

The textiles from Sikait (Egyptian Eastern Desert)

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7 figures

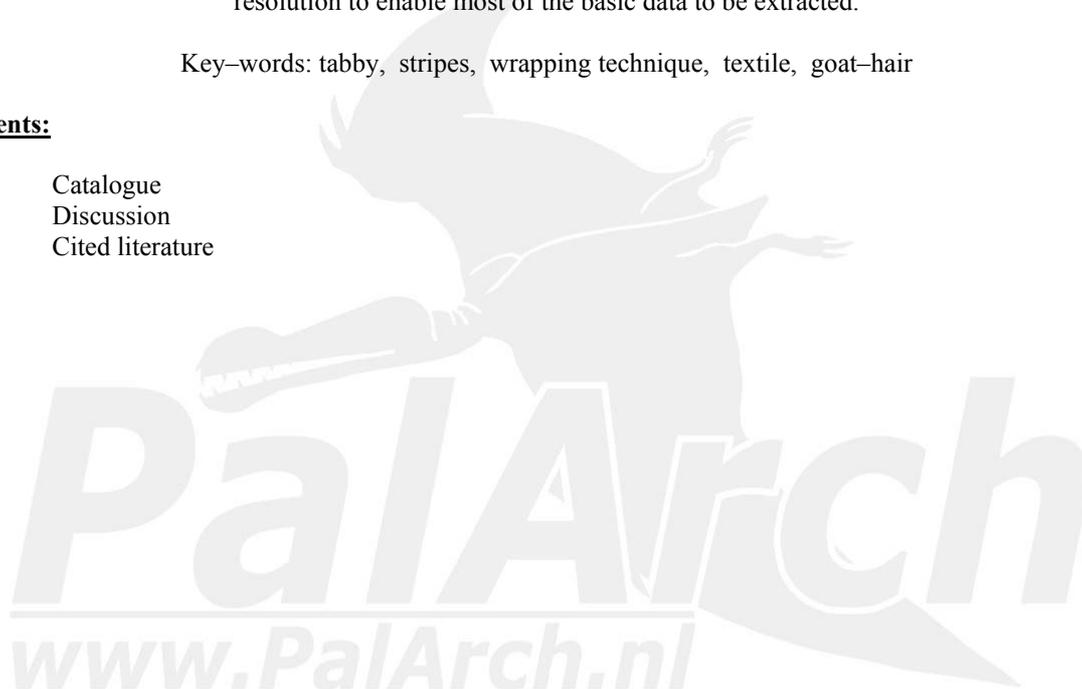
Abstract

The 2003 season at Sikait yielded ten textile fragments from six different late Roman contexts. They were not examined on site; but the photographs on which the descriptions below are based were of sufficiently fine resolution to enable most of the basic data to be extracted.

Key-words: tabby, stripes, wrapping technique, textile, goat-hair

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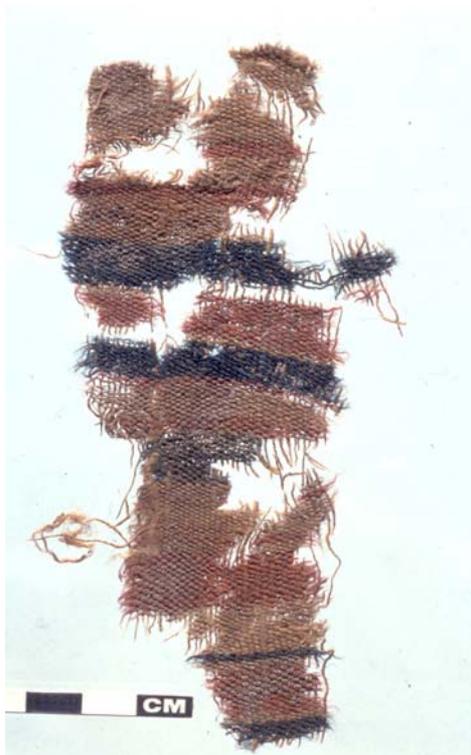
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1. Catalogue

