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The Textile Performance of the Written Word: Islamic Robes of Honour (*khilāʿ*)*

1 Introduction

When Ḥasanak, the vizier at the court of the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd (d. 1030), returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1023, he received a “robe of honour” from the Fatimid Caliph al-Zāhir (r. 1021–1036). Given the political circumstances at that time, this symbolic act was regarded as highly controversial. The Shiite Fatimid Caliphs were regarded as usurpers by the Abbasids, their Sunni counterparts in Baghdad. The Baghdadi Caliph al-Qādir bi-llāh (r. 991–1031), as the formal suzerain of the Ghaznavid Sultan, was offended by the robes Ḥasanak received from his Cairene adversary, and therefore denounced Ḥasanak as a traitor and extremist and demanded his execution. However, Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna appeased the Caliph by sending the robes to Baghdad, where they were publicly burnt.¹ How did the Abbasid Caliph come to see the robes as such a provocation? Was it simply the monetary value ascribed to textiles in the pre-modern Middle East? Or was it rather a quality of the clothing—namely, the fact that these robes bore inscriptions of the powerful gift-givers’ names?

As we see here, textiles can be combined with acts of giving, these acts being usually publicly performed. This is not a phenomenon alien to other cultures and contexts: Beyond the Islamic context, textiles “help(s) reproduce social groups to reproduce themselves” and entail “almost limitless potential for communication”² due to their logistic and stylistic flexibility. According to Marshall McLuhan, clothing is one of the “extensions of man”, representing an amplification of human skin.³ Clothing as seen within this framework can therefore be a powerful means of communication in any given society. Textiles are usually embedded in complex patterns of social strategies that can function regardless of questions of literacy or illiteracy. Robing as a cultural and vestimentary code is understood by most people regardless of their ability to read. However, when it comes to inscribed textiles in the Islamic

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1 Hambly 2001, 201; Sanders 2001, 228–229; cf. Enderwitz et al. 2015.

2 Schneider/Weiner 1989, 1.

3 McLuhan 2001, 129–132.

context, the perspective is slightly altered as the producers/original owners of the pieces inscribe themselves symbolically into the artefacts in question.

The focus of the present article is thus communication through inscribed textiles that are given and worn in public. In the Islamic context, such textiles are usually subsumed under the Arabic term *khil'a* (pl. *khila'*), so-called “robes of honour”. The term *tashrif* (pl. *tashārif*) is also used, the Arabic root *sh-r-f* signifying the “honouring” of a given robe’s recipient.⁴ In medieval Islamic times, these robes were given to notables, state functionaries, or foreign guests, bearing the inscribed name of the giver, usually a Caliph or Sultan. These textile-related practices are regarded here as set between practices of investiture⁵ as well as those of giving and visualizing. In medieval Islamic contexts, the three aspects are usually not seen as intertwined. Scholars mostly argued that gifts were not an important economic factor within Islamic societies and therefore not equivalent to the Maussian *potlatch* institution. However, these insights notwithstanding, I argue that the very act of giving is essential to understand public representations of social relations in the medieval Islamic context; the notion of gift exchange, as seen especially by Maurice Godelier, is a suitable approach to the Islamic institution of *khil'a*. His focus on the act of keeping a gift is broadened here by the aspects of visibility and performance that are essential characteristics of the *khil'a* phenomenon.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on textiles and their functions in Middle Eastern pre-Islamic and Islamic societies; afterwards I will briefly shed light on gift exchange in the medieval Islamic context. Chapter 5 elucidates aspects of visibility and performance that are crucial to the communicative potential of robing practices.

2 Socio-economic and Ceremonial Aspects of Clothing

According to Yedida K. Stillman, “[...] the entire Islamic vestimentary system [a term borrowed from Roland Barthes, ann. RS] is [...] a synthesis of pre-Islamic Arab, Hellenistic, Mediterranean, and Irano-Turkic modes of dress.”⁶ Textile production was a major economic branch in the Muslim Middle East during the Middle Ages.⁷ On the early Islamic Arabian Peninsula, garments were considered a “currency”, paid in the

⁴ Diem 2002, 38–39.

⁵ To a certain extent the phenomenon of *khil'a* is comparable to medieval European investiture. Yet in the Islamic context, the practice of bestowing a fine garment upon a certain person goes far beyond the boundaries of inaugurational situations. Thus, donating and visualizing are added to the framework.

