

# Egyptian Mamluk embroidery

13th- 16th Century C.E.

By

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# A little bit of history

## *Who were the Mamluks?*

The term Mamluk refers to slave soldiers, freed slaves, and Muslim converts from Eastern Europe, Egyptian Copts and Turkic peoples. Starting from the 9th Century C.E. under Abbasid rule, these people became an elite fighting corps that in 1250 C.E. rose up and overthrew the Ayyubid rulers.

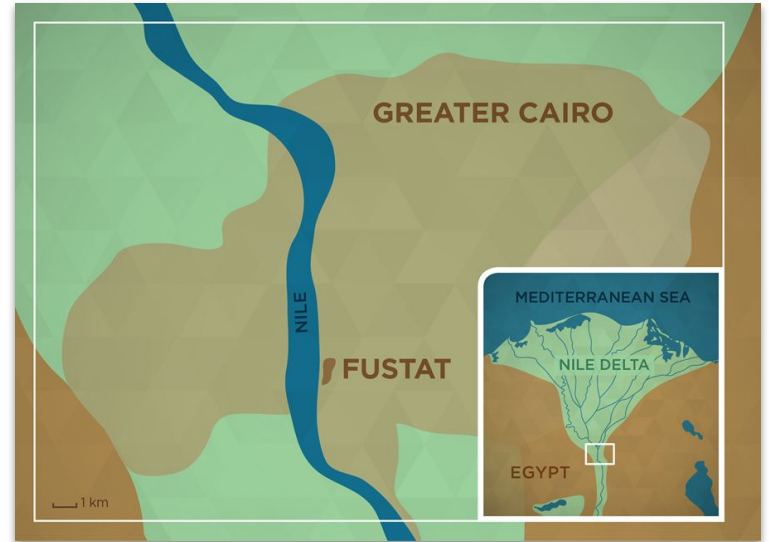
It was the Mamluk rulers that destroyed the Crusader kingdom of Outremer, as well as defeating Mongol invaders in Syria. They entered into close trading ties with the Venetians, exporting items through Cyprus under a Papal embargo. They also entered into trade with the Mongols, after they converted to Islam.

# Where the extant textiles were found

When doing a search for Mamluk textiles, they almost always list the find location as Fustat.

Fustat was founded as the capital of Islamic Egypt in 641 C.E., which grew in power over the centuries, peaking in the 12th Century C.E. when the city was burnt to the ground by the caliph to stop Crusaders sacking it's wealth.

Picture from AramcoWorld article ["In Fragments From Fustat"](#), written by Pamela D. Toler.



al-Qāhirah, or Cairo as it is now known, was founded by the Fatimid dynasty in 969 C.E. It did not become the capital until the burning of Fustat, when Saladin made Cairo the capital of his Ayyubid rule.

The Mamluks rapidly rebuilt, expanding Cairo with major infrastructure works that eventually took over the Fustat, which with a few other small settlements included became known as “Old Cairo”. From the Mamluk period onwards, Fustat effectively became a rubbish dumping ground.

Fustat is now a suburb of Cairo, with major heritage listings from the Medieval period.

In the 20th century, Egyptologist Percy Newberry and his wife Essie while working in Egypt gathered up over 1000 textiles over their extensive careers.

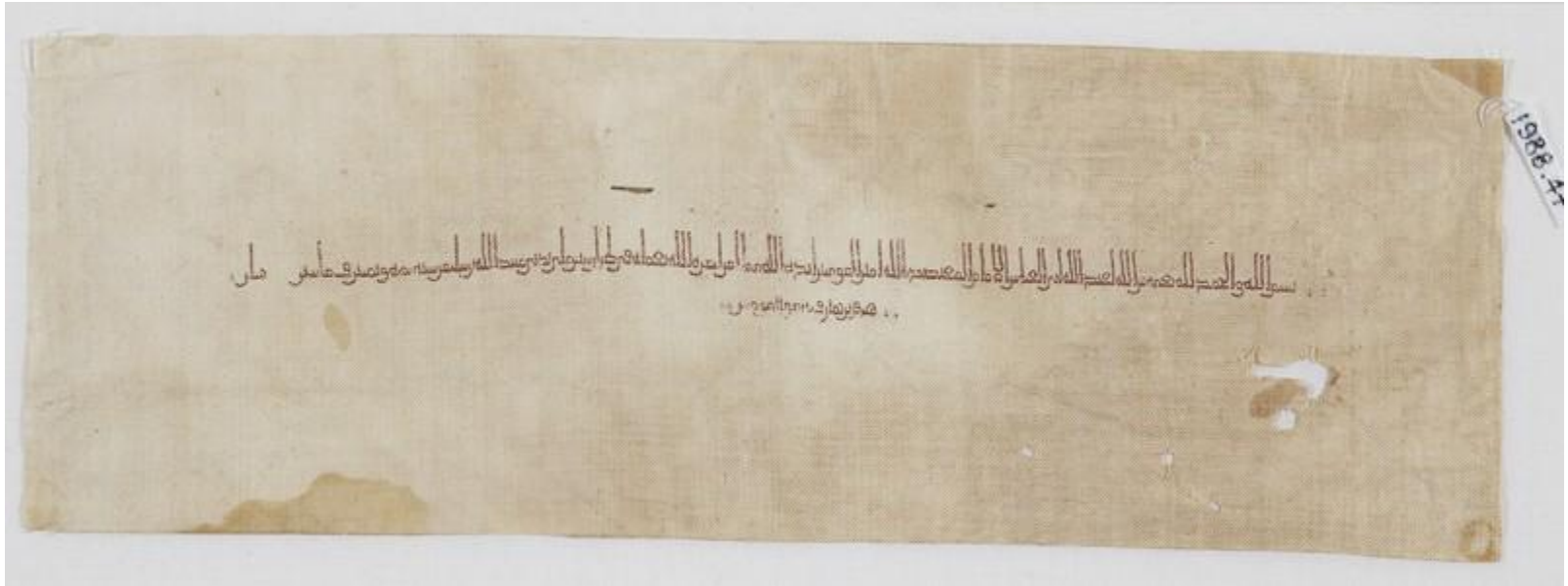
The notes from their collections say that their finds were from Fustat, although a few pieces had also been labelled as coming from Akhmim. Unfortunately there was much pillaging of historical sites at that time, with items turning up in marketplaces.

