

THE NEWBERRY COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC EMBROIDERIES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EASTERN ART, ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD

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In 1946 the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford was given a collection of nearly a thousand embroideries by Professor Percy Newberry, the eminent Egyptologist. He had acquired them in Egypt where he started his career in 1890 as a young man in charge of an archaeological survey team. According to his wife, Essie, he began collecting in the 1890's but most of the pieces were acquired later during the 1920's and early 1930's. At the time historical embroideries from countries around the Eastern Mediterranean attracted a great deal of interest from both private collectors and institutions but the Newberry collection is unique both in its size and variety. Its importance was recognized as long ago as 1937 by Carl Lamm, the Swedish art historian who referred to this "amazing treasure" in an article published in *Ars Islamica* (Lamm 1937: IV. 64-77) but the textiles have remained largely unknown over the last fifty years.

At first sight the textiles are not very impressive. They are mostly fragments of plain weave linen cloth embroidered with silk thread that range in size from a few centimetres to a large sampler that is approximately one metre square and many of them are in a worn and fragile condition. Newberry's wife, Essie, commented in an article (Newberry 1940: VIII. 11-18) published in 1940 that "they came from graves and rubbish heaps of Al-Fustat, Old Cairo and Egypt". Coming from such locations, it is hardly surprising that Essie Newberry describes the objects as "rags". The aim of this paper is to consider why such rags can also be called "amazing treasure" and reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements.

When the collection came to the Ashmolean Museum, the textiles were mostly still stuck onto large cardboard folio sheets and arranged in no particular order. They have now been removed using a steam pencil, allowed to relax and placed in individual folder mounts made for each one. There are very few complete objects because fabric was precious and re-used until just rags remained: even the rags themselves could be utilized to stuff cushions and mattresses. For this reason many more children's tunics have survived compared with adult-sized ones as the latter afforded little material worth salvaging. The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto boasts fifteen children's tunics in its large collection of medieval Islamic textiles but no complete full sized ones. The only tunic in the Newberry collection is a child's one (fig. 1). Again, items such as caps have no secondary value and this is doubtless why most collections include one or two and Newberry acquired six of them. Another reason for the incomplete state of the objects is that the dealers only wanted the so-called "pretty" bits that appealed to their clients and sometimes they

subdivided these yet again. The result is that it is extremely difficult to gauge from what articles most of the fragments have come.

Since the embroideries were acquired through dealers in Cairo, they have little or no recorded provenance. Newberry left a small notebook in which he had written the names of places from which a few of the objects came but there is no way of knowing whether this was personal information or supplied by the dealer. One of the textiles had a note attached to it that read "found on rubbish heaps of old Cairo" (fig. 2). It is appliqué work with a design that could be the lion of Sultan Baybars who ruled from 1260-1277 and so can be dated to the second half of the 13th century. The technique has been practised in Cairo for hundreds of years and continues to this day in the street of the tentmakers. Newberry also recorded that one of the *ṭirāz* bands in the collection was found in a cemetery some forty miles south of Cairo at Atfeh. The term *ṭirāz* originally meant any embroidered decoration but in this context it means an embroidered inscription band. The bands are unique in that their date of manufacture can be learnt from the inscription as it usually contained the name of the ruling Caliph. One particular *ṭirāz* in the collection includes the information that it was made in the workshop of Tinnis, at the hands of 'Ubayd-allāh, son of Sulaymān, in the year 288, 900 Christian Era (fig. 3). Newberry's notebook provides such scanty information that all that is certain is the items were collected in Egypt but this does not mean they were all made there. The embroidery stitch on some of the other early 10th century *ṭirāz* bands is characteristic of those made in Iraq where chain stitch embroidery was already a well established craft, whereas those made in Egypt at this time appear to have been made by less skilled craftsmen lacking an embroidery tradition.

Dating the textiles is extremely problematical with the exception of the *ṭirāz* embroideries which are among the earliest pieces in the collection. It covers a span of more than 900 years ending with ones from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that can be dated by their resemblance to others from the Ottoman empire both by design and stitch. These later embroideries include samplers that served as records of patterns from which the worker could choose motifs to copy onto towel or napkin borders.