1. SK03-9.007 pb 17 (2836-I)

*Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.*

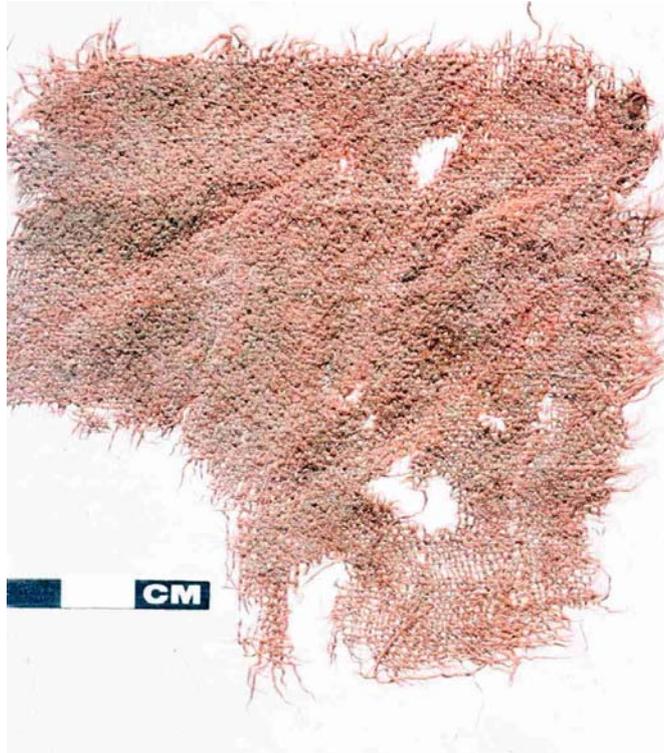
Piece of striped fabric, presumably wool, tabby.

Wa: S-spun, 8-9 per cm, wide spaced. Variable yarn thickness. Length 120 mm.

We: weak S-spun, c. 20-22 per cm. All thickish yarns. Length 55 mm.

Colors in weft: ?4 purple yarns/c. 30 undyed/6 pink/c. 12 undyed/6 purple/?4 pink/c. 16 undyed/c. 18 purple/c. 4 undyed/c. 14 pink/c. 4 undyed/c. 14 purple/c. 4 pink/c. 16 undyed/c. 4 pink/c. 16 purple/c. 34 undyed or indeterminate (pinkish)/c. 20 pink/c. 20 undyed/4 purple/c. 24 indeterminate pink or undyed (might be pink flanked by 4-6 undyed on each side)/8+ purple.

2. SK03-5.002 pb 78 (1786-I)



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

Piece of pink tabby, presumably wool.

?Wa: S-spun, 11-12 per cm (once denser). Maximum length 93 mm.

?We: ?Z-spun, at least 12 per cm (once denser). Length at least 90 mm.

3. SK03-6.032 pb 179 (two pieces) (4584-I)



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

(a) Striped pink and undyed fabric decorated with a row of wrapped triangles, presumably wool.

Wa: S-spun, 11 per cm, spaced out. Maximum length *c.* 23 mm.

We: pink or pale red: S-spun, 19–20 per cm.

undyed: S-spun, ?10 per cm. Maximum length *c.* 30mm.

Weft sequence in bands: 19+ pink/*c.* 20 undyed/20 pink/6+ undyed.

Pink weft more closely beaten up than undyed. Straight bands rather than curvilinear tapestry.

Central undyed band carries a sequence of triangles in alternating colours: one undyed/one pink or pale red/one undyed/one pink, at least. Worked in same yarns as used in weft. Central undyed band 12.5 mm wide. Triangles measure *c.* 12 mm wide at base and 7 mm high, base to apex.

