Unravelling the Threads of the Nubian Openworks

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Unravelling the technique: “thinking with my hands”

The hypothesis behind this technique is the creative use of the long lengths of warp threads left hanging from the fabric when weaving on the warp-weighted loom.

After dissecting several specimen, Elisabeth Crowfoot reconstructed the different steps of a complex chain openwork, which entails two removals of the loom weights, the braiding of two flat braids with the warp threads, the reinstallation of the warps as a single shed on the loom weights, and the wrapping of groups of warps starting in the reverse direction (from the bottom to the top).

In our eyes, this reconstruction poses a major problem: it requires the removal of the loom weights, not once but twice, and complicated manipulations of the warps. As every weaver would know, it would have been very hard to keep the threads under enough tension to weave the braids, and in good order to then reassemble the shed for weaving. It seems to negate the purpose of the technique itself: if openwork borders were in fact made to use the leftover warp lengths, then surely it would have been easier to leave them under tension through the whole process.

It became our working hypothesis: could we reconstruct a lattice using a wrapping method on a fixed warp? Ulrikka started “thinking with her hands”, testing different methods on a small tapestry loom. Without the possibility to unravel the archaeological textiles, and faced with very “fuzzy” specimen, it is difficult to ascertain the exact path followed by the threads. However, Ulrikka’s weaving hands found a much easier route than the one proposed by E. Crowfoot, straight forward and more efficient in execution, and which final result highly resembles the ancient pieces.

A step-by-step hypothesis

1. Weave on a warp-weighted loom (attested by many loom weights found on settlement sites).
2. Bring the 2 sheds together: remove the heddles, bring the 2 sheds in front of a low bar.
3. Interlace weft threads on a few rows, in compact 3-signards “countered” and “reversed” weft-twinning, grouping the warps in small groups.
4. Install long threads for wrapping: a long end, passed through the twining every 2 warp groups, repeated along the entire width.
5. Wrap the extra threads, each length 1 warp-group. Group the warps and wrap them together to form the middle of the cross (X) pattern.
6. Leave all the threads hanging and secure everything with several rows of twining.
7. Detach the loom weights.
8. Form and attach the fringed tassels.
9. Print the loom and the weaving “brain” of the craftspeople.

Perspectives: experimental archaeology

This project is a first test on our way to unravel the technique of the Nubian openworks. It shows the benefit of interdisciplinary research in textile studies, mixing the study of archaeological pieces with the experience and technical know-hows of a weaver. Our hypothesis remains to be thoroughly tested during a true experimental protocol on a warp-weighted loom.