

## Research on Culture of Costume in Coptic Paintings in Ancient Egypt

- Based on Book Research -

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### Abstract

The Christianity that spread to Egypt in 3rd century in A.D. is called Copt. Coptic Church built a lot of monasteries along the lower stream of Nile River, which produced thousands of text and paintings.

Ethiopia is well known for its worship to Virgin Saint Mary and produced many paintings of Virgin Saint Mary in different costumes. The pictures usually came in foldable small books containing 3 pictures. The paintings usually featured Virgin Saint Mary and Jesus Christ dressed as royalty in crowns, saints and angels. There are saints on white horse, mirroring the oriental influence on Coptic painting. This research will look into the patterns and colours on the Coptic textiles, mainly tapestry.

### I. Preface

Copt was referred to as Christians in ancient Egypt. The Emperor Constantine of Roman Empire converted to Christianity in 313AD and Christianity became only state religion of the Roman Empire in 392.

The Christianity in Africa was divided up into Eastern/Eastern churches with the infiltration of Roman soldiers. The Christians along Nile River saw their power and population grow sharply. The Eastern Church that took root in Ethiopia paved the way for the prosperous Christian culture.<sup>1)2)</sup>

Copt is from a dialect word "gypt" that is derived from the Greek word Agyptos, meaning "African as a language or as people living in the African Continent. Other theory says that Copt is from the Egyptian word Koptos, referring Gibt.

The Christianity that have prospered in Ethiopia and Egypt from 2nd 3<sup>rd</sup> century to 14<sup>th</sup> century AD had dominated education, politics, economics and culture of the North African countries as well as the religious scene. Bibles, church documents and prayers were translated into Ge'es, ancient Ethiopian language and they are important resources for archaeology and study of ancient languages.<sup>3)</sup>

This research will examine the patterns and colours of fabrics and the dresses of people described in the Coptic paintings.

The Virgin Saint Mary occupies a special place in the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia and paintings captures of images of Virgin Saint Mary in royal family's dresses or those of varied social classes. Due to its geographical location, Ethiopia went under the influence of Islam during Islamic

invasion and Christianity was vanished under Moslem oppression. The Coptic Churches in Ethiopia were therefore valuable and rare resources that shed a light on elaborate costumes in ancient Syria, Armenia and during the reign of King Solomon.<sup>4)</sup>

## II. The Patterns and Structure of Coptic Fabrics

The Coptic culture in Egypt started when Aksum Dynasty in Ethiopia permitted Christian philosophers to proselytise the new religion. Then, the bibles and other holy books were translated from Greek or from Arabic to Ge'ez, the language of ancient Ethiopia. The Coptic culture flourished; many monasteries and churches were built and many works of arts - wall paintings, regular painted pictures, texts and hand-scripted bibles - were produced. The fabrics didn't carry the religious implications, but fabric manipulation such as weaving and dyeing technology were highly development to meet daily use. The casual and ritual uniforms of saints, saddles of horses, and wall-hanging rugs reflected the influence of Central Asia.<sup>5)</sup>

The early form of fine paintings in church tapestries were conducive to the image of Greek or Arab mythology, but they expressed the Christian content-scenes in bible and saints- as Christianity widely spread throughout the nation. Fine paintings described different episodes of bibles and became a cultural heritage for its authentic values as fabrics.

The Coptic fabrics and paintings made between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century were extensively destroyed in wars and violent conflicts and a very few of them have been kept in tact until now. However, the paintings and hand-scripted texts

made in and after 14<sup>th</sup> century were said to retain almost all the styles and fonts of the early classics. The <fig. 1> is Coptic tapestry containing the characters in Greek mythology. The <fig. 2> is the picture from a Buddhist-inspired bible scene in which a wanderer tells a story to a aristocrat lady and Revelation (the last chapter of New Testament). All over the Europe and western hemisphere, tapestry that contained the clipping of a story from a bible and hung on the walls of household were designed to help people keep their Christian faith. As an example, the <fig. 2> is not Coptic, but its message centers on the aristocrat lady was moved by the story from a wanderer who taught her the vanity of human greed. Then, the lady went on to put the teaching of a wanderer into practice, took off her ring and gave the ring to a servant, repenting her past sins and reaching the point of emancipation.<sup>6)</sup>

Tapestry is a type of fabric structure that were widely used in Coptic Egypt and other areas of western hemisphere. Warps go over wefts, creating the sketches of a big picture and wefts became invisible behind the scene, when the fabric was completed. The variation can be made by the width and colour of wefts or by applying different weaving technologies. It is a picture drawn with warps and wefts.

