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**Gamma Marks: Recent Works  
Relevant to Their Study**

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# Gamma Marks: Recent Works Relevant to Their Study

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Janet Ewell

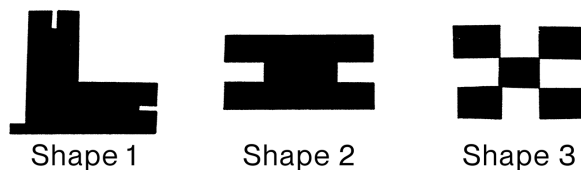
**Abstract:** *Many are familiar with the so-called gamma marks as they are portrayed on early medieval mosaics in Ravenna and Rome. They appear as right-angle marks, usually with toothed ends, or in a shape like a capital H on the corners of angels' and worthies' robes or in mosaics depicting textiles such as altar cloths and hangings. The marks defy easy explanation, in part because they are also portrayed in multiple cultural contexts, well beyond Italy, and because they take other forms. This paper surveys publications from Maciej Szymaszek, one of three scholars whose recent works significantly increase our knowledge of the marks' geographic spread, their frequency of use, and their persistence across time.*

Several significant works relating to *gamma marks*, or *gammadia*, have been published in the last dozen years.<sup>1</sup> These works expand our knowledge of their range and frequency in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period and offer hints concerning their significance to some who viewed or wore them.

Maciej Szymaszek catalogued and studied first- to third-century textile remnants with notched bands that bear the marks shown in figure 1. Cristina Cumbo photographed and documented more than 200 instances of the marks portrayed on the edges of the worthies'

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1. The word *gammadiae* first appears in print in the fifteenth century in the *Liber Pontificalis*, the Book of Popes. We do not know how ancients referred to the marks; because they seem only loosely and visually connected to either the Greek letters *gamma* or *eta*, scholars often refer to them as “so-called gamma marks.” Except when quoting others, this paper simply calls them “gamma marks.” (Γ) and (H) are used for clarification where necessary.



**Figure 1.** The three shapes Szymaszek found woven into textiles are from the first to third century CE. Shape 1 is the most common shape found in the study, named for its resemblance to the Greek letter gamma ( $\Gamma$ ) and sometimes called the right-angle mark. Shape 2 resembles the Greek *eta* ( $\text{H}$ ) and is sometimes called the H-shaped mark. Beyond their loose resemblance, they do not seem connected to the Greek alphabet. (Maciej Szymaszek, “The Distribution of Textiles with ‘Greek Letter’ Signs in the Roman World: The Case of the So-called *gammadia*,” in *Textile Trade and Distribution in Antiquity*, ed. Kerstin Dross-Krupe (Wiesbaden, DE: Harrassowitz, 2014), 193.)

mantles<sup>2</sup> in the frescoes of Roman catacombs. Gamma marks portrayed on a robe in the catacombs can be seen in figure 2.

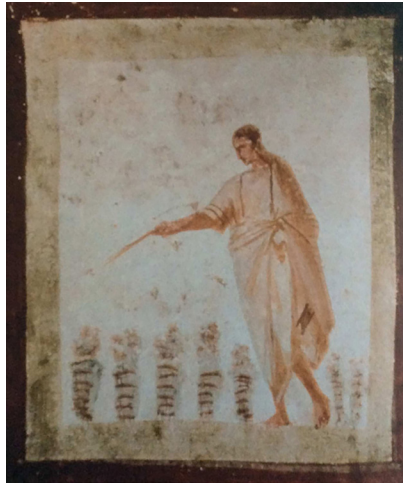
In addition, Jelena Bogdanović wrote in 2014 about the liturgical context and the ritual and spatial significance of the fifteenth-century priestly vestment, the sakkos of Photios, the Metropolitan of Kiev and all Rus'. The sakkos' opulent decorations were applied in the form of four crosses, each surrounded by sets of four right angles or gamma marks (see figure 3). Figure 4 shows a sketch of the cross-and-gammas pattern that may be difficult to discern amid the sakkos' rich embroidery.

These recent scholarly works enrich our knowledge of the marks' range and frequency and offer insight into their possible significance. To use comparative religion's vocabulary, these papers, taken together, suggest that the marks sometimes delineated sacred spaces and may in some cases have been associated with rituals, including rites of passage.

In this study I share images of what are frequently considered to be gamma marks and discuss Szymaszek's doctoral work on the first- to third-century textile remnants that bear these marks.<sup>3</sup> Using

2. A mantle is an outer garment, usually worn over a tunic, woven in one piece as a large rectangle, and meant to be wrapped around the body with the selvages—the long, self-finished edges—at the bottom and top. It is often shown in art with an end draped over the left arm and extending below knee level. On women, the mantle may also serve as a veil or head covering and extend to cover the person's lower legs. A mantle may be called a *robe*, a *palium* (Latin), a *himation* (Greek), or a תלית (*tallit*, Hebrew).