However most of the embroideries date from the late Islamic medieval period when Egypt was ruled by the Mamlūk Sultans, that is between 1250 and 1517. Research on textiles from this period has chiefly been limited to the sumptuous silk woven fabrics used for ceremonial garments and outer wear. The ones in the Newberry collection are not from luxurious garments but from items of light clothing and household furnishings made of linen for everyday use. Their decoration is characteristic of that found in Mamlūk art including among others epigraphy, geometric patterns, zig-zag patterns, and patterns from heraldic symbols. The embroiderers do not appear to have adapted designs directly from the woven textiles as in, for instance, the case of some Ottoman darned hangings, but arranged design

elements in bands, lattices and all-over patterns to suit the type of textile. This does not mean that all the design features of the earlier tapestry woven bands were abandoned; for instance the characteristic little crested borders seen on Coptic tunics continued to decorate the edges of the new Islamic geometric patterns.

When textiles from this period are displayed in museums or illustrated in publications, they are usually just described as "Mamlük, 1250 to 1517" but this covers almost three hundred years so is a very imprecise description. The material cannot be classified successfully using the designs as the sole criteria because similar ones were worked in various kinds of embroidery techniques but when design and stitch are similar then recognisable categories do make their appearance. Fortunately, because there are so many examples in the collection available for comparison, it is possible to put many of them into distinct classes and a chronology can at least be attempted.

By far the largest category is made up of embroideries worked in pattern darning in running stitch: it accounts for approximately one quarter of the total collection. They are mostly bands of decoration that appear very like weaving but have been embroidered by stitching over and under a specified number of threads to form the repeating patterns. Originally, the so-called Coptic tunics, which were woven in the piece, were decorated by tapestry woven bands inserted by the weaver of the garment, but later the style changed to tunics made of pieces cut from lengths of fabric. The reasons for the change in loom technology are not clear but by the 10th century tunics were being constructed with a continuous back and front centre panel, a vertical slit neck opening, wide straight sleeves, and slightly shaped side panels. It seems that they were decorated with bands of geometric patterns that were either woven in with a supplementary weft or embroidered. On surviving embroidered tunics the decoration was often worked around the neck slit, in horizontal and vertical spaced lines on the body of the garment and around the cuffs and bottom hem. Samplers have survived that served as models for the embroiderer to copy and from which the customer could select patterns (fig. 4). As well as narrow bands like those worked on trouser bottoms and on children's tunics, there are wider ones like those found on handkerchiefs and towel borders and also small motifs of birds and fishes that were worked in diaper patterns on tunics.

Naturally, it is impossible to know how representative a picture can be drawn of any given period simply from the items that have found their way into museum collections but it seems likely that embroidery was well established in Egypt by the end of the 13th century and, interestingly enough, Carl Lamm commented in his article that the true characteristics of the Mamlük style appeared at this time. A sampler dating from the mid 13th century shows a different arrangement of darning where the design has been left in reserve by covering the background with a pattern of dots and threaded outlines have been added to define the edges. This type of work produces a very striking effect particularly when worked on a large scale and

surviving fragments feature typical Mamlūk motifs. Pattern darning was a very popular way of decorating clothes and furnishings over a long period in spite of it being such a labour intensive technique. The radio carbon date for the child's tunic is late 14th/early 15th century whereas the one given to the sampler was mid 12th century.

Other less demanding counted work stitches make up two more distinct categories both of which would have been more economical in labour and silk thread than the pattern darned ones. One is a variation of herringbone stitch where the threads cross each other and produce a raised plaited texture. Besides being used for geometric band patterns it was used to work striking counterchange or reciprocal patterns where the shape is shown first in its positive and then in its negative form (fig. 5). Fragments decorated with small palmettes on zig-zag lines are reminiscent of a counterchange design seen on a *mihṛāb* from an early 15th century complex built by Sultan al-Muayyad in Cairo. These striking patterns often feature the fleur de lis motif that was eventually adopted as a royal symbol. The other counted stitch is known as double running and was particularly successful when used for geometric patterns (fig. 6). Somewhat different in style are borders with repeating designs of pairs of birds perching on branches: double running is particularly suitable for small towels as the embroidery is reversible because it looks the same both on the front and back. Lacking any indication as to the date of this kind of work, one of them was selected for radio carbon dating and was assigned to the first half of the 15th century.

Considerably earlier in date and in complete contrast is a group of embroideries where the threads have been laid across the ground fabric and stitched down at regular intervals. This so-called couched work is a fast technique for laying down areas of colour and particularly suitable for bold designs intended to be clearly visible. The embroidery is invariably worked in red silk and often outlined with blue thread so that any message such as "glory and prosperity" stands out against the plain linen background (fig. 7). Fortunately some have designs indicating their likely date: one of a lion with a raised front paw and S shaped tail like the ones associated with Sultan Baybars and his son is probably from the second half of the 13th century. A lion in a similar posture is carved in stone on a plaque in the Islamic museum, Cairo and like the embroidery was once coloured red.