⁶ Stillman 2000, 16.

⁷ Stillman 2000, 49.

form of taxes (*zakāt*) or shared as booty, continuing “the custom of oriental rulers since ancient times”.⁸

Textile production had its apogee under the Fatimid Caliphs (ca. 909–1171). During the reign of al-Mu‘izz (d. 975) and his successors, the manufacture of luxurious robes and fabrics was institutionalized by the founding of *dār al-kiswa* (ministry of the *kiswa*⁹) and the *dār al-ṭirāz* (ministry of *ṭirāz*). From the 11th century onwards, central Asian materials became increasingly important due to cultural contacts with the Mongolian state and the influx of Mamluk mercenary soldiers.¹⁰

The textile industry did not exclusively supply courtly customers with precious materials, but was firmly connected to pre-modern Islamic economies in general. In the pre-modern Mediterranean and especially in the Middle East, dress and furnishing fabrics were a more or less inflation-proof currency. Usually, it was not merely an amount of money that featured in trousseau lists, divorce settlements, or wills, but rather some type of woven fabric (*qumāsh* in Arabic), as the Cairo Geniza documents, for example, clearly indicate: clothing was part of a family’s investment, more easily convertible into cash than real estate.¹¹ S.D. Goitein even compared the textile industry’s position “to the place of steel and other metals in [the] modern economy”.¹² The price level for fabrics was 5–30 dinars for fine garments in 9th-century Iraq (cf. the monthly wage of a labourer: 0,5–1,5 dinars).¹³

The textile business would continue to be an important economic factor in medieval Islam for centuries. Even in the early modern 18th century, when Cairo had lost most of its former commercial influence, one fifth of its craftsmen were involved in textile manufacture and one quarter of the total number of commercial transactions were connected to selling or buying fabrics. Apart from the famous Central Asian silk routes, there were several other trading routes: along the Persian coastlands, commodities from the East found their way to Iraq, or alternatively to Southern Arabia and from there up the Red Sea.¹⁴

Apart from being a global commodity, textiles functioned as markers of social hierarchies and as important media for political or religious messages in regional and international circumstances—as objects in connection with investitures and as suitable diplomatic gifts, but also understood, in certain contexts, as bearing religious blessing (*baraka*) for the owner (see below). One example of the centrality of textiles was—and still is—the *kiswa*, the inscribed black cover of the Holy *Ka’ba* in Mecca. To be accepted by the Meccan authorities as a donor of the *kiswa* meant a

⁸ Stillman 2000, 26.

⁹ See below.

¹⁰ Stillman 2000, 62–63; Allsen 1997, 27–45, 71–98.

¹¹ Stillman 2000, 49–50; Stillman 1997; Baker 1995, 15.

¹² Quoted according to Stillman 2000, 49.

¹³ Stillman 2000, 49.

¹⁴ Baker 1995, 14; see also Allsen 1997, 99–101.

political advantage over potential contenders. Since the 15th century, the *kiswa*, which is renewed each year, has come from Egyptian workshops.¹⁵

As for the symbolic function of textiles as markers of social stratification, the Abbasid court protocol may be useful as an illustration. According to Hilāl al-Šābi' (d. 1056), the Caliphs usually wore red boots. In addition to this the author states:

As to Abbasids of rank—their attire is the black tunic (*qabā'*) of family members [...]. They are differentiated by the kind of military belt and sword that they wear and in the way that they are worn. However, those among them who have been appointed to judgeships may wear the *ṭaylasān* [a kind of headshawl worn over the turban, RS]. [...] Descendants of the Anšār [Medinan supporters of the prophet Muḥammad, RS] should wear yellow garments and turbans. As for the military commanders and officers—their attire is every sort of black *qabā'* and turbans as have been described. Their footwear consists of black stockings (*jawārib*) and *lālakāt* (a type of shoe) tied with straps (*zanānīr*). These are the rules that had to be observed. Those of lower rank are prohibited from wearing black, but are free to choose other colors, so long as they do not abandon all restraint, indulge in vulgarity, and forget the primary rules of etiquette.¹⁶

Under the Fatimids, and the Seljuqs and Mamluks as well, clothing styles and colours were strong indicators of social relationships—functions and stratification were made visible in textiles.¹⁷ Especially under the Mamluks, the military caste strove for distinction by attire; favoured markers included enormous headgear, specific shirts and belts, as well as colours designated to indicate military affiliation, such as yellow.¹⁸ During these periods, power relations were further strongly visualized through various court ceremonies including the giving of robes (see below).¹⁹

This communicative aspect of fabrics was not only manifest through clothing; furnishings, tent walls, and the “royal” saddlecloth were important textiles of everyday courtly life.²⁰ According to historian of Islamic Art Lisa Golombek, there was a strong “textile mentality” at work in the “draped Universe of Islam”.²¹

¹⁵ Wensinck/Jomier 2014.