Essie herself was one of the major people involved with the newly created Embroiderers' Guild in London, where they lived during WW2. She published 14 designs from her collection and worked on the restoration on Tutankhamun's curtains.

They were collecting textiles at the same time as A.B. Benaki (founder of the Benaki Museum) and George Hewitt Myers, who donated his collection to found the Textile Museum in Washington.

The Newberry collection was donated to the Ashmolean Museum after WW2. Cataloguing of the textiles including measurements, ground fabric, embroidered thread type, design details, and possible stitches used in the embroidery. This is still ongoing- the site is updated with new textiles regularly.

One of the earliest embroideries in the Ashmolean collection is this *tiraz* from Atfal Egypt, made between the year 900-901 C.E.



*Tiraz* is a Persian word, meaning embroidery. However, by the time it was adopted by the Arabs in the Abbasid period, it was specifically embroidered blessings, quotes from the Quran, and given as gifts from caliphs, viziers etc.

Another early embroidery is one dated to the 10th century.



By the time of the Fatimid rulers, while there was still some tapestry weaving happening, embroidery was taking off as a craft. They conquered Egypt in 969 C.E. and ruled until Saladin conquered them in 1171 C.E.



This is what is called a *pseudo-tiraz*, with embroidered shapes based on the Arabic alphabet. Possibly made in a professional workshop that wasn't the Royal workshop- this is not any robe of honour (called a *Khila*).



Fatimids also used stitches like pattern darning, running stitch, long armed cross stitch, satin stitch, stem stitch, split stitch, and chain stitch.



The image in the left has a selvedge on the left & is embroidered with a generic blessing, which becomes common from the Ayyubid era.

The above image is from the late 12th century or late Ayyubid period. It is obvious that when the textile had been found it had been removed from the plain linen ground cloth.

The time the Mamluks took over and in the 14th century the embroidery output hit its peak, along with silk weaving (also happening in Alexandria). It ended up being the second most exported item, after Mamluk metalwork.



By this stage you can see new stitches being used, such as double running stitch, pulled stitches, a filling stitch like gobelin, and cutwork.

When the last Crusader city of Acre fell in 1291 C.E. Pope Nicholas IV declared an embargo on Egyptian goods, specifically the metalwork and other items “used for war”. This covered arms, horses, iron, and wood. However, the Venetians worked around that by getting the Egyptians to ship their products to Cyprus, where it was relabeled and shipped on to Europe. The Venetians brought in gold and silver ingots to Cyprus which in turn was used for trade. The Mamluk caliph lodged a complaint & then levied high taxes on European imports.

In the year 1295 C.E. the Ilkhanate ruler Ghazan converted to Islam. So with leaving the Silk Road trade routes open the Mamluks also expanded their trade out East as well.

The Mamluks set up the Royal embroiderers in the city of Alexandria, with private workshops in Damietta. A very important port in the Nile Delta, it was a great trading port that was a target of Byzantine & Crusader attacks. It was also a great place to sell Egyptian goods to the Mediterranean and European market. At peak of manufacturing it was thought that there were roughly 400 different embroidery workshops (including the Royal workshop) in Damietta.

There was the two types of embroidery workshops- the Royal workshops, based in Alexandria and the other private workshops. The Royal workshops did the Robes of Honour, and the Kiswah cover of the Kaaba every year for Hajj. The private workshops did other bespoke work. Around the year 1340-41 the domination of the Royal workshops was broken when the administration of these workshops was transferred to local emirs (courtiers) which closed the Royal workshop in Alexandria, privatising this function.