Some of the motifs found on the silk woven textiles can also be found on the linen embroideries. This applies to the lotus and peony flower motifs that originally came from China and became part of the Mamlūk design vocabulary. The embroiderers outlined the shapes with a linear stitch and filled in the background with coloured silk with dense, regular slanting stitches worked on the diagonal (fig. 8). The same technique was used to translate flowing arabesque designs with scrolling stems supporting floriate trefoils and leaves that suggest a mid 14th century date. Some pieces have been worked very simply in a linear stitch such as split or stem just to cover the outlines drawn on by the craftsman. They form quite a substantial

group of eighteen pieces in all and include parts of garments and furnishings: one item is part of a garment front decorated with repeating heart-shaped motifs around the neck opening and shows that freestyle embroidery was also worked on garments. Four of them are tabs that once hung down around a tent or canopy: the one on the left of the pair illustrated has a diamond shape within a circle that was the blazon of the Master of the Robes (fig. 9). Similar heraldic symbols appear on Mamlük glass and metalwork. Some of the linear type embroideries have been worked with a stitch variation that is only found on Mamlük work. It developed from split stitch that normally produces a smooth outline by the worker inserting his needle in such way that the thread formed small scallops: the most obvious explanation is that the embroiderer was attempting to reproduce those seen on some 14th century silk fabrics.

Sometimes two or more stitches were employed to work the elaborate geometric patterns so characteristic of Mamlük decoration. A new dimension was added when openwork techniques were introduced demanding a high degree of skill on the part of the embroiderer. The resulting embroidery (fig. 10) is the finest type of work produced in 15th century Egypt and resembles that depicted in a 1499 painting of *The Circumcision* by the Italian, Marco Marziale (Ettinghausen 1957: 114-115). Openwork techniques themselves were further developed in Italy and eventually led to the production of needlelace. Likewise many of the counted work embroideries made in Europe and North Africa during succeeding centuries have their origins in Mamlük embroidery as do some of the designs in the 16th century printed pattern books. It should come as no surprise therefore that this unique collection of embroideries was given the description of "amazing treasure" some sixty years ago.

REFERENCES

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- Newberry, Essie W. 1940. "Embroideries from Egypt". *Embroidery. The Journal of the Embroiderers' Guild*. VIII.1.11-18.

ILLUSTRATIONS



fig. 1. 1984.353 Child's tunic with panels embroidered with tiny fish motifs in brown silk on undyed linen, 55x52cm.

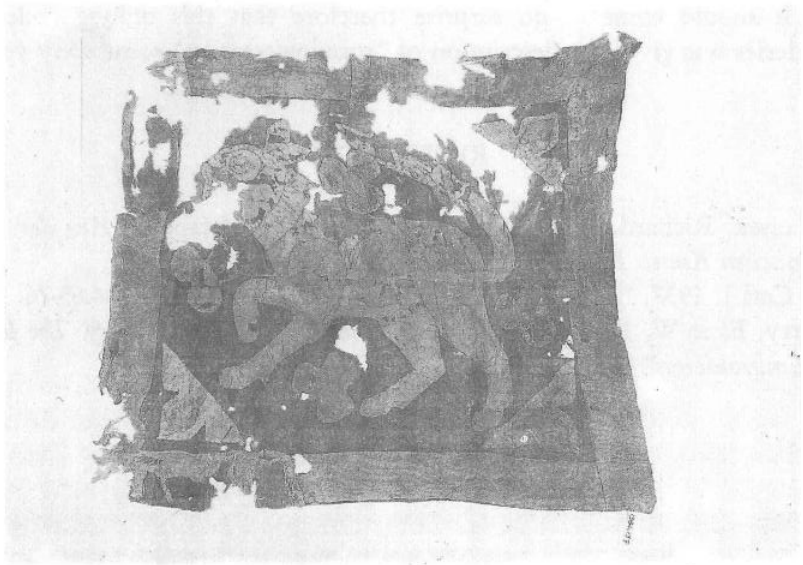


fig. 2. 1984.137 Cover decorated with a lion in appliqué work on blue background, 38x56.5cm.