¹⁶ Quoted according to Stillman 2000, 48.

¹⁷ See Fuess 2011.

¹⁸ Fuess 2008; al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 39–43.

¹⁹ Stowasser 1984.

²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn 2012, 252–3.

²¹ Golombek 1988. She argues that developments in Islamic architecture can only be understood with reference to textile aesthetics, Koran manuscripts, for example, being comparable to decorative details in carpets.

3 *ṭirāz*, *khil'a* and *tashrif*

Three concepts are crucial in order to understand pre-modern Islamic textile-related gifting practices: *ṭirāz*, *khil'a* and *tashrif*. *Ṭirāz* is a term originally from Persian (literally meaning *embroidery*), designating inscribed bands on textiles, in Islamic societies predominantly embroidered onto or woven into fabric.²² It eventually indicated a strip of writing embroidered on papyrus. Later on, the term was also used to describe the workshops in which those textiles were manufactured, and became synonymous with the term *khil'a*.²³ The root *kh-l'* is semantically related to the root *l-b-s*, which roughly means “to wear”; *khala'a* denotes “to undress” as well as “to bestow a robe upon somebody”. In a broader sense, both roots are thus applied for practices of investiture.²⁴ Another term often synonymous with *khil'a* and *ṭirāz* in the medieval sources is the term *tashrif*, which means the “honouring” of a person with gifts (see above). For the sake of terminological clarity, however, we will apply the three terms to distinct (yet interwoven) phenomena: the *khil'a* is the attire-gift. As far as the sources indicate, the term was applied for a whole set of textile gifts—often a combination of a mantle and several accessories and/or valuable horses,²⁵ sometimes only a small hat.²⁶ The term *ṭirāz*, in this article, in turn designates an inscribed (but not necessarily embroidered) textile band, and the *tashrif* refers to the practice of honouring a person by bestowing a *khil'a* upon him/her. *Tashrif* was usually performed in public, as the sources indicate: the bestowal of robes was part of royal audiences as well as of official processions, and therefore visible to the general public.²⁷

According to Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), there were three main and important royal prerogatives of the Caliphs; all of these practices were related to the appearance of the royal name in sense-perceptible form, thus publicly communicated: being named in the Friday prayer (*khuṭba*), the royal Mint (*sikka*, *ḍarb*), and *ṭirāz*, i.e. having one's name embroidered on or woven into precious fabric.²⁸ This *ṭirāz* institution was under state control for many centuries, and when in later Mamluk times the (state-run) economy “declined”, *ṭirāz* continued to flourish beyond the state sector.²⁹

²² Stillman 2014.

²³ Stillmann 2000, 120–121; Stillman/Sanders 2014; see also Diem 2002 and Springberg-Hinsen 2000, 21–24.

²⁴ Mayer 1952, 60.

²⁵ Diem 2002, 38–39.

²⁶ Mayer 1952, 56–58. It is difficult to assess the range of the term, as mostly fragments have survived down to the present day, and we have to rely on metatexts to understand the whole phenomenon. One example of a complete attire is the “Veil of St. Anne”.

²⁷ Mayer 1952, 61; Petry 2001; Stowasser 1984.

²⁸ Stillman 2000, 131. She even goes so far as to state that “Omission of the ruler's name from any or all of these was tantamount to rebellion” (126). See also Ibn Khaldūn 2012, 244–252.

²⁹ See below note 46.

