

**WCoB Gift to Count Gilbert documentation**  
**By Baroness Miriam bat Shimeon**

I had volunteered to embroider a hand towel as requested by Count Gilbert Purchase to the Guild, I looked into what was done in period. Most surviving extant hand towels are later in period, using designs that had been published in *Modelbuches* as could be found in Italian and German sources.

The hand towels known as Perugia towels, made from the 15th century onwards, are usually made from linen and cotton, with designs woven into bands during construction (usually blue although could be red or brown as well)<sup>1</sup>.

For example-



This towel is linen and cotton, woven in white linen and blue (indigo) cotton, with three separate distinct designs of chevrons, wyverns and winged shields. The size is 97cm by 175 cm<sup>2</sup>.

However, the extant images show that the towels were woven, not embroidered. Expanding my research into Italian embroidery, it looks as though much of the style of later Italian embroidery was greatly influenced by the Middle East<sup>3</sup>, with a number of Middle Eastern motifs being reproduced in Western European printed pattern books<sup>4</sup>. This then turned my

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<sup>1</sup> As taken from the Victoria & Albert Museum website-  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O15355/towel-unknown/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> As seen on the Website "Historical Needlework Resources"-  
[http://medieval.webcon.net.au/loc\\_italy.html](http://medieval.webcon.net.au/loc_italy.html)

<sup>4</sup> Page 8, "Embroideries and Samplers from Islamic Egypt" by Marianne Ellis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 2001.

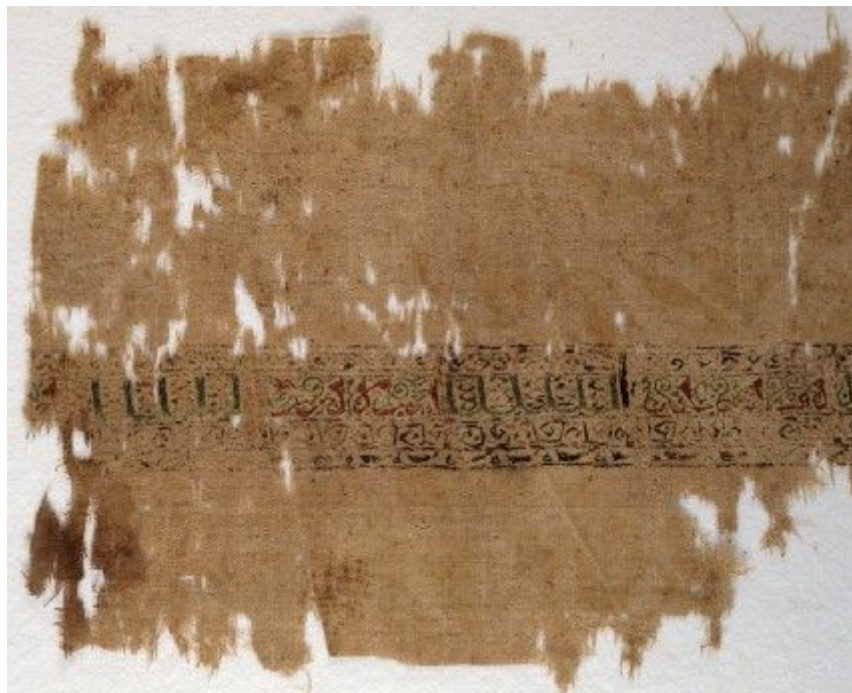
research earlier & more Eastern. Some of the earliest towels were made of linen embroidered with silk during the Fatimid reign of Egypt.

For example item number EA1984.110 in the Ashmolean Museum<sup>5</sup>-



This is dated to the late 11th-12th century C.E. It is linen embroidered in blue, yellow, brown, and green silk in buttonhole, stem, chain and double running stitch, with couched threads in a design based off kufic tiraz (embroidered Arabic letters) bands. The width of 68 cm suggests a towel, with a visible selvedge on the left<sup>6</sup>.

The Ashmolean also hold other towels, such as item number EA1984.523<sup>7</sup>-



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<sup>5</sup> Website link-

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/object/10810](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/object/10810).

<sup>6</sup> Page 18, "Embroideries and Samplers from Islamic Egypt" by Marianne Ellis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Website link-

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/object/10738](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/object/10738).