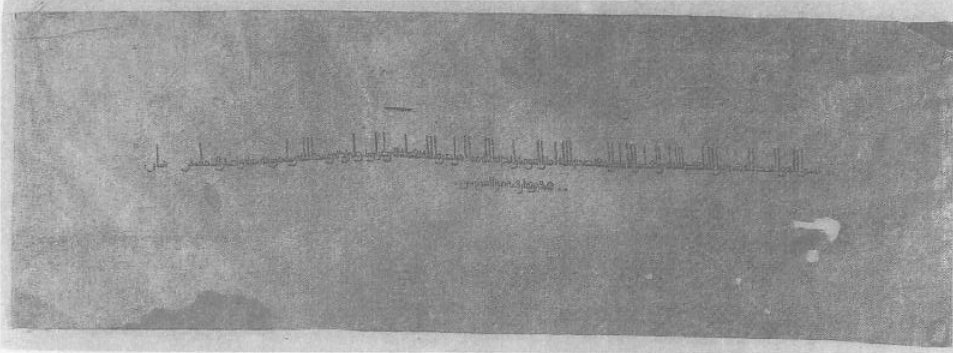


fig. 3. 1988.47 *Tirāz* band worked in blue silk embroidery on glazed linen ground, 11x31.5cm.

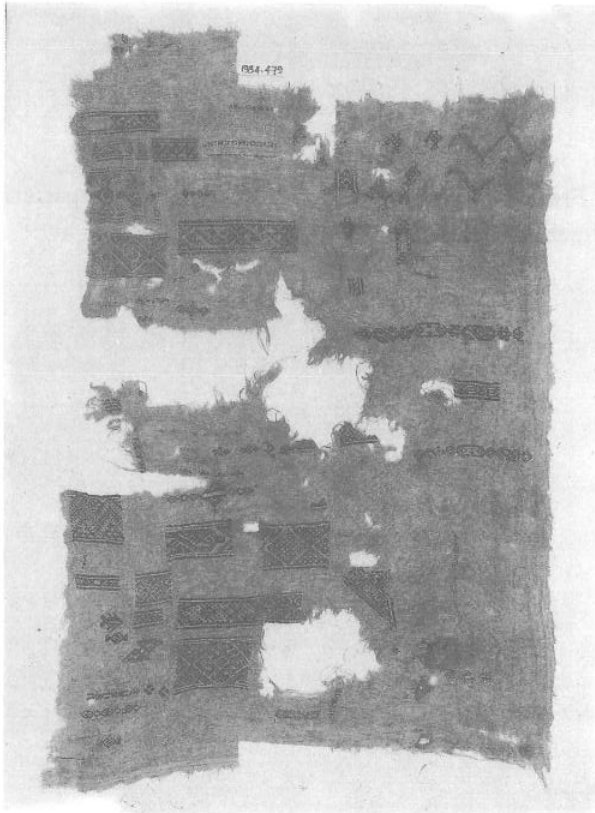


fig. 4. 1984.479 Sampler with geometric patterns and bird motifs embroidered in red, blue, green and brown silk on undyed linen ground, 26.5x41.5cm.