The origins of the royal manufacture of precious textiles are Sasanian as well as Byzantine, as the production of certain luxury products was the prerogative of the rulers in these societies.³⁰ Well before the 6th century AD, honorific robing was a common practice in courtly life in Constantinople. Robes were exchanged and given for church investitures, bureaucratic promotions, diplomatic missions, and to honour outstanding individuals. In 481, for example, Clovis, the first Frankish king to be baptized, received a robe from the Byzantine Emperor; candidates for commercial guilds were given robes as part of the induction into their specific offices.³¹ In the Sasanian Empire, bureaucrats also received visual signs upon inauguration—the most prominent of these signs were diadems and other headgear.³²

Ceremonial robing was therefore a common cultural practice before the coming of Islam—and it is plausible that the very first Muslims were familiar with it. Robing appears several times in the Koran, in Q 18:31, 22:23 and 76:12, e.g., where “clothing of fine garments” is clearly associated with rewards for good deeds in the afterlife:

[18:31] Those, theirs shall be Gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers flow; therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they shall be robed in green garments of silk and brocade, therein reclining upon couches. O, how excellent a reward! And O, how fair a resting-place!³³

The prophet Muḥammad purportedly bestowed *khilaʿ* upon highly respected members of the emerging Muslim community. He is said to have given his own mantle (*burda*) to the poet Kaʿb b. Zuhayr. Later on, this would become a precedent for the *tashrif* practice, as well as for the transmission of the *khirqā* (woollen robe) from master to pupil/successor in Sufi contexts.³⁴

The Prophet’s mantle was at times hotly contested by different traditions. According to the Shiite branch of Islam, Muḥammad willed the *burda* to his son-in-law, ʿAlī. The Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad used the object as a symbol of dynastic legitimacy as well.³⁵ Under the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775), for example, the practice of donning woollen cloaks representing the supposed Prophet’s *burda* during certain ceremonies was instituted. Not surprisingly, it was under this dynasty that the bestowal of *khilaʿ* was firmly established as courtly protocol. The secretary class (*kuttāb*), often of Iranian background, was of major importance for the setting of cultural trends, such as certain behavioural codes, the consumption of specific goods and of literary tastes, genres and motifs. The Cairo-centered Fatimid adversaries of the Abbasid caliphate in turn used the public space to display their Ismaili ideology,

³⁰ Stillman 2000, 122–123.

³¹ Gordon 2001, 9–12.

³² Rose 2001.

³³ Translated by Arberry 1955.

³⁴ Stillman 2000, 26; for the *khirqā*, see Michon 2014; Elias 2001.

³⁵ Stillman 2000, 17.

thereby fostering a more luxurious and uniform style of clothing.³⁶ Official robes of honour “were produced with his [the Caliph’s, ann. RS] imprimatur so-to-speak and came to be considered by extension as bearing his charismatic blessedness as well.”³⁷

The first fabrics with writing on them (*ṭirāz*) in the Islamic era were produced during the Umayyad period (661–750). The first Caliph to whom the establishment of a state-run *ṭirāz* workshop is ascribed was Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 724–743). The *tashrif* practice is also said to have continued under the later Umayyads, including the giving of embroidered garments.³⁸ Despite the silence of the metatexts on the issue of early inscribed *khila'*, several artefacts have been found that can be dated to this era. The oldest pieces to survive are two fragments inscribed with the name of the late Umayyad Caliph al-Marwān (II., r. 744–750), and containing information as to their place of production.³⁹ During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809), however, the bestowal of inscribed robes of honour had become a firm part of courtly life and protocol. Under the Fatimids this tendency broadened.⁴⁰ Under the Mamluks it became more or less inflationary; the bestowal of robes had become an almost daily routine.⁴¹

With regard to the Ayyubid (ca. 1171–1250) and Mamluk (ca. 1250–1517) eras, it has been argued that there was a decline in the *khila'*/*ṭirāz* institution due to the declining quality of the materials. This seems to be too harsh a judgment. *Ṭirāz* were no longer manufactured in state-run workshops, but produced in factories run by “private entrepreneurs”. Quoting Ibn Khaldūn, Stillman states that the *tashrif* practice was still widespread during Mamluk times and even later.⁴² However:

[...] the *ṭirāz* bands that had been the most distinctive hallmark of *khila'* under the great caliphates and the Turkish military regimes that ruled the Arab world throughout most of the Middle Ages were no longer the fashion [in the Ottoman, Safavid and Qajar eras, ann. RS].⁴³

When we talk of luxurious objects we sometimes forget that textile-related practices went beyond courtly contexts. The Geniza records, especially trousseau lists, are witness to the overall social role of fabrics up to the early Mamluk period.⁴⁴ It is especially remarkable that the “bourgeoisie” tried to imitate the textile practices of the elites: “Merchants, for example, bestowed *khila'* and *ṭirāz* garments upon relatives

³⁶ Stillman 2000, 41–43, 53–55; for the “Fatimid public text” see also Bierman 1998, 60–99.

