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# Explorers, First Collectors and Traders of Textiles

from Egypt of the 1st millennium AD

## TABLE OF CONTENT

- 6 Preface
- 7 A brief note on the need for <sup>14</sup>C-redating
- 7 Acknowledgements
- 8 Abbreviations

### CHAPTER 1

## EXPLORERS, FIRST COLLECTORS AND TRADERS

- 12 A very Victorian tourist: The Reverend Greville John Chester and 19th-century textile collecting at the Victoria and Albert Museum  
*Benjamin Hinson*
- 22 The question of “What went before?” and George Hewitt Myers: The formation of The Textile Museum archaeological collection  
*Sumru Belger Krody*
- 34 Alfred Wiedemann, Émile Brugsch, and the trade in mummy textiles at the end of the 19th century  
*Veerle van Kersen*
- 42 Late Antique textiles from the Robert Forrer collection in Polish museums in the context of his activities as a textile dealer. Preliminary research  
*Anna Glowa*
- 50 A survey of the “Coptic” textiles from the Hermitage collection  
*Olga Osharina*
- 60 Textiles from Egypt’s first millennium AD in Danish museum collections  
*Anne Hedeager Krag*
- 74 Sir Charles Nicholson and the Nicholson Collections at the University of Sydney  
*Glenda Susan Marsh-Letts and Candace Richards*
- 86 Collecting on the side: Textiles from the 1913–14 excavations at Antinoopolis held in three Australasian museums  
*Rosanne Livingstone*

- 96 The first discovery of figured silks in Antinoopolis: Carl Schmidt's excavations in Egypt  
*Kosuke Goto*

- 112 One of the last choices of Albert Gayet in the field: A child's tunic from Antinoopolis in Lyon  
*Fleur Letellier-Willemin*

- 120 Fundort bekannt! Stoffe aus Qarara  
*Claudia Nauwerth*  
*unter Mitarbeit von Béatrice Huber*

#### CHAPTER 2

### RECEPTION OF TEXTILES IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

- 134 "Coptic" fabrics, collectors, and the Fauves  
*Nancy Arthur-Hoskins*

#### CHAPTER 3

### FROM COLLECTIONS: SCIENTIFIC METHODS AND CONSERVATION

- 144 Mini-weavings from Gebel Zeit  
*Roberta Cortopassi and Mohamed Dallel*

- 152 Site-by-site research on First Millennium AD textiles from Egypt at the British Museum: Conservation and documentation of archaeological collections  
*Anna Harrison, Elisabeth R. O'Connell*  
*and Frances Pritchard*

- 166 From the Middle Ages to the Modern Era: A Coptic liturgical garment in the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz  
*Petra Linscheid*  
*with a contribution by Ina Vanden Berghe*

#### CHAPTER 4

### TEXTILES FROM RECENT EXCAVATIONS

- 180 Textile finds from burial 2003-NW-39 of the Fag el-Gamus necropolis  
*Anne Kwaspen and Kristin South*

- 192 Ein Mantel für die kalten Tage  
*Béatrice Huber*

- 202 New finds from old excavations in Western Thebes. Nineteenth-century scholars and the textiles from Deir el-Bachît  
*Sabrina Tatz*

- 210 The spring 2019 season at Hisn al-Bab: Care, study and general presentation of textile finds from Area 9 (6th–7th centuries)  
*Amandine Mérat*

- 220 Bibliography

- 234 Index names

- 235 Index places

- 236 Index textile and costume terms

- 238 Index museums and institutions

- 239 Authors



Engraving by Marius Michel,  
*Photograph of a mummy*,  
c. 1891.

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Chapter 1

**EXPLORERS,  
FIRST COLLECTORS  
AND TRADERS**

Greville Chester's donations were reflected not only in quantity but quality. His textiles include some of the museum's most famous examples, with several displayed prominently today (FIGS 2–3).