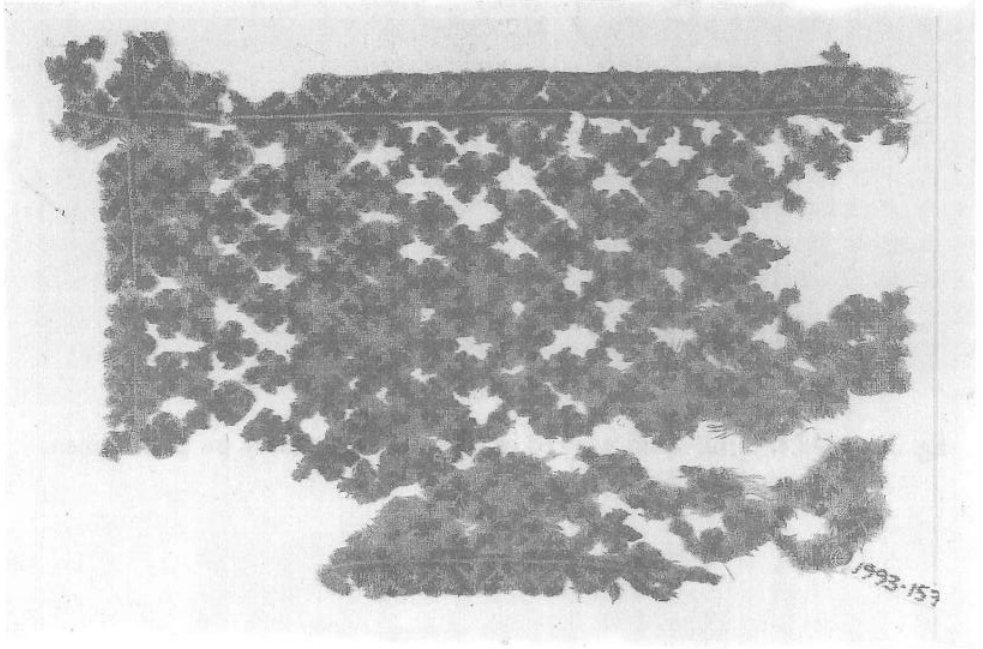


fig. 5. 1993.157 Fragment embroidered with counterchange pattern in blue silk on undyed linen ground, 24.4x16cm.

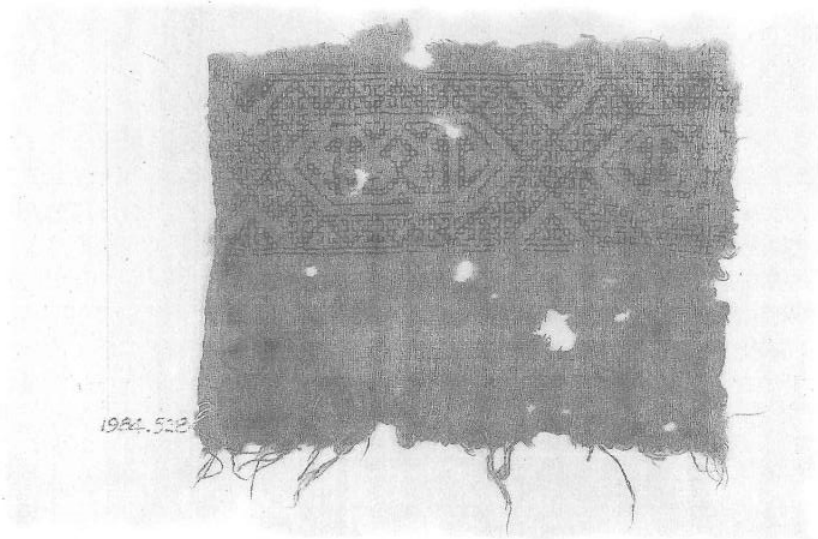


fig. 6. 1984.528 Fragment of a band embroidered with a geometric pattern in blue silk on undyed lined ground, 12x14cm.

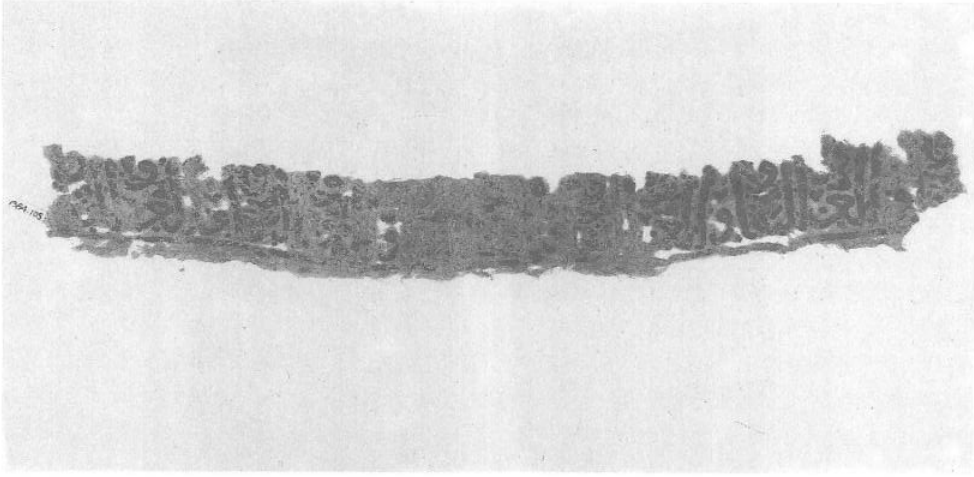


fig. 7. 1984.105 A band embroidered with the words "glory and prosperity" in red silk on undyed linen ground, 7x56cm.