One of the characteristics of Coptic fabrics is the clearly defined outline as shown in the <fig. 3, 4 and 5>.

The clear-cut outlines that were associated with ancient Coptic Egyptian arts are also used in wall paintings and dyes of Ethiopian Coptic tradition.

The outlines give clear definition to shapes and colours of objects and enable the expression of geometric patterns with angles, flying-dish shapes and slow curves. The slow curves shown

in <fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6> are the results of accumulating the partial curves of wefts. In modern tapestry, this technology is called "pattern weaving." The figures represented the well-developed weaving technology in ancient Coptic culture. The diversified weaving skills became handy to capture people and other inanimate objects in natural motions.

The <fig. 3> (Coptic fabric) has lions and rabbits. The <fig. 4> was made in Egypt, but it have the elements of Eastern Muslim culture and Sasan Dynasty of Iran, indicating that the region

proactively absorbed the eastern culture.<sup>7)</sup>

As shown in the figures, Coptic weaving was characterized by the use of looping. The techniques are designed to achieve relief effect. Looped pile compound weaves, knotting, soumak, chaining and twining were the main techniques to bring out the visual and cosmetic effects of the fabrics. Twining method required short and fine linen threads (pile) to stand perpendicular to warps and wefts, as if it were towels. Twining-woven fabric that dated back to 2160 BC was unearthed from the tomb of Deil-el-



<Fig. 1> <Coptic Tapestry>. 1~5C. - 5000 years of Textiles



<Fig. 2> <The Tapestry clipping of a story from a bible>. - Weave of Tapestry



<Fig. 3> <Coptic Tapestry>. 6~7C. - Weave of Tapestry



<Fig. 4> <Coptic Tapestry>. 5~7C. - 5000 years of Textiles



<Fig. 5> <Coptic Tapestry>. 4~5C. - Weave of Tapestry



<Fig. 6> <Coptic Tapestry>. 1~3C. - Weave of Tapestry

bahari, in Tabae, as an evidence of advanced weaving technology in ancient Egypt.<sup>9)</sup> The <fig. 6> shows the distinctive figures of animals created by the looping technology involving wool thread. Looping has the effect of giving variation to textures, by differentiating the width of looping or the length of thread. By cutting the edge of looping, weavers could make fabric look as if carpets or veludo that has piles on top. The <fig. 7> is the example of chaining. Chaining is not exclusive to Egypt and the technique can be found in China, Turkey, Ural-Altai Mountain range

and Pre-Inca Civilianisation.<sup>9)</sup>

The <fig. 8, 9 and 11> were examples of fabric featuring hunting and bull fighting. The <fig. 10> was the description of the nature based on Roman mythology. The <fig. 12> showed how versatile the looping can be in terms of expressing from the natural patterns (plants, flowers and animals) and geometric shapes to abstracts.<sup>10)</sup>

The Arab Islamic culture had the influence on Coptic fabrics, as shown in <fig. 11 and 12>, which recreated the images of a battle scene between nomadic tribes, animals and plants from



<Fig. 7> <Coptic Tapestry>. 1~3C  
- Weave of Tapestry



<Fig. 8> <Coptic Tapestry>. 7C. - 5000  
years of Textiles



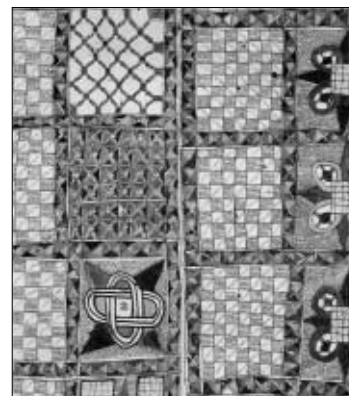
<Fig. 9> <Egyptian Tapestry>. 4C. - 5000 years of Textiles



<Fig. 10> <Egyptian Tapestry>. 4C. -  
5000 years of Textiles



<Fig. 11> <Egyptian Tapestry>. 5C.  
- 5000 years of Textiles



<Fig. 12> <Egyptian Fabric>. - 5000  
years of Textiles

the perspective of Arab culture. Their clothes and saddles have the same colours of stripes and mosaic patterns as the <fig. 12>. <sup>11)</sup>

Tapestry can recreate all the structures of fabric and has wide applications ranging from apparel, wall-hanging ornaments and carpets. The tapestry textiles have survived to date because the textiles were woven for everyday use and Coptic practice of burying the dead fully clothed in dry sands. They were valuable resources for the research on fabrics in Sahara desert area in Egypt. The dyes in textiles were based on plants, animals and mineral material and came in varied colours. The dying methods are dipping, drawing(dyeing) and tyedyed fabric. Coptic textiles have unique dyeing method that achieved beautiful colour and motifs, as if they put together Arab and Christian culture. <sup>12)</sup>

The fibres for Coptic weaving are from animals and plants that are available along the Nile River. In particular, linen and wool and the mixture fabrics of wool and linen are mostly widely used. In addition, cotton, tapa, backings of plants and silk from China were in use.