Greville Chester's working relationship with the V&A might have been well established, but it was not always harmonious. His correspondence with the museum reveals frustrations over its slowness to respond to him, and there were disagreements over outstanding payments for the textiles, lasting until his death:

“More than a week ago I wrote to the Secretary of the SKM to ask whether the Museum would like to acquire any specimens of ancient Coptic textiles to supplement the fine collection ... as I have had no acknowledgement of the letter I fear it may have miscarried. I should be thankful for an immediate answer.”<sup>23</sup>

“I am sorry to trouble you again, but the delay in the Department's payment for my textiles has been so long, that I must ask whether those taken by South Kensington cannot be paid for without further writing.”<sup>24</sup>

“Will you please sanction payment of £9 to the executors of the late Rev G. J. Chester through Mr Aug. J. Coe, Solicitor.”<sup>25</sup>

Given that these grievances were written in 1887 and 1888, it may be no coincidence that whilst these years proved by far the highest in terms of number of donations, after this point the amount tailed off considerably.

Greville Chester tailored his donations to specific museums depending on their preferences; as the V&A was particularly interested in late-antique textiles, these formed the focus of his collecting for them. However, for Greville Chester, as a clergyman his interest in such textiles was personal and religious as much as academic. As mentioned earlier, the designs found on Late Antique textiles were considered to be supporting evidence for Biblical narratives, with which early Egyptology was heavily concerned.<sup>26</sup> The Egypt Exploration Fund (now Society) itself was initially established to excavate sites believed to be related to the Exodus; Amelia Edwards' announcement of the Fund, in *The Times* of March 30th 1882, appealed to the Christian sensibilities of the British public to fund and support it.

Greville Chester was not ignorant when it came to Egyptian Christianity. He travelled widely across the monastic sites of the country<sup>27</sup> and wrote several papers on biblical archaeology in Egypt, trying to elucidate sites from the exodus narrative based on its geography.<sup>28</sup> Many of his museum donations reflect his interest in Egyptian religious material, most overtly his manuscript donations from the Ben Ezra synagogue to the Bodleian library.<sup>29</sup> Greville Chester's writings on

FIG. 2  
Tapestry woven panel depicting Adonis, V&A 269-1889.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 3  
Tapestry woven panel, V&A 258-1890.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 4  
Tapestry woven panel, V&A 1261-1888.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 5  
Tapestry woven panel with cross and doves within a roundel, V&A 247-1887.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 6  
Tapestry woven roundel from a tunic, with winged erotes around a central cruciform motif, V&A 1279-1888.

© Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo Benjamin Hinson.

FIG. 7  
Tapestry woven panel from a tunic, with a lion surrounded by cruciform designs, V&A 1273-1888.

© Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo Benjamin Hinson.

FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7



his travels across monastic sites also reflect his pre-occupation with finding religious manuscripts; of one site he writes “I did not visit Dayr Mari Bolos...as I was assured that not a single fragment of any ancient MS had escaped the wreck of the eighty years of abandonment.”<sup>23</sup> Greville Chester’s donations to other museums also reflect a Christian interest; a search of the British Museum’s collection database reveals 42 pilgrim flasks and 184 Coptic ostraca, and to the Ashmolean he gave 38 St. Menas flasks.<sup>31</sup>

Given Greville Chesters’ religious background, he would obviously have been interested in Late Antique textiles. Indeed, it is hard not to wonder if his beliefs and interests were further reflected in the *specific* pieces he selected as being worth the V&A’s attention. It is understood that, after the emergence of Christianity, many earlier ‘pagan’ motifs became re-understood and re-associated with a Christian context. In that sense, therefore, most Late Antique Egyptian textiles contain

‘Christian’ iconography. Even if Greville Chester was unaware of the specifics of this historical context, however, it is likely that he would also have readily seen Christian ideas embedded in even superficially decorative designs. For example, floral scenes could be understood as a reference to either Jesus (cf. John 15:5, “I am the Vine”), the gardens of paradise, or depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (FIG. 4).

However, beyond this, a substantial number of fragments given by Greville Chester contain more immediately overt Christian iconography, such as crosses, haloed figures, lions and cherubim. The frequency of such occurrences makes it difficult not to suggest a conscious preference on Greville Chesters’ part. Thirteen fragments contain crosses (FIG. 5), and a further 22 designs could readily be seen as ‘schematic’ crosses (FIG. 6). Lions occur prominently 21 times (FIG. 7), a reference either to the idea of Jesus-as-lion, or the story of Daniel; indeed one fragment, 302-1889

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, June 1, 1887.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, July 14, 1888.