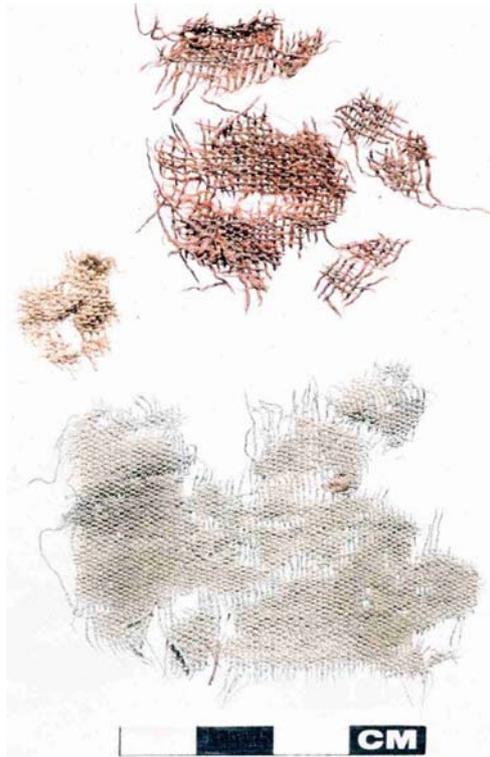
Although they appear at first glance to have been embroidered (the reverse side was not photographed), the triangles were almost certainly created in a wrapping technique ('flying needle'), using paired wool yarns. In the two best preserved triangles the base and one adjacent side are wrapped in S-direction, the other side in Z-direction. Each pass of the wrapping yarns passes over one warp thread, but over an indeterminate (but apparently regular) number of weft threads.

(b) Scrap of now open tabby, pale, undyed ?wool

?Wa: S-spun, *c.* 13 per cm. Maximum length 12 mm.

?We: probably S-spun, ?20 per cm. Maximum length 29 mm.

4. SK03–10.079 pb 184



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

Three textile fragments.

(a) (3083–I) Piece of green tabby, presumably wool

Wa: S–spun, 14–15 per cm, wide spaced. Maximum length 44 mm.

We: ?weak S–spun, might be paired, c. 30 yarns or pairs per cm, covering warp. Said to be pale green. Maximum length 60 mm.

(b) (3804–I) Scraps of dull red tabby, presumably wool (c. 6cm² in all)

?Wa: S–spun, 10 per cm, wide spaced. Maximum length 30 mm (largest piece).

?We: S–spun, at least 15 per cm, wide spaced. Maximum length 25 mm (largest piece).

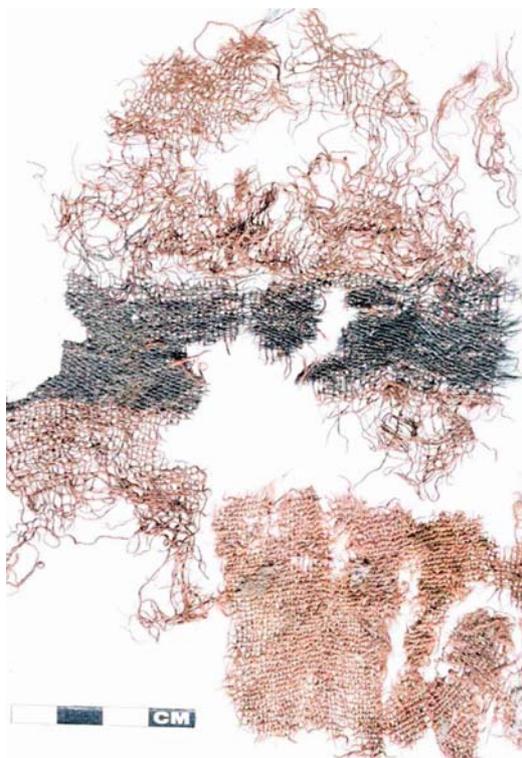
(c) (3804–I) Scrap of pale brown tabby, presumably wool

System 1 (?wa): strong S–spun, c. 11 per cm, wide spaced. Maximum length c. 15mm.

