

Archaeology of dress along the Middle Nile

Elsa Yvanez
University of Copenhagen

What defines people's identities, and how can we recognise them in the past?

To answer these questions, archaeologists focus on the remains that past people left behind, trying to bridge the gaps imposed by time and geographical distance. One of the most effective ways is to interpret material culture and understand how and why these objects embody social realities. This record of the past has, however, been heavily affected by time, which destroyed a very large portion of the objects that built people's surroundings. Our view is often limited to the hard and solid parts, to the objects and architecture made of stone, ceramic or metal that resisted the passage of the centuries. The many objects made of putrescible organic material—wood, animal skin and fibres—have been left behind. In particular, the many objects made of soft and flexible material have been slowly erased from our reconstruction of the past. Even when supplied with a rich iconography of reliefs and paintings, our view of past people often finds itself limited to hard mineral surfaces. On rare occasions, however, exceptional climatic conditions can preserve textiles and leather. That is the case in the Nile valley, where extreme aridity has preserved thousands of textile and animal skin garments.

This extraordinary material provides us with the rare opportunity to develop an archaeology of dress practices, encompassing remains of clothing, iconographic representations of different people and body ornamentation. When combined according to specific cultural codes, these elements form 'dress practices' that functioned as powerful means of non-verbal communication between individuals and their community: "tell me what you wear, and I will tell you who you are." The team of the Fashioning Sudan project will piece together clothing assemblages and body perception through archaeological and historical sources, retracing the development of dress practices from the Bronze Age to the medieval period (from c. 2500 BCE to 1500 CE) across the vast territory of modern Sudan and Nubia.

The project is centred on the 'soft' dimensions of people: their garments and the way they were moving in them, supplemented by other body industries such as skin and hair ornamentation. By understanding how people fashioned their appearance, we aim to reconstruct interwoven narratives of identity, exploring concepts of age and gender groups, social status, and community building.

Garments can tell us a particularly rich story because they are the results of a very complex, long and costly *chaîne opératoire*, and because, once produced, they accompany humans from birth to death as a second skin. In that way, garments sit at the crossroad between the exploitation of raw resources, craft technologies, and societal use (Andersson Strand *et al.*, 2010). All of these paths, oscillating between individual choices and communities of practices, reveal different ways in which humans experience 'identity': we craft and perform our own identities while recognising the identities of others.

Crafting – performing – recognising identities through dress in the Middle Nile valley

The ERC Starting Grant project Fashioning Sudan—Archaeology of dress along the Middle Nile—will explore these three dimensions of identity through the holistic study of clothing.

Recognising identities: new paradigm for dress as identity markers

Our first objective is to build the archaeology of dress practices as a valuable method to study the human past, expanding Marie Louise Stig Sørensen's method for "reading dress" (Sørensen, 1997) to the African context of the Middle Nile valley. In this first work

package, we will lay the methodological and theoretical groundwork of the project, merging the concepts of materiality, entangled networks, and sensory assemblages developed in archaeology and social anthropology. We will be conscious of incorporating recent developments in the decolonisation of cultural heritage, creating new ontological categories of garments and outfits that are not based on exterior views but deeply rooted in the Sudanese milieu. In doing so, we aim to create a model illustrating the relations between dress practices and the ancient societies of Sudan and Nubia, retracing the networks between garments, the natural environment, economic production and social practices. This theoretical approach will structure our study of the material and be tested through experimental archaeology and garment reconstructions (both physical garments and 3D digital illustrations). It will also be directly implemented in the building of our project relational database grouping textile, skin, and leather artefacts, together with a selection of iconographic documents and body adornments (hairstyles, jewellery, body modifications such as tattooing and scarification). Populating the database will result in the identification of garment types and typical traits of cloth cultures, such as actual items (e.g. the loincloth), specific aesthetics (e.g. fringes) or techniques (e.g. openworks), and concepts (e.g. reveal/conceal the body).

Crafting identities: manufacturing dress in context

Our second objective is to provide original knowledge about the exploitation and management of natural resources and how sustained craft production was sustained. By conducting multi-targeted high-resolution analyses, we will study past Sudanese ecology through the prism of non-subsistence technologies: for the first time, agriculture and animal husbandry will not be targeted through

Image: PI Elsa Yvanez studying a funerary textile from Sai Island, Nubia, in Nov. 2022. © Sai Island Archaeological Mission, photo by Olivier Cabon.

the prism of food production but through dress practices and comfort. This work package will explore the manufacturing of dress components and develop understanding of the mechanisms that led specific raw materials to be transformed into garments. It will be structured according to three main research questions:

- 1) What plant and animal products were used to make garments?
- 2) What was the *chaîne opératoire* of textile and leather garments?
- 3) How did garment production affect the economy and specific modes of subsistence?