³⁷ Stillman 2000, 129. Cf. Sanders 2001.

³⁸ Stillman 2000, 40.

³⁹ Blair 1997, 97.

⁴⁰ Bierman 1998.

⁴¹ Fuess 2012; Petry 2001.

⁴² Stillman 2000, 132, 133–137; see Walker 2000 and Mackie 1984 for details.

⁴³ Stillman 2000, 137.

⁴⁴ Stillman 2000, 55–61.

and friends. In a contract of betrothal (*sheṭar ērūsīn*), the groom-to-be promises to give his bride a robe of honor on their wedding night. In a letter written while on a business trip to India, a merchant orders as a gift for his beloved son a *ṭirāz* turban of fine [...] linen with the young man's name embroidered on it."⁴⁵ There were even workshops that created "fake *ṭirāz* with pseudo-inscriptions", which looked like inscriptions but were merely "decorative bands".⁴⁶

4 The Significance of the Gift

When talking of gift-giving practices, I rely on the framework developed by Godelier in his *The Enigma of the Gift*. Godelier argues that the threefold process of giving, receiving/accepting, and returning a gift as outlined by Mauss has to be supplemented by the aspect of keeping a gift.⁴⁷ Receiving a robe during a public ceremony is a standard procedure in the pre-modern Middle Eastern context. However, concerning Mauss's threefold scenario (giving, receiving/accepting, returning a gift), certain questions have to be asked: does receiving a gift really imply that it has to be reciprocated in some form or another, the reciprocal gift being "equivalent" in value to the original gift? In the context of *khil'a*, there seems to be a certain expectation from the giver as to the future behaviour of the receiver, namely, loyalty and the fostering of social relationships. The immaterial, in this context, the sustainability of power-relations, seems to be corroborated by the material. Godelier argues:

[...] It is first and foremost the different ways humans imagine their relationships with each other and with what we call nature that distinguish societies and the periods during which some of them exist. But the imaginary cannot transform itself into the social, it cannot manufacture 'society' by existing on a purely 'mental' level. It must be 'materialized' in concrete relations which take on their form and content in institutions, and of course in the *symbols* which represent them and cause them to send messages back and forth, to communicate. When the imaginary is 'materialized' in social relationships, it becomes a part of social reality [emphasis by Godelier].⁴⁸

This last point must not be underemphasized: the imaginary has to be *materialized* and furthermore *visualized* in some form in order to be intelligible for different actors in a given society. By the same token, social relationships become subject to a network of societal surveillance—a strategy also found in other contexts: in order to prevent the misuse of pious donations (*waqf*), *waqf* deeds were usually either read aloud in

⁴⁵ Stillman 2000, 55–56.

⁴⁶ Gervers 1978–79.

⁴⁷ Godelier 1999, 8.

⁴⁸ Godelier 1999, 27.

public or inscribed in stone on the facilities concerned.⁴⁹ Thus, in addition to verbal communication (textiles inscribed with the name of the ruler/giver in the former case and a foundation text in the latter), non-verbal communication creates a network of obligations and counter-obligations that is underlined by tangible objects.

As mentioned above, the suitability of gift exchange theories for the Islamic context is doubted by several scholars. Stewart Gordon, for example, argues:

One might be tempted to use 'gift-exchange' theory to analyse the *khil'at* ceremony. Certainly, *khil'at* embodies the central insights of Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*: that every gift comes with obligations, that gift and obligation form part of a unified system, and that this gifting system affects many other aspects of culture. Nevertheless, the structure and dynamics of Mauss's theory cannot be applied to the *khil'at* ceremony. [...] *Khil'at* was not the central organizing principle of the societies that used it.⁵⁰

I, however, argue that even without being a "central organizing principle", *tashrif* practices were crucial for sustaining the social fabric—especially in fragmented societies such as the Mamluk state. Considering these insights, Linda Komaroff admits a suitable gift exchange framework for the Islamic context was yet to be written.⁵¹ According to Komaroff, textile-related gift giving practices entail characteristic features. Thus, "their presentation [...] was part of the message, and the procession and even display of gifts, along with the presentation and the wearing of counter-gifts such as the robes of honor, were all a form of communication, sometimes quite public."⁵² Giving used to be "performed"—extraordinary packaging was part of the play.⁵³ Gifts were part of complex patterns of social life and could serve a variety of functions:

