

March U3A Monthly Meeting – Report by Tim Meacham

'Buried Textile Treasures: Discoveries from Medieval Egypt' by Jacqui Hyman

Jacqui introduced herself by setting the scene for her interest in textiles from Egyptian burials of the Mamluk period. Having attained her first degree at Leeds she was offered an opportunity to look in more depth at finds from this lesser-known era (long after the more celebrated Pharaonic and Roman periods). Emerging from the weakening of the Ayyubid realm in Egypt in the second half of the 13th century AD and holding sway until 1517, the Mamluk dynasty, originating from ex-slaves, developed into the greatest Islamic empire of the later Middle Ages; its capital, Cairo, became the economic, cultural, and artistic centre of the Arab Islamic world.

The Mamluk burial practices were as elaborate in their way as the earlier Pharaonic interments, presenting the bodies of the dead in their 'Sunday best' clothing to ensure their positive reception into the next life. Throughout the 19th century, thousands of their graves were desecrated by treasure hunters, attracted by the fine materials and rich patterning of the burial clothes. Public disquiet at this led to the appointment of Flinders Petrie in 1882 to prevent the dispersal and loss of so much important historical material, but it was his assistant Percy Newberry whose activities provided the main examples for Jacqui's talk. Assisted by his wife Essie, Newberry, a botanist by trade, retrieved a number of examples of Islamic clothing from the rubbish mounds created by the treasure hunters. No government funding was available but donations from museums in the north west of England supported him in carrying out his research and in gratitude Newberry passed on examples to these museums, including the six items Jacqui was given to work on.

These four tunics and two hats, all from children who had met untimely deaths, had sat untouched in a box at Leeds University Museum of Textiles from 1933 until 2008, gently deteriorating through the effects of dirt, damp and bodily fluids. Jacqui gave a graphic description of the three years of painstaking effort required to clean, conserve and study this clothing. The hats in particular had suffered, being squashed flat at the bottom of the box. When first properly examined, after a lengthy hydration process to prevent them from disintegrating, both seemed similar, but after further very careful cleaning, and study through an advanced microscope, one was found to have considerable quantities of gold included in the weave. Jacqui took us in depth through similar examinations of the four tunics, two of linen and two (more impressively) of silk. One of the latter, in effect a child's silk waistcoat, was made from materials found only in China, clear evidence of medieval trade. Tantalising questions remain: writing found inside the hats was subjected to a revolutionary decipherment technique, but resisted all attempts to read it. Glen Howard proposed the vote of thanks and the Chairman had to cut short a plethora of questions which bore witness both to Jacqui's love for her subject and the interest aroused by her clear and detailed delivery.