### III. Apparel reflected in the Coptic Paintings

#### 1. Dresses of Virgin Saint Mary

Coptic Egyptians used 24 Greek alphabets and 7 demotic characters from ancient Egyptian language. After Arabic became the everyday and official language of Egypt, Coptic language was limited to the settings of museums and churches. To study the dress codes of Coptic society, the researchers looked up the materials from "the Ethiopian Research Centre" of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia and from "Coptic Meseum"

of Cairo University in Egypt. The research involved studying Coptic language, unknown and uncommon language to the rest of the world.

In Ethiopia, King Solomon era is the most important milestone in the history and re-scripted Christian theological books and paintings always belong either to early or later reign of King Solomon. The ancient Coptic language has been used to document technology of artists and church papers. <sup>13)</sup>

The re-scripted Coptic Bible that was put out during the ruling of Yokuno Amlak Dynasty or between 1270 AD and 1527 set the date of production to the early reign of King Solomon. In the reign of King Zagwe (between 1540 and 1769), the re-scription of the Holy Books of Churches set its production date at the later reign of King Solomon. The elaborate costumes shown in the <fig. 13 to 16> were made during the early period of the King Solomon, but dresses became much brighter, more colourful and detailed towards the later reign of King Solomon. <sup>14)</sup>

Virgin Saint Mary in a hooded toga or dalmatica , popular dresses in classic Greece and Roman Empire can be founded in all over Ethiopia. A lot of devout Coptic Christians possessed various forms of scripted bibles to keep up their faith. With the individual variations of bibles came many different shapes of Virgin Saint Mary. This research will mainly focus on the dress codes of Virgin Saint Mary in the pictures from the bibles that were personal belongings of Coptics, due to the limitation on the size of this thesis.

The <fig. 14> features the Second Gondar style of the later reign of King Solomon. It became famous for Virgin Saint Mary in the dress and the crown of Ethiopian royal family. On her left, the script reads "Dabra-Metomaq," the name of a

monastery meaning "There comes our Mary," and "Saint Mother (Our Noble Lady or Maryam)."<sup>15)</sup>

The elaborate crown and dress made break from the conventional look of Virgin Saint Mary in Europe. The black silk coat she was in has different round-shaped motifs. Inside the coat, she is wearing reddish brown dress with round neckline and jewellery-ornate necklace with folding fan on her hand. The elegant Virgin Saint Mary is surrounded by her followers and guardian angels clad in yellow and orange and waist belts. The people's dresses are in bright colour adorned with motifs. People who appeared to make a visit with Virgin Saint Mary

are in dresses that have similar colours and motifs to the dresses of Virgin Mary. The posture of people-either standing or bowing on their knees- seemed to be an influence of Islamic rituals.

Virgin Saint Mary appears in the paintings of Virgin Mary conceived with baby Jesus", Mary holding baby Jesus", Trauma of Jesus", Sadness after the death of Jesus" and the resurrection of Jesus from the death". Some paintings captured Virgin Saint Mary performing miracles. Most paintings feature the combination of hooded cloak with stripes, narrow sleeves and a dress with round neckline. Virgin Saint Mary in Coptic



<Fig. 13> <The Saint Mary is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 14> <The Saint Mary is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 15> <The Saint Mary is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 16> <The Saint Mary is Coptic Painting>. - African zion

culture looked much brighter, more beautiful than the European counterparts.

As the African society had simpler structure than Europe at that time with fewer conflicts between different social strata, faith of Africans was simpler and more genuine and Africans seemed to lead a proactive life. Virgin Saint Mary represented their proactive attitude towards life. The positive approach to religion encouraged people to keep the bible handy and envision the images and dresses of saints in distinctive and bright colours. Coptic bibles contained more detailed and elegant icons of Virgin Saint Mary than in Europe where Mary was in darker and simpler dresses. The Coptic details of Mary were the product of the Islamic mosaics and their unique approach to religion.