[...] gift giving was an integral part of the social fabric, especially as a means of formalizing alliances, as a signifier of power and expression of political aspirations, or as an instrument to obtain salvation. [...] Gift giving intended to further princely ambitions or diplomatic goals, to seal peace treaties, to promote devotion, or to reward loyalty was integral to maintaining a vast network of personal, social, political, economic, and religious relationships, and rare, costly, and aesthetically pleasing objects were at its core.⁵⁴

49 Compare Mottahedeh/Stilt 2003; see also Stilt 2011.

50 Gordon 2003, 25–26, n. 10.

51 Komaroff 2011, 20.

52 Komaroff 2011, 20.

53 Komaroff 2011, 20.

54 Komaroff 2011, 20–21. However, she is aware of the fact that the majority of those gifts that survived to be analyzed by modern art historians belong predominantly to a phenomenon of elite material culture. This reminds us of a basic research problem: by focusing on objects that were made of valuable materials and featured prominently in courtly environments, we risk excluding other functions and types of gift exchange—e.g., gift exchange based on the giving of less valuable but nevertheless highly "emotionally" relevant objects, such as the *mandil* (handkerchief) or other seemingly ubiquitous and "profane" things. See Rosenthal 1971; Enderwitz 1995, 60.

Anthony Cutler, contrary to most scholars discussing gift exchange, argues that in Byzantine and Islamic contexts the gifts were to be regarded as part of economic history. Cutler elucidates the supposed dynamics of symbolic and economic capital by referring to the role and function of garments exchanged: the price of silk was “effectively equivalent” to gold; garments were part of tax payment in Arabia, and *khilaʿ* were part of the salaries granted to government officials (see above).⁵⁵ The sources support this latter point. The 15th-century author al-Qalqashandī (d. 1419) elaborates on the *tashrif* practice in his chapter on gifts/donations (*al-inʿām*) to the notables, a chapter that also contains a paragraph on the bestowal of horses and pious foundations.⁵⁶ Thus, gift giving practices do not seem to have been interpreted solely in light of mere courtesy and good manners—moreover, they were regarded as part of the royal provision of notables. The precious objects in turn were usually on public display.⁵⁷

5 Visibility, Legibility and Performance of Textiles

One important feature was named in the previous chapter: gift exchange has to be visible in order to effectively publicize social relationships. As we have learned, the aforementioned *ṭirāz* is an inscription, originally embroidered on a piece of textile, be it cotton, wool, or silk. The writing surface is thus portable—however, this does not imply that the script is as easily detectable as the writing on the walls of mosques in Fatimid Cairo,⁵⁸ for example. The writing usually appears on bands around the sleeves of a robe, vertically on the chest and occasionally on the back, as on the famous “Veil of St. Anne”.⁵⁹ The writing styles applied do not guarantee the absolute legibility of the script; however, the repertoire of content in *ṭirāz* textiles tended to be limited: names of rulers, names of administrators, and blessings were popular motifs.⁶⁰ So even extravagant decoration that might have complicated the semantic comprehension of *khilaʿ* inscriptions was not necessarily an obstacle to actually grasping the message. Besides, the public presentation of robes shows that the iconicity of the script superseded its semanticity, and given the very public nature of robe bestowal and use, it is highly likely that the message was understood without the text. It was therefore a useful tool for communicating in a semi-literate society.

The visibility of garments has not always been important to Islamic rulers, as examples from the Umayyad period, where the wearing of luxury garments in public

⁵⁵ Cutler 2001.

⁵⁶ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52–55.

⁵⁷ See Cutler 2008, 91–93 for the role of the „object on display“, i.e. their “signifying role”.

⁵⁸ Bierman 1998, 75–95.

⁵⁹ Elsberg/Guest 1936.