To answer them, we will merge the study of ancient crafts and economies, drawing data from the artefacts themselves as well as from tools, archaeobotany, archaeozoology, landscapes, the study of chaînes opératoires, experimental archaeology, and textual sources. Tracking the use of raw resources through time and space will involve sampling of both textile and skin items, fibre and skin identification (imaging with scanning electron microscopy, palaeoproteomics, HPLC analyses for the identification of dyeing and tanning agents), as well as radiocarbon dating. In doing so, we hope to shed new light on



Example of material selection in woven fabric and tanned leather from Sai Island (Photo Elsa Yvanez, Sai Island Archaeological Mission).

the economy of ancient Sudan, revealing the little-known interactions between different production models such as hunting, semi-nomadic pastoralism, and sedentary agriculture. We will also reveal savoir-faire and communities of practice to renew our understanding of cultural and trading networks.

Performing identities: dressing the individual and social body

Our third objective is to reconstruct diverse narratives of identity in ancient Sudan, relating dress practices to the individual and social body. Our main research questions will be:

- 1) What type of garment was used in specific periods, locations and contexts, and how did it function as body covering and means of communication?
- 2) How was dress used in the building of different identities?
- 3) How did dress practices react to social changes and changing attitudes towards the body?

Combining tools and analyses developed in the previous work packages, this phase will fully capitalise on the exceptional preservation of the material to build the first organised repertoire of leather

and textile garments. It will be used as a solid foundation to study the process of identity building through dress on the scale of both individuals and communities. We will draw statistical analyses from the database, revealing and tracing the use and distribution of different dress components through time and space. The results will be assembled in a diachronic map of dress practices. The database will also lead to detailed case studies merging information from whole outfits with the archaeological and historical data on specific individuals and their socio-cultural belongings. Particular attention will be devoted to revealing different attitudes towards the body and assessing the recurrence—or lack thereof—of specific outfits for specific groups. Far from assembling the blocks of a rigid typology, we wish to explore the coexistence of multiple groups and multi-layered narratives of identity, the combination and exclusion of which constantly evolved through peoples' lifetimes. Examples of partial identities currently visible in the record can be archers, unmarried girls, religious officials or children. Fashioning Sudan will particularly focus on gender and age, social status, bodies in life and death, regional identities and individuals vs groups. Using data acquired and analysed in detailed case studies, we will attempt to trace the dynamics of relationships and exchanges between people and cultural horizons.

Material and team members

The formation of a rich material corpus will sustain the large scope of the project. A preliminary survey has shown the existence of thousands of preserved textile and animal skin artefacts from 70 sites, located from the Khartoum region in the south to Lower Nubia in the north. Disparities in the representation of specific periods or regions do occur due to heterogeneous material preservation, which the project will try to circumvent as much as the documentation permits. Located in excavation magazines and multiple museums, material from 30 key sites has been preliminarily chosen



Examples of dress practices as represented on a copper alloy bowl from Karanog showing distinctive garments, hairdos, jewellery, and either tattoos or scarification on the stomach of the seated female individual (reproduced from Wildung et al., 1997, p. 382.).

according to the following criteria:

- i) sites located in both Central Sudan and Nubia
- ii) sites dated to understudied periods
- iii) long-lasting sites bridging many centuries
- iv) assemblages suggesting interesting cultural dynamics, such as those occurring during transitional periods or in border regions.

The study of this material rests on the expertise of specialists in textile and animal skin analysis, Sudanese archaeology, heritage science and data management and analysis. Besides the project investigator, the team includes four postdocs, a research assistant,

one external collaborator, a weaver, a data specialist and a digital illustrator seconded by an advisory board.

Together, we will work towards a diachronic overview of dress practices, which will reveal potential patterns in the negotiation of identities through time and space. In a bottom-up approach firmly grounded in the analysis of 'soft' archaeological artefacts, the project will explore these past identities by studying the multiple threads that unite people to their natural environment and their material appearance. In telling the stories of garments, the team of Fashioning Sudan hopes to participate in reconstructing the fantastically diverse human mosaic that is Sudan.

References

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Fashioning Sudan is developing the archaeology of dress practices as a holistic method to reconstruct narratives of identity in ancient Sudan and Nubia. We will investigate remains of garments made of textile and leather, the artefacts that lay closest to our bodies from birth to death, and are at the crossroads between individuals, technology and social praxis.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The project is hosted at the Centre for Textile Research, Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen. Activities in Sudan are supported by the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and the Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan (SFDAS) in Khartoum. Object analyses are possible thanks to partnerships with other universities and museums in Europe and North America.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Assoc. prof. Yvanez received her PhD in archaeology at the University of Lille III (France) before holding postdoctoral positions at the universities of Copenhagen and Warsaw. Her research focusses on the production and uses of textiles in the Nile Valley, with particular interests in the textile *chaîne opératoire* and its economy, dress practices and the use of textiles in burials.

CONTACT

Assoc. prof. Elsa Yvanez
Project lead

- ✉ elsa.yvanez@hum.ku.dk
- 🌐 <https://fashioningsudan.ku.dk/>
- 🌐 <https://ctr.hum.ku.dk/>



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