While the embargo imposed by Pope Nicholas did bite, trade went quite well until the Black Plague hit Egypt in 1347 C.E. which then kept on recurring every few years. Loss of people also led to famines. Growing corruption within the Sultanate meant that by the time of the end of the 14th century the number had dropped to 50 workshops.

Workshops were often then found in markets, or suqs. Embroidered clothes and household items were in bridal trousseaus (as can be seen in Cairo Geniza documents) and the price of such embroidered items skyrocketed. The sudden rise in counted stitch work is much argued about now- some believe the counting stitches emerged from the practice of tapestry weaving while others believe that the growing silk weaving imported from the East into the weavers at Alexandria encouraged the use of counted stitch embroidery. Either way, there was an explosion of counted stitch work (double running especially but also long armed cross stitch and pattern darning) that has marked the style of Mamluk embroidery.

There are extant tunics, although they are usually children's clothes. They wore quilted and embroidered caps too.

This is an example of embroidered items that were imported to Egypt.-



This textile was embroidered in either Anatolia or Syria, with silk scrollwork and dragon heads on linen. It was found in Egypt, no specific site was recorded.

The popular designs that were found in Egypt were geometric shapes with “s” and “z” shapes, scrollwork, trefoils, birds with trees, medallions, hearts, triangles, diamonds, fylfots, and in the later 15th-16th century freehand scrolling with floral designs.



Part of a tunic, linen embroidered with silk. Ashmolean has the dates as 10th-15th century but it is obviously part of the counted stitch work made popular in the Mamluk era. The bottom band is reversible, but not the s or diamonds.

Link- [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/500/sort\\_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/495/end/1565/object/15905](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/500/sort_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/495/end/1565/object/15905)



The market for embroidery was quite broad. This embroidered textile had Maltese crosses on it, although the Ashmolean Museum still had Fustat as the possible find spot.

Link-

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/600/sort\\_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/495/end/1565/object/16081](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/600/sort_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/495/end/1565/object/16081)



This is a counted floral work. Ashmolean has the find spot as Fustat, with the date of 10-15th century. Exact dating requires carbon dating, which gives a statistically likely date. Link- [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/category/textiles/object/18683](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/0/sort_by/date/category/textiles/object/18683)





Freehand flower embroidery, done in double chain stitch. Also dated 10th-15th century in Fustat by the Ashmolean. Link-  
[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/category/textiles/object/18887](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/0/sort_by/date/category/textiles/object/18887)

## *Speaker notes*

Slide 2- The main driver of the Mamluk dynasty was Baybars, a person largely ignored by Western history.

Slide 4- UNESCO website is currently insecure, but there is a website for historical Cairo for tourists, which lists mosques etc.

Slide 6- Afeh, some sixty-five kilometres south of Cairo, found in the cemetery. More than likely this is a repurposed textile, from either a tunic or shawl to be a shroud. The letters are 8mm high, done in red silk in small satin and slanting stitches. Meaning- In the name of God, praise be to God, the favour of God to the servant of God Abu'l-Abbas, the Imam, al-Mu'tadid billah, Commander of the Faithful, may God support him. Among the things ordered, may God glorify him, to be made in the tiraz at Tinnis at the hands of 'Ubaidallah son of Sulayman in the year 288. Peace. Harun son of Khumarawaih, client of the Commander of the Faithful. The Tinnis workshop was likely to have been a Royal one.

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/0/sort\\_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/886/end/886/object/10844](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/0/sort_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/886/end/886/object/10844)

Slide 7- [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/0/sort\\_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/950/end/950/object/16006](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/0/sort_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/950/end/950/object/16006)

Pink (perhaps starting as red?) and yellow elephant, outlined in brown silk, with a band of embroidery with an interlaced hexagon & blue/green design also interlaced. Unsure as what it could have come from, but obviously has been cut up, possibly from when it was found. Maybe based on an Indian block printed fabric of the same time period?

Slide 8- The silk used was in a couching and buttonhole stitch, with the colours of yellow, blue, green, and brown. The small shapes at the bottom are either leaves, or birds. Birds were a very popular motif and came to symbolise wealth.

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/100/offset/0/sort\\_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/1040/end/1040/object/10810](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/100/offset/0/sort_by/relevance/category/textiles/start/1040/end/1040/object/10810)

*Speaker notes cont.*

Slide 10- Cooper Hewitt Museum, 13th century although stylistically its later. From-

<https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18355533/>

Slide 13- Used this design to make myself a square neckline tunic.

Slide 14- It may be a tunic front, but I used the design to make sleeves on an under tunic.

Slide 17- How to do double chain stitch can be found on the Textile Research Centre website-

<https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/techniques/embroidery/embroidery-stitches/double-chain-stitch>