⁶⁰ Blair 1997.

was not common, have shown.⁶¹ In later times, such textile practices were instead performed quite publicly. At the Abbasid court, as well as under the Fatimids⁶² and Mamluks,⁶³ robes were given in ceremonial contexts and were often worn during processions. According to the above-mentioned Hilāl al-Şābi', in 983 the Buyid governor 'Aḍuḍ al-Dawla (r. 949–983) was granted a robe by the Caliph al-Ṭā'ī' (d. 991) after a proper ceremony: he was ordered to kiss the floor in the caliphal audience hall when approaching the ruler, a practice he had to repeat facing several Baghdadi notables to complete the ceremony.⁶⁴

For the later Mamluk era, according to the 15th-century author al-Qalqashandī, there were specific occasions when robes of honour were given to members of Mamluk society: religious and secular holidays were most prominent among them, and the robing was usually performed in public.⁶⁵ A typical *tashrif* ceremony in the Mamluk period involved the display of the textiles in the central courtyard of the Cairo citadel. Afterwards, the recipients paraded down from the citadel hill to a central square in the city.⁶⁶ Festival processions were also popular occasions for the bestowal of robes.⁶⁷ It was a publicly visible ritual—a way to convey power relations and display influential social networks. Robing was by no means the only form of donation and power display in the Mamluk era; besides giving horses and valuable objects other than textiles to specific persons, the endowment (*waqf*) and support of pious institutions was a widespread phenomenon.⁶⁸

The performance and therefore communicative potential of the text was by that time obvious for authors writing on the significance of the written word. According to al-Qalqashandī's secretarial manual *Şubḥ al-A'shā*, inscriptions on fabrics and buildings are ubiquitous and understood even by the illiterate, even outside the capital city of Cairo. They are a means to "remind them [...] of the justice (*'adl*) in this state".⁶⁹ Thus, even though the written word may not be semantically intelligible to the "common people", the "presence" of writing in official contexts reminds them of the societal order. In the much narrower and original textile sense, *ṭirāz* bands prominently feature on the robes given to the notables of the kingdom. Al-Qalqashan-

⁶¹ Stillman 2000, 42–43: "[...] for the Umayyads, the wearing of luxury garments and Iranian fashions were primarily a private indulgence, and not for display beyond the confines of their desert palaces, since they had cultivated the public image of the oldtime Arab desert sayyid. The Abbasids, on the other hand, made public use of special clothing."

⁶² Bierman 1998, 95–99; Sanders 2001.

⁶³ Petry 2001.

⁶⁴ Sourdel 2001.

⁶⁵ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 39–43, 52–55.

⁶⁶ Petry 2001, 355; see also Stowasser 1984.

⁶⁷ Petry 2001, 364–365.

⁶⁸ See Komaroff 2011.

⁶⁹ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IX, 252.

dī thus informs us that “the honorific names (*alqāb*) of the Sultan are inscribed on these textiles.”⁷⁰ He mentions the Mamluk robing practices in a paragraph on “the outer shapes of the elite” of his native Egypt. The same chapter contains information on the feuds (*iqṭā‘āt*) that were essential to the income policies affecting the realm’s military elite. Thus, the overall theme of this chapter is mostly, but not exclusively, fashion as a means to indicate hierarchies within a society. Moreover, this frame of reference sheds light on how the author might have understood social bonds among the diverse parts of Mamluk society in his day. According to this survey, the community functions on the exchange of goods, presents, valuable objects, and appointments to government and military posts. The regime is generous to those who are supposed to be loyal. In addition to the act of donating, those in power publicly display the names of the recipients, so that a kind of mutual dependence forms the glue of Mamluk society—at least as outlined by sources contemporary with al-Qalqashandī. I would rather underline the very strong sense for the ceremonial and the visibility of donating, as that seems to feature prominently in the sources. However, the visibility of the ceremonial act is expressed by material culture. There is, al-Qalqashandī argues, a clear meritocratic principle at work when it comes to the specific material features of a robe of honour:

The highest ranking military leaders get an upper coat (*fawqānī*) produced of red atlas silk, embroidered with brocade (*zarkash*) and with a collar of squirrel fur (*sinjāb*).⁷¹

In addition to this obviously eye-catching coat, headgear, bracelets, and shawls are given to the honoured person, e.g. “an exquisite scarf (*shāsh*) that is wrapped around him and that is of white silk on both sides—the honorific names of the Sultan appear on these two sides [...]”⁷² The most valuable robes are decorated with pearls and/or gold threads.⁷³ According to the descriptions in the metatexts, textiles were more splendid than the surviving artefacts suggest, which may be due to their overall fragility.⁷⁴ However, examples of robes from the Mamluk era complement knowledge derived from textual sources. A large fragment (36 × 144.5 cm) of *ṭirāz* from Egypt dated to the 14th century is made of fine linen woven with paired linen indigo wefts simulating embroidery. The inscription repeats and mirrors the term “dominion” (*al-mulk*). The second band of decoration consists of geometric decoration.⁷⁵ Another *ṭirāz* fragment, also from 14th-century Egypt, is produced from double-weft silk and

⁷⁰ Though literacy rates during the Mamluk period are assumed to have been relatively high, see Hirschler 2012, 11–31.