System 2 (?we): S–spun, c. 25 per cm. Maximum length c.13mm.

Colour possibly a very pale brown, but might be undyed.

5. SK03-6.032 pb 179 (4584-I)



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

Two pieces of pinkish tabby with dark blue band

Wa: S spun, c. 9 per cm, now wide spaced. Maximum length 130 mm.

We: pink: S-spun, c. 10 per cm at least. Maximum length 105 mm blue band weft: ?S-spun, c. 20 per cm. Band width 25 mm.

Pink ground weave now very distorted and thread counts given above minimalist. Separate (detached?) piece of ground has slightly higher count now.

No sign of any warp grouping in band, so probably remains of a striped fabric.

6. SK03-9.007 pb 14 (2730-I)



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

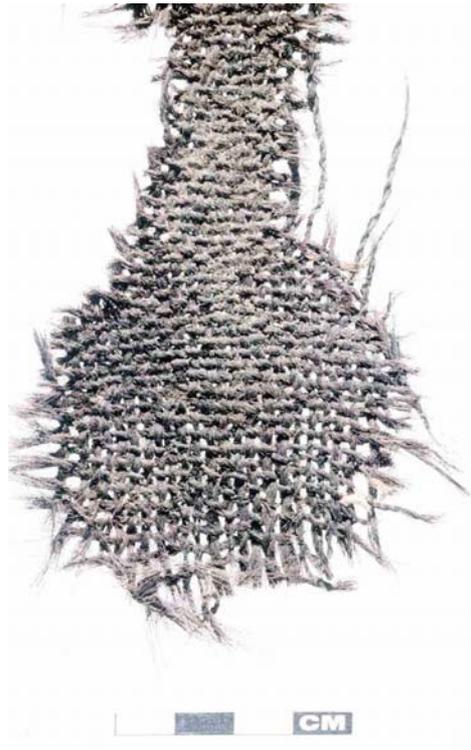
Piece of coarse tabby with stitches. Fibre uncertain – could be cotton or wool.

?Wa: irregular diameters, most with S twist. Some thicker yarns (and so probably all yarns) may be S-plyed, 4 per cm, S-plyed from ?2 Z-spun yarns. Maximum length 55 mm.

?We: spin direction uncertain, probably Z, c. 13 per cm. Maximum length 90 mm.

Traces of stitching in 'purple' yarn. Z-plyed from 2 S-spun yarns. Function unclear. Purple yarn presumably wool.

7. SK03-10.011 pb 33 (0547-I)



Photograph by S.E. Sidebotham.

Piece of dark goat-hair tabby

System 1, ?wa: Z-plied from 2 S-spun yarns, 5 per cm, wide spaced. Maximum length 70 mm.
System 2, ?we: Z-plied from 2 S-spun yarns, c. 5 per cm, wide spaced. Length at least 110 mm.

2. Discussion

The two striped wool fabrics (nos. 1 and 5) can be readily paralleled in Roman contexts in the eastern provinces and are more likely to represent furnishing fabrics than clothing. The pink and white striped textile (no 3) decorated with a row of alternating pink and white triangles is unusual. It is not paralleled in the corpus from Berenike, but Jane Batcheller has kindly drawn our attention to a number of pieces from Karanis in the Fayum (TAQ c. AD 450) which show a similar technique, albeit on a more sophisticated level and with plied warp (Batcheller, 2002: 224–225, cat. nos. 197–209). The Karanis examples, some of which are complete items, resemble small fringed table mats.

The material from Sikait is too limited in extent to allow meaningful comparisons with corpora from other Egyptian sites, but it is broadly in keeping with what might be expected to be represented on a Late Roman site in the Eastern Desert.

3. Cited literature

Batcheller, J.C. 2002. Late Roman Textiles from Karanis, Egypt. An Investigation into the Characterization of Archaeological Textiles. – PhD, University of Manchester.

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