

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release, April 2023

SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2023

LAST GARMENTS

GRAVE FINDS FROM THE ASSI EL-HADATH CAVE IN LEBANON

30 APRIL TO 12 NOVEMBER 2023

OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.



They are old, worn, and patched. Yet it is this same fact that makes the garments and accessories on display in this year's exhibition so special. They attest to the sartorial culture of a particular rural population in the thirteenth century, and give us a sense of how valuable textiles were to the people of that time.

The new exhibition at the Abegg-Stiftung presents archaeological textiles discovered by Lebanese researchers during excavations of the Assi el-Hadath cave on Mount Lebanon between 1988 and 1993. Several adults and children had been buried there towards the end of the thirteenth century. Their well preserved clothing affords us an exciting insight into the care taken to extend the longevity of precious textile materials.

MARONITES AND THE ASSI EL-HADATH CAVE

Mount Lebanon has been the ancestral home of the Maronites since the tenth century. The Maronites are a Christian community that owing to religious persecution had previously had to flee Syria. When the Crusaders conquered the whole region, the Maronites placed themselves under their protection. However, by the thirteenth century the Crusaders were driven out by the Mamluks and the Maronites faced persecution all over again. Arab sources tell of the attacks on Hadath, the seat of the Maronite patriarchs, and of how its inhabitants fled to an unassailable cave with its own wellspring.

Located high up on Mount Lebanon around 100 km north of Beirut, the Assi el-Hadath cave discovered in 1988 is just such a remote and inaccessible cave. Inside, researchers found not only a walled well and a trough for grinding corn, but also a number of graves. The manuscripts with chants and prayers that also came to light identify the deceased as Christians. That the cave was a Maronite refuge therefore seems highly probable. Five adults, five children and one newborn baby, fully clothed and wrapped in sheets, were found buried at the back of the cave. Owing to the dry climate there, the bodies of the deceased had naturally mummified and their clothes and shrouds had likewise survived.

WINDOW ONTO THE PAST

The exhibition is organized into six sections, each of which shows the textiles found in a single grave context. Compared with other archaeological finds, all the garments worn by each of the deceased are well documented. They open a window onto the past, but one whose temporal and geographical extent is sufficiently narrow to tell us about the sartorial culture of one particular ethnic group in the thirteenth century.

Unlike today's fast fashion, medieval textiles were very time-consuming and costly to make. The durability of garments was therefore a top priority, as can be inferred from the numerous patches and repairs still visible on these items today. These textile clues allow us to draw conclusions about how the textiles were used and how they were worn. The stack of twenty-eight pieces of cloth sewn onto the front of a woman's blue tunic at around knee height, for example, was evidently intended as reinforcement or padding. The numerous repairs also show that the tunic was worn for work over a period of many years. These "last garments" were not made specially for burial but served as everyday wear or feast-day attire during the wearers' lifetime.

WORN OUT – WHAT NEXT?

The careful handling of valuable textiles in order to preserve them for as long as possible is also evident in the shrouds shown in the exhibition. These were often pieced together from several fragments of cloth and are the result of successful recycling of older materials. Once a garment was worn out, any usable parts were salvaged to be reworked for other purposes. This practice is demonstrated in reverse by an animated film depicting the reconstruction of a tunic from fragments of a shroud. At least in part, garments, too, might be made of materials that had been used elsewhere. The shape and size of the pattern pieces simply had to be adjusted to whatever material was available. The outer fabric of a child's tunic, for example, turns out to consist of nineteen pieces of three different cloths.

MATERIALS FROM NEAR AND FAR

The textiles found in the cave were made from a variety of materials. However, the most commonly used fibre was cotton, which like linen, had to be imported. Locally grown fibres were all bast fibres such as those obtained from the stinging nettles native to that region. Most of the textiles are undyed. Even just the dyeing of cloth and yarn constituted a luxury that very few people could afford. Embroidery executed in silk was the principal means of adding a dash of colour. Silk, however, was expensive and required importation from the east before being processed locally. The display case containing textile fragments that cannot be securely attributed to any one grave gives visitors a glimpse of both the variety of materials and the many different forms and techniques of decoration used in the thirteenth century. From a technical point of view, the plaited band found among the grave goods of an adult woman is especially interesting. It consists of elements made in an ancient technique called *sprang*, which entails twisting and intertwining spanned threads to create a stretchy, net-like fabric. A series of short video sequences is provided to demonstrate each step in the manufacturing process.

THE CONCLUSION OF A LONG PROJECT

The exhibition concludes an extensive restoration project conducted by the Abegg-Stiftung that has lasted several years. To preserve the garments and accessories from the Assi el-Hadath cave for the future, the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities in 2017 entrusted the bulk of them to the Abegg-Stiftung for conservation and restoration. The conservators' first step was to examine and document the materials and techniques used in the construction of the textile finds. The treatment best suited to each item was then selected. Fragile areas, for example, had to be stabilized with a suitable support fabric. Each garment also had to have a tailor-made mount to lend it volume and support the cloth in all the desired places. Once the exhibition is over, the textiles, complete with their mounts, will be returned to the National Museum of Beirut. Until then,

however, these textile testimonies from Lebanon afford us a unique glimpse into a distant past. What the exhibited objects also show, especially the many children's garments, is how thrifty people in those days were with cloth and how carefully they pieced together even small remnants to make garments, which they then decorated – and repaired as and when necessary.

Both press release and photos are available as e-mail attachments. Please contact
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Caption:

Child's coat (detail). Mount Lebanon, 13th century. Cotton, linen and silk.
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