

Nubia is the region located immediately south of Egypt, between the First and the Sixth Cataract of the Nile. In Late Antiquity, while Egyptians started praise Christ and Virgin Mary, Nubian pilgrims still visited the great temple of Isis in Aswan. It was not before the middle of the 6th century that Byzantine missions came to Nubia to convert its rulers to Christian faith. At that time, the territory was divided from north to south into three kingdoms: Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia.

In 651/652 a great battle took place at Dongola, the capital of the kingdom of Makuria, where Nubians stopped the progression of Egyptians, recently converted to Islam. A non-aggression treaty named *Baqt* was concluded between both parts. The treaty was also enriched by some economic obligations, but most of all, it granted the Christian kingdoms independence from the Muslim conquest.

Between the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th century, Nobadia and Makuria merged into one great kingdom of Makuria, which probably extended from the First to the south of the Fifth Cataract of the Nile. Its capital was Dongola. The kingdom remained independent and powerful for five centuries before declining, mined by succession quarrels and frequent Egyptian intervention in state affairs. The last document to mention the kingdom of Makuria is dated to the beginning of the 15th century.

In the paintings discovered in Nubian churches, kings and dignitaries, both lay and ecclesiastic, appear dressed in richly decorated robes. As in many other cultures, in the medieval kingdom of Makuria portrait was the privilege of the elite, and consequently the common people are almost never represented in such a context. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence displays inverse proportion of material: only few pieces of richly decorated silk textiles were found in excavations, while fragments of 'ordinary' clothes, made of cotton, linen and wool are thousands.

It is commonly accepted, based on the medieval description of the *Baqt* treaty by the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi, that luxury items such as fabrics were imported from Egypt, in exchange for the slaves provided by the Nubians. What about common textiles? The most important archaeological site from the point of view of textile material is Qasr Ibrim, located 240 south of Aswan. The medieval occupation levels were explored from 1963 to 1984 and revealed thousands of textile fragments, from various fibres, ranging from coarse to very fine weave. An often accepted idea is that the well-woven pieces were imported from Egyptian workshops, while those of poorer quality were typical of the local production. If this statement can be true for Qasr Ibrim because of its vicinity with Egypt, it seems unreasonable to consider this situation as characteristic for all the kingdom of Makuria.

Numerous textiles as well as tools related to fabric weaving largely attest the textile *savoir-faire* of the Nubian medieval society.

The aim of the present project is to establish a broader picture of the textile production and consumption in the medieval kingdom of Makuria. In spite of its importance, the Qasr Ibrim case needs now to be compared with other Nubian sites, which remain largely unpublished. The identification of local workshops (based on technical and chemical analyses of the textiles), and the reconstruction of the trade network at a regional level would increase our knowledge of the economic organization of the Makurite kingdom. The study of luxurious fabrics such as silk should also shed light on its international commercial relationships.

Another interesting point is to investigate the Nubian society's relationship to dress.

At first glance, the available data reveals contradictory information about the clothing traditions of Christian Nubia. While the material remains show its inhabitants were dressed in a variety of costumes and, moreover, mastered the different crafts involved in textile production, why did the Arab writers repeatedly depict them as naked people? Should we read these comments as common literary topos about the *Sudan* (litt. 'the Blacks') and simply dismiss them? Or should we consider that these statements reveal some valuable information about the Nubian population, as for example its paucity? Or may they reflect, perhaps, the coexistence of communities with various clothing traditions? How could dress reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Nubian population? This is also a question that the present research will explore.