<sup>25</sup> Correspondence from the executors of Greville Chester to the V&A, 26 July, 1892.

<sup>26</sup> GANGE 2006.

<sup>27</sup> CHESTER 1872, 1873.

<sup>28</sup> CHESTER 1875, 1880.

<sup>29</sup> JEFFERSON 2011, esp. 175–176. Between 1889 and 1892 Chester sent 991 manuscripts from the synagogue.

<sup>30</sup> CHESTER 1873, 116.

<sup>31</sup> SEIDMANN 2006b, 149.



FIG. 8



FIG. 9



FIG. 8  
Tapestry woven panel  
possibly depicting Daniel in  
the Lions' Den, V&A 302-1889.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.  
Photo Benjamin Hinson.

FIG. 9  
Tapestry woven *clavus* from  
a tunic, with a central haloed  
figure, V&A 1274-1888.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 10  
Tapestry woven panel  
depicting The Visitation,  
V&A 1283-1888.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIG. 11  
Tapestry woven panel from  
a tunic, with lions and  
horsemen showing gestures  
of blessing surrounding  
a roundel with vines in a  
cruciform arrangement,  
V&A 244-1887.

© Victoria and Albert Museum.  
Photo Benjamin Hinson.

(FIG. 8) potentially depicts Daniel in the lions' den, and five depict lions hunting deer or antelope, a metaphor for the triumph of good over evil. Horsemen, viewable as military saints such as George or Demetrius, occur 13 times, and indeed seven figures are haloed (FIG. 9). Birds such as quails and doves occur 29 times. There are also three fragments containing winged cherubim, and a fragment depicting the Visitation (FIG. 10). On some pieces many themes combine, as on 244-1887 (FIG. 11). There is, therefore, a real tendency towards explicit Christian iconography in piece selection.

## GREVILLE CHESTER AS A COLLECTOR

In one sense, Greville Chester was unusual for a collector of his time, with a level of academic rigour; his many publications, as well as his Ashmolean catalogue, were mentioned above. Greville Chester was not an uninformed traveller, but a savant with an interest in and history of writing about archaeology. Additionally, when known, he recorded where items were brought or sourced from, a rare level of provenance information for the time.<sup>32</sup> In his letters to the V&A regarding textiles, he frequently located them for the benefit of the museum:

"I beg to inform you that I have this year brought back from Egypt a considerable number of ancient textiles found in Echmîm, some of which I believe differ from the specimens in the splendid collection acquired for the museum by W.H. Wallis."<sup>33</sup>

"I enclose a thin scarf and a leather object embroidered with Coptic crosses, of which I do not know the use, and beg to offer to give them to the South Kensington museum. They were found at Echmîm. Believe me."<sup>34</sup>

"I leave at the same time four specimens of textiles from Echmîm."<sup>35</sup>

"I enclose 3 pieces of Ancient Arabic silk ... these were found at Erment, Upper Egypt. I send also a wonderful yellow silk handkerchief from Echmîm, for which I will ask £4."<sup>36</sup>

"I enclose another piece of ancient Arabic silk found at Edfoo, upper Egypt."<sup>37</sup>

With textiles, however, a pinch of salt is needed. With the exceptions noted above, when Greville Chester provided a specific location for his donations, this tended to be Akhmim.<sup>38</sup> This is at first glance entirely reasonable. Akhmim was recognised even in antiquity as one of the key weaving centres in Egypt, an association apparently stretching back into Pharaonic times (see for example Strabo, *Geography* XVII, 1.41), and huge numbers of the textiles now in museum collections were indeed found there (or more specifically in the necropolis of al-Hawawish northeast of the town).



FIG. 10



FIG. 11

<sup>32</sup> THOMPSON 2016, 125–126; JEFFERSON 2019, 271.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, May 25, 1887.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, September 30, 1887.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, June 4, 1888.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, December 28, 1891. The piece from Akhmim is today 611-1892, and those from Armant 612 to 614-1892. Further Greville Chester pieces with an Armant provenance are 1385-1888, 1668-1888 and 260-1889.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Greville Chester to the V&A, January 1st, 1892. This piece is today 615&A-1892.