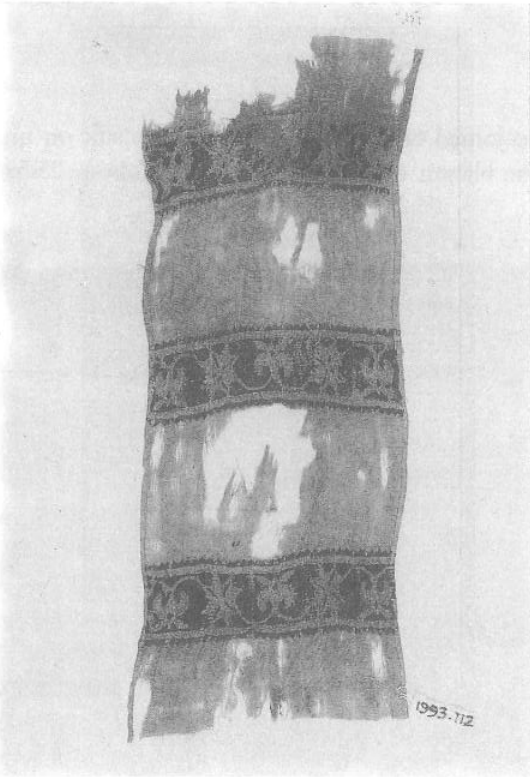


fig. 8. 1993.112 Fragment embroidered with stylised flowers in blue and cream silk on undyed linen ground, 25.5x10.5cm.

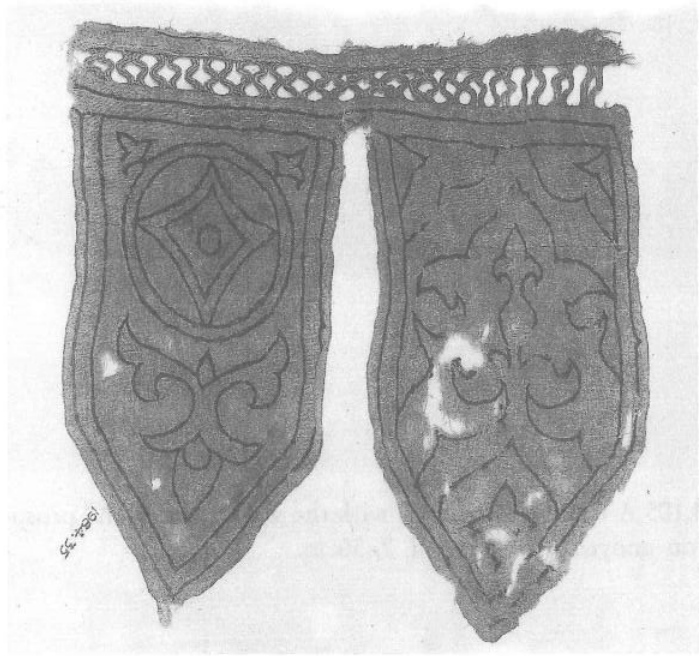


fig. 9. 1984.35 Two joined tabs embroidered in blue silk on undyed linen ground (one with the blazon of the Master of the Robes), 23.5x24.5cm.

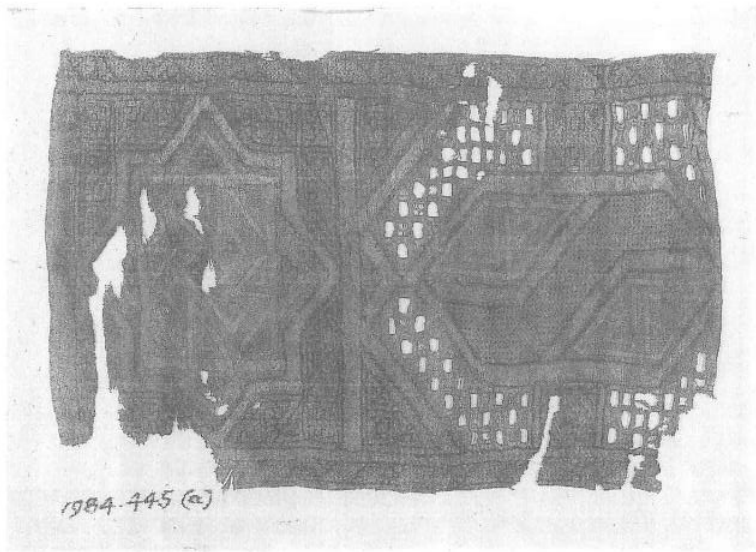


fig. 10. 1984.445a. Fragment of a band embroidered in blue and yellow silk on undyed linen ground, 11.2x27.3cm.