl* spatulas (Vila 1978, 65; Bonnet 1978, 122). As el-Hobagi demonstrates so well, this association is particularly proven in the case of metal vessels involved in the offering rituals. In Nubia, the same custom has also been noted at Gemai, Sedeinga and Faras (Bates and Dunham 1927, 35, 44; Griffith 1925, 100; Berger el-Naggar 2008, 188). At the Fourth Cataract site 3-O-380 near et-Tereif, an exceptional cow burial, dated from the Post-Meroitic period, also contained a copper-alloy bowl wrapped in fabric (Welsby and Welsby Sjöström 2011). Several graves from the Western cemetery of Meroe revealed wrapped copper-alloy bowls and strainers with traces of adhering textile fabrics and basketry (Dunham 1963, 57, 76-8, 221-2, 248, 311, 326). A comparable arrangement is similarly known for ceramic containers, despite its rare preservation. At Gabati for example, a plate and a small bowl were wrapped together in a coarse cloth (Mallinson 1994, 27).

Besides the wrapping of individual vessels, the observation of textiles fragments in undisturbed burials shows that larger



parts of the equipment could be left entirely covered by a single fabric. This practice was noted both in W308 at Meroe and in tumulus VI at el-Hobagi. The best illustration comes from tomb no. 10 at Nelluah, where a textile was originally spread over 16 ceramics and a silver bowl deposited in a lateral niche (Almagro *et al.* 1965, 85).

The tradition of wrapping funerary objects in textiles, or sometimes in basketry or leather, is therefore well documented along the Middle Nile Valley. It is attested well before the Meroitic period, notably in graves of the Kerma period. For instance, a copper alloy mirror discovered in tomb 79 at Kerma was wrapped in a folded piece of fabric, in the same way as many of its Egyptian counterparts during the Middle Kingdom (Bonnet 1984, 14-5; Price and Gleba 2012). The recurring association of textiles and metal objects appears yet again, for reasons of preservation of course but also as the result of a deliberate choice. In the absence of known iconographic or textual illustration, it remains difficult to identify and interpret the reasons of this choice. On the one hand, wrapping polished and shiny objects with a cloth could have had practical reasons, such as to protect against corrosion. This gesture, more symbolic than truly effective, remains however difficult to comprehend in a funerary context. In any case, the extra step represented by the addition of textile covers seems to demonstrate the materialistic value of the metal artefacts as prestige goods. On the other hand, the wrapping of funerary objects in textiles could find a more symbolic explanation based on the religious significance of the artefacts.

Made of valuable metal or of more readily accessible ceramic, the objects wrapped in textiles are first and foremost distinguished by their liturgical role during the funerary offering rituals. At Meroe, the inventory of grave W308 (see Dunham 1963, 143-51) reveals that textiles are associated with the offering of food, drinks, libations and ointments:

Southern side:

Three jars and one copper alloy bowl decorated with sorghum motifs: offering of cereal or cereal products (like beer)

Northern side, on the footed ceramic altar:

Three ceramic bowls containing organic remains (textiles, basketry, seeds and berries): food offerings

Three small globular jars and three cups: libations or drink offerings

Two glass vases: anointment

In his study on liturgical equipment, Patrice Lenoble recognised the three globular jars and three cups found in W308 as the essential utensils used for libations, standardised during the late Meroitic period as a set of at least six small bowls on a tray (Lenoble 1991).

At el-Hobagi, the wrapped bowls inverted on top of jars were likely used during the ceremony to receive the cereal or beer poured from the jars. The iconography engraved on the bowls depicts lotus buds, the falcon Horus or faces of Hathor that remind us of their religious and funerary signifi-

cance (Lenoble 1999, 172-3). Moreover, the six containers forming the 'religious kit', wrapped and covered by textiles, clearly belonged to the ritual equipment utilised to pour libations. Once again, the cups and basin's décor carries the iconography of rebirth, embodied by aquatic plants such as the lotus or creatures like the frog and crocodile (Figure 4). The Osirian theme of the rebirth and continuity of kingship is also illustrated through falcon figures and ceremonial scenes in front of the ruler (Lenoble 1999, 173-8).

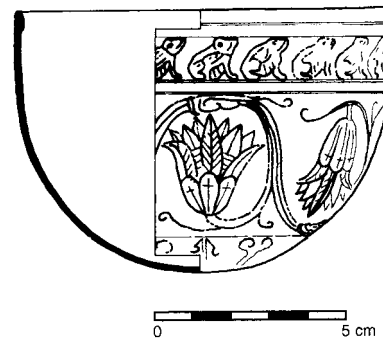


Figure 4. Friezes of frogs and lotuses engraved on copper-alloy cup SNM 26307 (archives Patrice Lenoble UMR 8164 HALMA (Lille 3 - CNRS - MCC)). Scale 1:2.

Far from being interred for materialistic reasons, these funerary offering vessels became an intermediary between the officiants and the deceased, so as to pass onto him or her the rejuvenating powers of the liquids or the food (Lenoble 1991; 1996; Francigny 2015). They undoubtedly took place in a highly sacralised ceremony that bestowed upon them great symbolic value.

It is in this religious context that I propose to understand the textiles under study here: not as mere physical protections but as true contributors to specific stages of the offering rituals. First, the setting of the equipment on a blanket or an animal hide, followed by the careful wrapping of individual vessels and then the final covering, both often made with valuable cotton cloths. Sealing the deposit, the textile wrappings and covers brought the ceremony to a close, thus isolating the purified and powerful vessels from other contents of the grave and enclosing them in layers of liturgical protection.

The two case studies of Meroe W308 and el-Hobagi VI both show the active participation of textiles during the funerary offerings. However, the relative rarity of well-preserved fabrics discovered *in situ* within the grave arrangement leaves pending questions. Was there a gradation in their liturgical value, depending on the religious, funerary, or mundane nature of the wrapped containers? Was the practice systematic for all liturgical containers or limited to certain periods/objects/graves? Can we distinguish an evolution from the Meroitic to the Post-Meroitic periods?

Through this article, I have shed light on several roles of textiles within the ceremony, as some of the many elements that shaped the funeral order of events. Here, textiles illustrate how the detailed study of one type of artefact can help us refine our understanding of Meroitic funerary liturgy.

Acknowledgements

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