# A survey of the “Coptic” textiles from the Hermitage collection

Olga Osharina

The founder of the Hermitage Coptic textile collection was Vladimir Bock 1849–1899 (FIG. 1). He graduated from the faculty of Natural History of St. Petersburg University. On February 20, 1888, he was appointed to the position of curator in the Medieval and Renaissance Department of the Hermitage. In the course of his two voyages to Egypt in 1888 and 1897 he acquired 2,500 fragments of ancient textiles for the Hermitage.<sup>1</sup> On his first trip to Egypt Bock was accompanied by the prominent Egyptologist Vladimir Golenishchev, who visited the Nile valley several times after the mid 1870s. Some information about the origin of the Hermitage textiles is presented in the article by Golenishchev *Archaeological travel to Egypt in the winter of 1888–1889*. In winter-spring 1888–1889 Bock bought a splendid woven medallion representing the goddess Ge<sup>2</sup> and the river deity of the Nile which is in the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts now.<sup>3</sup> The provenance of the objects brought from Egypt by Bock is for the most part unknown; only in some cases is the place of their acquisition indicated. In the archives of the Hermitage Museum there are only a few documents related to him: his curriculum vitae, some official orders concerning his two trips to Egypt, plans and materials connected with his book “*Matériaux pour servir à l’archéologie de l’Égypte chrétienne*”, published after his death by his friends, and some notes and sheets of paper with prices of several objects of applied art (except textiles) that he bought in Egypt. In autumn 1898 Bock organised the first exhibition of “Coptic” art in Russia, which took place in the Hermitage Museum in Raphael’s loggias.<sup>4</sup> More than 1,500 objects, photos and drawings were presented at the “Coptic” exhibition. Orientalist Boris A. Turaev visited that exposition and wrote a very short article about “Coptic” textiles from the Hermitage in 1890. He states that some of these textiles came from Akhmim, Samaina, Fayum and Naqada, and that some

were bought from the local fellahin and only a few from traders in Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>5</sup>

After the October revolution of 1917, due to the nationalisation of private collections many new objects were acquired by the Hermitage. In January 1920 several textiles (about fifteen) came from the former collection of the archaeologist N. I. Vorobiev. In the summer of the same year the widow of Turaev sold to the Hermitage his Egyptian collection, including several dozen Christian items. On 7 October 1931, the Samarkand Antique Society transferred to the Hermitage 103 Egyptian and Late Antique objects, among them eight textiles. In the Hermitage archives there are two vouchers from the Cairo museum, signed by its director, Gaston Maspero (1846–1916), confirming the authenticity of several objects.<sup>6</sup>

An especially valuable contribution to the Hermitage collection was the inclusion of the items from the Palaeography Museum, the former private collection of academician Nikolay P. Likhachev.<sup>7</sup> In the 1920s over 500 textiles were transferred to the Hermitage from the Museum of the School of technical drawing founded by Baron Alexander Stieglitz.<sup>8</sup> Most of them were acquired from the Aachen canon and art historian Franz Bock (1823–1899), who in his turn bought them from antique dealers in Akhmim.<sup>9</sup> After the Second World War a very few additions to the Hermitage Coptic collection took place. The most significant was the acquisition of 13 textiles from the widow of I. I. Tolstoj (doctor of classical philology, the great-grandson of field marshal Michail Illarionowitsch Kutuzov [1745–1813]), in October 1953.

The collection of textiles in the Hermitage, which comprises about 3,200 pieces, can be divided into four unequal groups. To the first one belong samples of purple fabrics with floral and geometric ornaments, some of them probably originating from Akhmim. The

<sup>1</sup> Archive of the State Hermitage, reserve F. 1, list V, item 3, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> DV 11440, see OSHARINA 2017, 224 fig. 4.

<sup>3</sup> CAT. HAMM 1996. 308–309 no. 349.

<sup>4</sup> CAT. ST. PETERSBURG 2004, 14.