The religious paintings go back to thousands of years in time, but the records of a certain dresses, ornaments and life style made the current generation associate the contemporaries with the ancestors dating back to thousands of years.

## 2. Dresses of Jesus Christ and Saints

Egypt around the birth of Jesus Christ went under the Greek sphere in terms of culture. Middle East was the area, in which Jesus Christ was born, grew up and embarked on his mission during that time. The Coptic paintings in Egypt were the pictures of Christianity with the elements of Hellenic and Arab culture and in turn their dresses borrowed many components from the surrounding countries. The 2.74m-wide roll of paper scripted bible used in Al-muallaqa Church in Cairo contained <fig. 17 and 18> ; one describing Jesus Christ's triumphant entry to Jerusalem Castle and the other on the

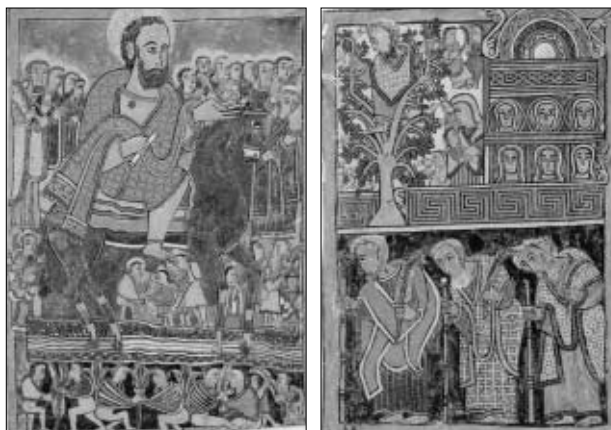
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the death. Jesus Christ's dresses in both paintings are the same types as in the paintings of King Solomon that will be introduced in the following section of this thesis. The shape of trousers are different, however the types of items, the way they get dressed, colours and motifs of fabrics shared many similarities. Jesus Christ's dresses included segmenta going over the shoulders, dalmatica, menura and candys, worn by upper class Persians. Jesus's candys had wide sleeves and embroidered motifs of stripes, stars and natural shapes (plants and animals) with gold-thread. Candys that started as an upper-class dress in Persia became widespread to the grassroots. This social changes prompted the coining of terms "Candys" era.<sup>16)</sup>

The saddles of a horse have horizontal stripes in light colours. The paintings of Jesus Christ also showed the dresses of the grassroots as well those of monks.

The <fig. 19> has the images of Jesus Christ brought to the Roman governor Pilate, who ordered the persecution of Jesus Christ. The Roman Empire officers in the picture has outwear with blue stripes - the same colour as in the previous painting.

The <fig. 20> described the second coming of Jesus Christ with Adam and Eve. As Coptic paintings had been produced over the long period of time, dresses also change greatly.

The holy books produced in Coptic Ethiopia describe the activities of many saints. The <fig. 21 and 22> are from a long roll of paper used as exorcist tool in Ethiopia. Both paintings featured the saints charging demons and Satan with a spear on horseback, giving an idea of what men's clothes were like. For outwear, men had cloak-style paludamentum which was fastened



<Fig. 17> <The Jesus Christ is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 19> <The Jesus Christ is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 18> <The Jesus Christ is Coptic Painting>. - African zion

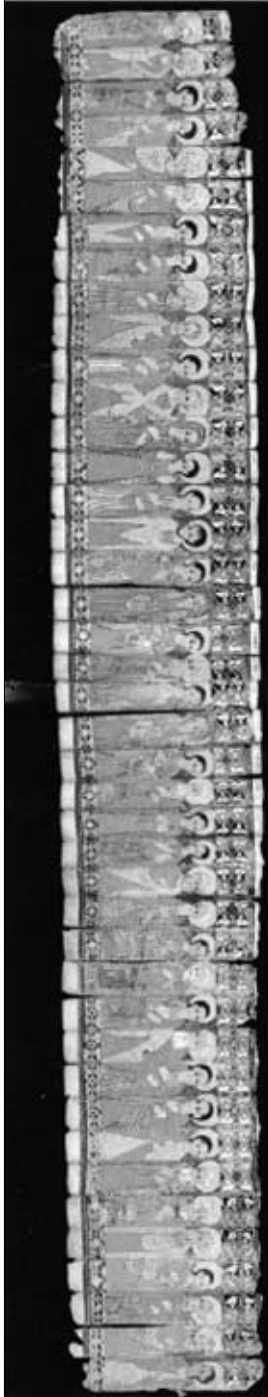


<Fig. 20> <The Jesus Christ is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 21> <The Saints are Coptic Painting>. - African zion