⁷¹ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52.

⁷² Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52.

⁷³ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52–53.

⁷⁴ See Walker 2000.

⁷⁵ Galloway 2011, 6.

bears the repeated inscription “Glory to our master the Sultan al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad”. This probably refers to the Rasulid Sultan al-Mu’ayyad Da‘ūd ibn Yūsuf (r. 1297–1321), who reigned in Yemen, indicating that this is one of the many objects manufactured in Egypt for the Yemeni Sultans, either as diplomatic gifts or special commissions. Several other fragments of this textile survive, and their shapes suggest that they once formed a coat.⁷⁶ A fragment of Egyptian silk damask from the early 14th century bears the inscriptions “Glory to our master”, “the Sultan the king”, “al-Nāṣir”, “the suppressor of Heresy”, “Muhammad b. Qalāwūn” (r. 1293–1341). While most Mamluk textile patterns have a strong symmetrical quality, this example belongs to a group featuring more fluid, asymmetrical designs, perhaps influenced by Chinese Yuan silk imports.⁷⁷

In general, the inscriptions on the textiles described here are rather formulaic in content and stylistically heterogeneous—a point which might have facilitated the application of the robes for communicative purposes. Thus, textiles were a highly effective means of communication. Inscriptions on textiles in turn did not necessarily have to be legible. The above-mentioned fake *ṭirāz*, as well as the mirror-reverse-example, further corroborate this assumption. Although a phenomenon of the “middle classes”, fake *ṭirāz* can help us understand the iconicity of texts on textiles: obviously the actual content of the inscription was not its most important feature—the very fact that the textile bore inscriptions at all mattered more. It is not known whether the bourgeois imitation of courtly robing practices transformed the original model. In any case, the textual sources do not discuss the content of the inscriptions at great length—apart from the occasional mention of the “honorific names” of the powerful (see above), the authors seem to assume that their potential audience was aware of the limited repertoire of textual standards.

6 Conclusion

Textiles were a powerful means of communication. Due to their portability and stylistic flexibility, they could be used to convey a broad range of diverse messages. As so-called “robes of honour”, they were embedded in complex patterns of gift exchange and public visual strategies. By the textile, alliances and loyalties were formed and strengthened (or weakened at times). Most of the textiles involved were inscribed, usually with the names of rulers. As inscriptions and words on textiles were usually formulaic and did not go beyond a certain repertoire, they may have been meant to be read, but the comprehension of their semantic meaning was not necessary in order to

⁷⁶ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund (1931).

⁷⁷ Baker 1995, 66.

grasp their symbolic communicative potential as corroborating factors of social hierarchies. These textiles were on constant display, as they were worn by their owners. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the inscriptions were actually read by potential beholders. It was thus a way to communicate to all members of society, whether literate or illiterate.

The case of Ḥasanak, mentioned at the beginning of the article, suggests that in 11th-century historiography the behavioural code connected to the acceptance of a robe already seemed to be obvious. It was transmitted by several historiographical sources that might have had their own intentions in describing Ḥasanak as a traitor. In any case, we have to admit that in the minds of these writers, the acceptance of a robe by an authority who was perceived as hostile to one's own ideological precepts was a highly controversial action. Moreover, this act of disloyalty must have been understood by the possible recipients of these reports as symbolic—otherwise the story would probably not have been included in historical sources from the 11th through the 13th centuries AD. Thus, the communicative potential of textiles was understood by a variety of sources. With regard to my initial questions, it is highly likely that it was the *knowledge about* the inscriptions on the textiles, and not necessarily the inscriptions *per se*, as well as the prominent act of investiture, that were commonly and globally understood as symbolic actions in connection with a valuable commodity that formed—in addition to other factors of course—the glue of the highly complex medieval Islamic societies.

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