<sup>5</sup> TURAEV 2000, 12.

<sup>6</sup> KAKOVKIN 2000, 150.

<sup>7</sup> CAT. ST. PETERSBURG 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Archive of the State Hermitage, reserve F. 1, list 12, item 22, 1897.

<sup>9</sup> BORKOPP-RESTLE 2008, 198.

FIG. 1  
Vladimir Bock.  
© The State Hermitage Museum.





FIG. 7

Turning to scenic compositions on “Coptic” textiles one may notice that only a small part is connected with the Bible. Most of them belong to the rich Antique heritage. The most popular were the symbols connected with the idea of resurrection and eternal life. These are the images of the Dionysian cycle, scenes of vintage and harvesting fruit (FIG. 7), numerous allegories of prosperity (FIG. 8) and good fortune (FIG. 9), and the seasons of the year, expressing the constantly changing rhythm of life and its cyclic nature. Scenes representing Dionysos and his retinue are numerous: Silenes and Pan, warriors with shields, dancing maenads (FIG. 10), musicians and animals.

Fabrics with inscriptions are rare among Late Antique textiles.<sup>15</sup> It is important to mention a fragment of a textile with a winged female figure of the goddess Nike and a Greek inscription in two lines “Mercy of God with the saint lord Kollu(thos?)” (FIG. 11). The symbolic meaning of the scene inspired the idea of retribution after death: the goddess Nike awards Kolluf a wreath. The textile is of considerable interest from the viewpoint of iconography, since the figure of Nike resembles the angels in the scene of the Ascension.

Prominent in the Hermitage collection is the group of textiles representing riders on horses and centaurs. This vast group of items dating between the 4th and the 11th centuries includes over a hundred objects, some of them quite rare. For example, a tapestry fragment depicting a man seated upon a lion can represent Dionysos or St. Mamantus.<sup>16</sup> The composition with Alexander the Great flying on a textile fragment in the Hermitage (DV 18964)<sup>17</sup> is comparable to a similar scene on a Byzantine silver plate from the Hermitage collection.

FIG. 8



FIG. 7

Tapestry with a scene of vintage, Egypt, 7th century. Linen, wool. The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg DV 11162.

© The State Hermitage Museum. Photo Svetlana Suetova, Leonard Kheifets.

FIG. 8

Tapestry *tabula* with fruit baskets and flowers, Egypt, 4th century. Linen, wool. The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg DV 11321.

© The State Hermitage Museum. Photo Svetlana Suetova, Leonard Kheifets.

FIG. 9

Tapestry *tabula* with flying eros with a bowl, Egypt, 4th century. Linen, wool. The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg DV 13216.

© The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Svetlana Suetova, Leonard Kheifets.

FIG. 10

Tapestry with dancing maenad, Egypt, 4th century. Linen, wool. The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg DV 11291.

© The State Hermitage Museum. Photo Svetlana Suetova, Leonard Kheifets.

FIG. 11

Tapestry *tabula* with flying Nike, Egypt, 6th century. Linen, wool. The State Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg DV 11168.

© The State Hermitage Museum. Photo Svetlana Suetova, Leonard Kheifets.

<sup>15</sup> FLUCK/HELMECKE 2006.

<sup>16</sup> DV 11538, CAT.

ST. PETERSBURG 2017, 88–89 no. 27.

<sup>17</sup> OSHARINA 2014, 60, fig. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Inv. no. 9094 see CAT. ST.

PETERSBURG 2004, 89, 173.

<sup>19</sup> DV 13252, see OSHARINA 2013, 221, fig. 16.