<Fig. 22> <The Saints are Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 23> <The Saint Mothew>. - African zion



<Fig. 24> <The Saints Peter and Paul & Abraham with Issac and Jacob>. - African zion



<Fig. 25> <The Saint John>. - African zion



<Fig. 26> <The Saint George>. - African zion



<Fig. 27> <The King David is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



<Fig. 28> <The King Solomin Judgment is Coptic Painting>. - African zion



by a waist belt. Inside paludamentum, men would wear narrow-sleeved tops and tight pants. They wore casual-looking, light shoes or sometimes went about barefoot.<sup>17)</sup> The 12 saints in <fig. 21 and 22> are all fighting on horseback, but their clothes were in varied motifs and colours, adding the variety to the paintings. The saddles of horses come in many different colours, most in light shades, reminiscent of nomadic tribes in Ural Altai Mountains Range in the East. The tight tops and pants are derived from tunic-style Kaftan and trousers worn by nomadic tribes in Central Asia. This type of trousers look similar to Anaxarids of Hellenic Greece and some of them can go even tighter downwards as if they were tightly padded.<sup>18)</sup>

Some paintings have saints reciting magic words to chase off demons. The paintings give emphasis on the saints' wide-open eyes and hostile looks directed towards Satan and demons.

On the right side of <fig. 13> is St. Samuel bringing down demons with the aid of lions and holy cross. A folding book with very narrow width contained paintings that keep track of Virgin Saint Mary on her mission manned and supported by angels and St. Michael to spread Good News, to defeat demons with her hostile looks and to save the world from demons and offering salvation to the people who go through the worldly pains. In general, as angels and heavenly women in Asia Bosal in Buddhism are described as women, Coptic paintings engendered angels as women by dressing them as women. The dresses of angels are all in similar colour with floral patterns. Other picture featured male angle growing beard as in the Bpsal with beard in Buddhism. St. Mathew or Metewos in Ge'es also appears at his desk, writing something. He was wearing red

cloak-styled outwear that has no motif. A shawl that goes over his shoulder has black stripes in the yellow background. St. Mathew spent his life scribing bibles. Thus, he was at his desk, scribing bibles in many pictures, like the Munson character who holds brush and paper in Taoism of China.

The first chapter of the New Testament is the whole records of the family trees and history of Jesus Christ in red and black ink.

Between 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> century in AD, many monasteries were built along the lower stream of the Nile River and the monasteries are used to house Coptic documents and icons of Virgin Saint Mary, Jesus Christ and saints. The <fig. 26> is the picture of St. Anthony and the other picture has the scene of St. Anthony visiting St. Paul. St. Anthony is wearing short-sleeved, round semi-shroud dress with the waistline being tied. In black cloak is St. Paul from Thebe who spent most his life spreading Christianity in Red Sea Region. Another picture envisions St. George<sup>19)</sup> meeting up with monks in a monastery. Two monks have turban on head and were clad in yellow cloaks with a touch of motifs. The yellow colours in the monks lighten up the overall look of the picture. St. George is in semi-shroud with belt on his waist. Tekla Haymanot from Dabra Libanos Monasteries and Ewosta tewos from North Ethiopia are two monks in the picture. They are following the dress codes of Jesus Christ and saints.

The <fig. 25> is the stand-alone figure of St. John in an orange tablion with floral motif, paludamentum, dalmatica, segment and tunicataliris. St. John wrote "Revelation," the last chapter of New Testament, in Patmos, a small island in Aegean Sea. The scripted bibles produced before and after the reign of King

Solomon reflected the dress code of saints. As Coptic society hadn't seen the persecution or oppression from Islamic force yet, the Coptic paintings were associated with the light shades of colours and elaborate details for the dresses.