Also containing a tiraz band, although the letters are illegible. Tiraz bands itself was used in many household items at the time<sup>8</sup> It uses the same mixed stitches as the previous towel and is from the same time period of the 12th century<sup>9</sup>.

The surviving extant embroidered textiles of the Ayyubid (1174–1250 C.E.) and Mamluk (1250–1517 C.E) show more counted stitches gaining popularity, such as double running, long arm cross stitch and pattern darning. The use of tiraz became more stylized, if used at all. It is thought that the use of double running stitch (so the reverse of the textile mirrors the front) was especially used on towels<sup>10</sup> but also pattern darning with a pattern that looks “right” on both sides<sup>11</sup>.

For example the item number EA1993.182 in the Ashmolean Museum-



This textile is linen embroidered with blue silk in double running stitches. The textile size is 20cm wide, with a selvedge on the right hand side.

Pattern darning was widely embroidered on samplers, and were used in towels and handkerchiefs. Pattern darning is a type of counted running stitch used in rows to create a geometric design<sup>12</sup>. Earlier pattern darning designs were of isolated animal motifs<sup>13</sup> while dense geometric band with triangles and scrollwork are found after the 14th century C.E.<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Page 180, “Rethinking Mamluk Textiles” by Bethany J. Walker, Mamluk Studies Review, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Page 19, “Embroideries and Samplers from Islamic Egypt” by Marianne Ellis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, page 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 38.

<sup>12</sup> Page 135, “Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World” by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, Bloomsbury, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 136.

For example this textile in the Ashmolean Museum item number EA1984.399<sup>15</sup>-



As the Mamluks revived embroidery during their reign<sup>16</sup>, Egyptian embroideries were becoming more and more exported to the Western world<sup>17</sup>. Towels were used in hospitality in Cairo<sup>18</sup>. The Mamluks also exchanged gifts with the Ottoman, starting from the 15th century, favouring decorative household items such as shawls, towels and handkerchiefs<sup>19</sup>. With the success of the Ottoman empire over the Mamluks, the same gifting style continued, with the Ottoman Sultan giving gifts that were wrapped in embroidered gauze, handkerchief or envelopes<sup>20</sup>. The Sultan also gave out gifts of embroidered towels as archery awards in the 17th century C.E.<sup>21</sup>.

The type of towel requested by Count Gilbert Purchase was a pattern darned towel. Mistress Miriam Galbraith passed on to me some linen she used to create her own pattern darned towel. I chose Au ver a Soie silk thread, in colours that would pass for indigo dyed silk (since it had been in use for over 4000 years in the Middle East<sup>22</sup>) for the navy blue and a red colour, as would resemble a kermes dye with a tin mordant<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Website link-

[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/object/15897](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/object/15897).

<sup>16</sup> Page 178, "Rethinking Mamluk Textiles" by Bethany J Walker, Mamluk Studies Review, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 168.

<sup>18</sup> Page 418, "Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes" by Paula Lewicka, Brill 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Page 199, "The Sultan's New Clothes: Ottoman-Mamluk Gift Exchange in the 15th Century" by Elias I. Muhanna, Muqarnas, No. 27, Book 1, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Page 328, "Symbols of Power" by Louise Mackie, The Cleveland Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, page 330.

<sup>22</sup> Page 82-3 "Historical Dyes Used in Egypt in Different Historical Periods in Egypt" by Omar Abdel-Kareem, RJTA Vol 16, no. 4, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page 84.

I had trouble charting up a design myself, so turned to the work of Mistress Safiya bint Suleiman. Some of her work on pattern darning was based on this extant textile in the Ashmolean Museum item number EA1993.333<sup>24</sup>-



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<sup>24</sup> Website link-  
[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/start/1097/end/1553/object/10748](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/start/1097/end/1553/object/10748)

The pattern darning section I used can be found in the collar-



Mistress Safiya's work can be found on Scribd, where she has uploaded much of her research-

<https://www.scribd.com/document/228120518/Charted-Patterns-from-Medieval-Egypt-Pattern-Darning>. The pattern can be found on page 36.

As following the style where front and back of the towel is "right"-



I have also photographed my progress and posted the album to Facebook. This album is available to the public here-

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10211707149207420.1073741843.1028401897&type=1&l=77e53dc9d7>

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