FIG. 9



FIG. 11



FIG. 10



It is known that the range of Biblical subjects on the objects from Christian Egypt was rather limited. The development of martyrdom and the ideas of Apocalypse inspired the idea of retribution after death. The images of Egyptian saints remind us of the most important Christian doctrine: the righteous acquire eternal life and bliss. Especially popular at that time were St. Thekla, St. Menas the Martyr, St. Colluth, and St. Sisinius. The images of Christian saints were not usually supplied with labels, so they can be identified only through iconography. Thus a medallion on a child's tunic with a woman, her arm stretched forward, and a lion, can be identified as an image of St. Thekla.<sup>18</sup>

Another Hermitage fragment displays a medallion with a horseman spearing a demoness. It is possibly St. Sisinius.<sup>19</sup> Scenes from the lives of prophets are among the earliest Biblical subjects on "Coptic" textiles. They remind us of the salvation and the coming of the Messiah, giving instruction in righteousness and sanctity. Stories from the lives of prophets who preached salvation and the advent of the Messiah, setting the example of piety and sanctity, were common in Late Antique art. In paintings, sculpture, miniatures, and other objects of art the image of David, the king-prophet, often occurs. In the Hermitage there are several fragments of a tunic (stripes and medallions) with scenes



FIG. 3

FIG. 3  
Tunic, Design Museum  
Denmark, inv. 149/1958.

© Design Museum Denmark,  
photo Pernille Klemp.

FIG. 4  
Detail of tunic, inv. 149/1958.

© Design Museum Denmark,  
photo: Pernille Klemp

FIG. 5  
Fragment with portrait,  
Design Museum Denmark,  
inv. 10/1967.

© Design Museum Denmark,  
photo Pernille Klemp.

### *Tunic*

- Design Museum Denmark, inv. 149/1958 (FIGS 3–4)
- Gift from the New Carlsberg Foundation and ors. L. Zeuthens Mindelegat; purchased by I. de Baranowich in Paris in 1958
- Length from shoulder to hem: 123 cm; chest width: 117 cm; sleeve length 43–45 cm<sup>4</sup>
- Warp: S-spun red wool yarn; dye analyses show that it is dyed with kermes and madder;<sup>5</sup> weft: fine S-spun wool yarn – red and light yellow in the basic fabric; blue, green, red, white, violet, pink and brown in the patterned parts; thread count: 10 x 28 threads/cm in the red woven area, details in *soumakh* and embroidery; tunic in a cross-like shape with a weave width of 257 cm
- Date: ca. 7th–8th centuries

This tunic was made of red wool with yellow stripes down the sides, and decorated with tapestry-woven *orbiculi*, *clavi*, and sleeve bands. The *orbiculi* on the knee area, two on either side of the tunic, are 16 cm in diameter (FIG. 4).<sup>6</sup>

FIG. 4





FIG. 5

*Fragment with portrait*

- Design Museum Denmark inv. 10/1967 (FIG. 5)
- Gift from Helge Jacobsens Legacy;<sup>7</sup> bought in 1967 from Tove Alm, Stockholm, who brought it from Egypt
- Height 15.5, width 9.8 cm
- Wool and linen, tapestry
- Date: ca. 5th–7th centuries

This very fine illustrated tapestry fragment shows the bust of a human being with a beige-coloured face. Remains of a yellow halo surround the head. The person is wearing a garment with wedge-shaped folds in black, red and blue. The figure's right hand is closed around a strap that goes over the shoulder and under the arm as if something is being worn on the back.

The fragment has occasionally been interpreted as "The Good Shepherd".<sup>8</sup> No studies have yet been carried out on this very interesting textile, but hopefully this will soon be done.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The weaving started at the end of one of the sleeves and continued at the long side of the tunic, whereby the cross shape is formed, possibly on a vertical web (ERIKSEN 1996, 72)

<sup>5</sup> ERIKSEN 1996, 72–75: tunic.

<sup>6</sup> FRANZÉN 1961, 76–96. This tunic was restored at the Textile Department of the Central Office of National Antiquities (Riksantikvarieämbetet), Stockholm, during the winter of 1959/60.

<sup>7</sup> *Hvem Hvad Hvor* 1968, 434. (*Hvem Hvad Hvor* is a yearly

handbook from Politikens Forlag, which was published in the period from 1933 to 2012. The book gathered up this year's events in Denmark and the rest of the world, partly in calendar form and partly in larger articles.)

<sup>8</sup> MÜTZEL 1926–28, 212, shows a similar mummy portrait on page 212. This fragment is entitled *The Good Shepherd* in PALUDAN 1974, picture no. 112.

<sup>9</sup> HEDEAGER KRAG 2015, 128.