### 3. The dresses of King David and Solomon

The coming of Christianity to Ethiopia dated back to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century. However, it was much later that the bible and theological books began to be translated to Ge'ez by 70 translators. The translation went from Hebrew to Greek, and from Greek to Arabic. Coptic bible was based on Arabic version. The <fig. 27> was the figure of King David<sup>20</sup> who rose to the throne by his efforts and wisdom, even though he was not down on the bloodline to be a king. He was the father of King Solomon. According to the Old Testament, King David and Solomon were two wise kings that had respects of the next generations. Their life was documented in Old Testament that contained the collection of poems written by King David (David's Mazmur in Arabic or Mizmor in Hebrew). In the portrait, King David normally holds a stringed instrument on one hand, indicating his musical and poetic skills and his joy from playing music. The fabric of a certain behind a chair and his dress appeared to be made by looped pile compound weaving that created substantial thickness or Veludo-looking effects. King's outwear combines pinkish and bluish violet colours. The greenish dress was the ritual dress for king. This greenish shade of the dress is close to modern pastel tone and vivid colour. The crown is adorned with varied jewellery. King David's wear was similar to Byzantine style tunic or dalmatica. Lorum, decorated with jewellery,

goes over the king's shoulder. The king's shoes have long front and the cover of royal chair was patterned with Solomon Seal<sup>21</sup> featuring red spot on the centre. The back of the chair has a borderline of green spots that look like sharp edge of roofs in the old Oriental buildings. (The portrait is 20<sup>th</sup> century AD recreation of a king who helmed in 10<sup>th</sup> century BC.) The recreation was an attempt to faithfully follow the tradition of old scribed versions, even though it leaves the king sitting unnaturally on a chair. It could have had the added advantages of modern touch to it to make the king look natural, but the objective of this portrait was the accurate recreation of old version, rather than modern interpretation.

Ethiopians respect King David and Solomon most among the characters in Christianity.

King Solomon was a successor and a son of King David. King Solomon built Jerusalem shrines, right after he took the throne. Like his father, he was a wise king and left many political legacies and episodes behind, which became widely known through Bible. King Solomon wrote the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and The Song of Solomon, which were included in the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup> Even in modern society, he was known as a king of wisdom and good judgement.

The <fig. 28> is the portraits of King Solomon. In these portraits, the king was holding a big sword before two women claiming to be a mother of one child. Most of all, the crown of the king stands out most for its elaborate beauty. Crowns in the shape of firecrackers bursting out, stripes with distinctive borders, four quarters pattern gives the feeling of motion. The famous Solomon seal are found on the sheath and on the long paludamentum styled shawl that goes across the whole body diagonally.

### III. Conclusion

Up to this point, this research has looked at the apparel in the religious paintings included in the scripted bibles that belong to persons or Coptic monasteries. This research came to the following conclusion. 1. As tapestry have survived most among types of fabric, patterns and structures, this research focused on tapestry items.

Tapestry are used for plain, twilled, and changeable fabric and looped file compound weave. The techniques to achieve relief effects included looping, knotting, soumak, chaining and twining. The modern tapestry retained the Coptic techniques. The motifs in the tapestry are mostly geometric, natural shapes (plants and animals) and human activities (i.e. riding on horse and warriors). 2. There are varied types of clothes shown in Coptic paintings. This research attempted to identify and sum up the most important trends.

For women's clothing, the research looked into the dresses of Virgin Saint Mary

For men's clothing, the research looked into the dresses of Jesus Christ and saints.

The wardrobes of King David and Solomon cannot be found in the official records of the history of fashion or design. Occasionally, some personal belongs of Copts like Old Testaments and old roll of paper holy books in Coptic churches give some ideas on what the wardrobes of kings were like. These materials were hard to come by, thus worth studying.

As a result, Virgin Saint Mary, guardian angels and followers of Mary reflected the fashion of women at Coptic society. Monks wear toga-style dalmatica, veil and Hellenic or Roman fibula. In particular, Virgin Saint Mary in the elaborate wardrobes of Coptic royalty and crown is rarely to

be seen. For men's wear, this research studied the pictures of a second coming of Jesus Christ with Adam and Eve and his triumphant entry to Jerusalem, which represent the dresses of ancient noble class in Greece, Arabs, Syria and Armenia. The paintings of trauma of Jesus Christ" was an exception to this.

Saints in their portraits are in line with the dress codes of aristocrats. A group of people, or soldiers and hunters on horseback and warriors were presented in tight-sleeved tops, tunics and tight trousers that looked like anaxarids of Persia. Candys that looked like a shawl or cloak, paludamentum and tablion go on top of tops and trousers.

King David and Solomon have very elaborate wardrobes, unlike those of saints and monks. They are wearing crown, upscale-version of segment, tablion, paludamentum toga and dalmatica.

The overall characteristics of Coptic apparel are light colour shades and motifs. Most overriding colours include yellow, orange, brown, green and blue, which give bright and active images. The most common motifs are natural (animals, plants) and Solomon seal. In particular, Solomon seals" in the dresses and saddles supposedly played shaman role of exorcising evil spirits.

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