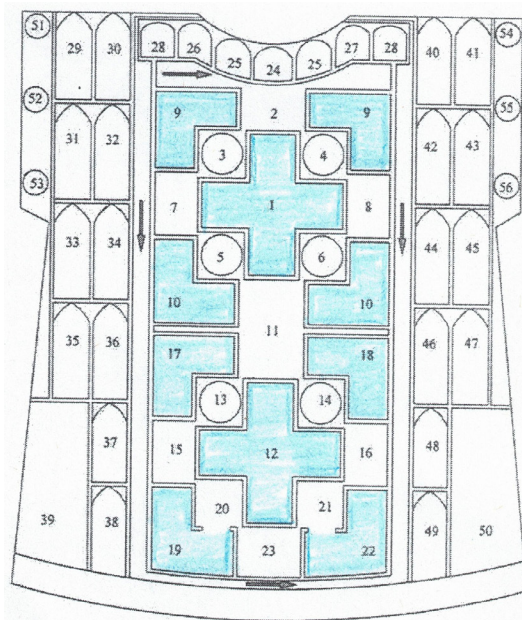
3. In a forthcoming paper I will discuss the work of both Cumbo and Bogdanović, summarize the contributions of these three scholarly works, and consider the potential implications they raise.



**Figure 2.** Note the mark above Christ's left knee as he multiplies loaves and fishes in this fresco in Rome's catacomb of Via Anapo, fourth century CE. (Anonymous, *Christ multiplies the loaves of bread*. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Christ multiplies the loaves of bread, anonymous catacomb of via Anapo," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ\_multiplies\_the\_loaves\_of\_bread,\_anonymous\_catacomb\_of\_via\_Anapo.jpg.)



**Figure 3.** The Major Sakkos of Photios, the early fifteenth century Metropolitan of Kiev and All Rus'. Scriptural events are embroidered with the crucifixion and anastasis (the victorious Christ standing on the doors of hell, raising Adam and Eve from the dead) shown inside the two central crosses. These crosses are surrounded by four gamma marks (Γ). (Anonymous, *Major Sakkos of Photios*, circa 1417, satin embroidered with gold and silver thread and silk with pearl ornaments, Kremlin Armory, Moscow. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Large sakkos of photius," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Large\_sakkos\_of\_photius.jpg.)



**Figure 4.** This drawing of the Major Sakkos of Photios shows more clearly the eight gamma shapes ( $\Gamma$ ) surrounding the major crosses on the front of Metropolitan Photios's major sakkos show in figure 3. Another two crosses and eight gammas are on the back. (Jelena Bogdanović, "The Moveable Canopy, The Performative Space of the Major Sakkos of Metropolitan Photios," *Byzantinoslavica* 72, no. 1–2 (January 2014): 251.)

Szymaszek's work, archeological reports, and the ensuing scholarly analysis, the paper suggests patterns that seem to emerge and looks at the patterns' implication.

The primary evidence of gamma marks is visual, not verbal. Therefore, it is much easier to point to a gamma mark than it is to define one. See figures 5 through 23 for examples of gamma marks.

### **Gamma Marks on Preserved Textiles: Maciej Szymaszek's Work**

Maciej Szymaszek's 2014 unpublished doctoral dissertation<sup>4</sup> examines over 160 textiles with woven-in, notched bands from the first to

4. Maciej Szymaszek, *Signs (So-Called Gammadia) on Roman and Late-Antique Textiles in the Light of Archeological, Iconographic, and Literary Sources* (PhD diss., John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, 2014).



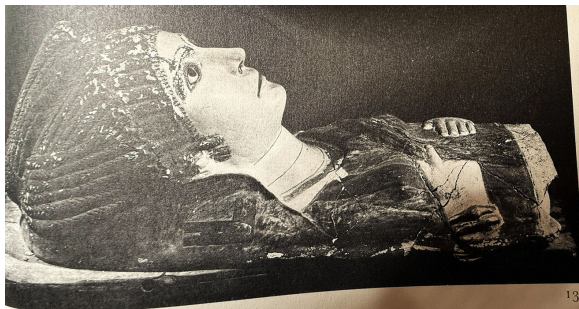
**Figure 5.** A sixth-century mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna, contains ten gamma marks: four on top at the altar cloth's corners enclose the Eucharist, four on the front enclose the eight-pointed emblem, two in gold on the altar itself, and four at knee level on prophets' and angels' robes. (Anonymous, *Mosaic of Sacrifice of Abel and Offering of Melchizedek*, Ravenna, Italy. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Mosaic of Sacrifice of Abel (left) and Offering of Melchizedek, (right) Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna (6098688702)," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mosaic\_of\_Sacrifice\_of\_Abel\_(left)\_and\_Offering\_of\_Melchizedek,\_ (right)\_Basilica\_of\_San\_Vitale,\_Ravenna\_(6098688702).jpg.)



**Figure 6.** A third-century CE mosaic, Mytilene, Greece, illustrates Act 3 of Menander's third-century-BCE comedy "Samia." The central figure has marks on his robe. (Anonymous, *Girl from Samos mosaic panel from the dining room of the House of Menander in Mytilene*, third century CE, photograph of floor mosaic, University of Texas, Austin. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Samia (Girl from Samos) Mytilene 3cAD," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Samia\_(Girl\_from\_Samos)\_Mytilene\_3cAD.jpg.)



**Figure 7.** The oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator, from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai. Christ holds scriptures encased in a golden book cover on which the central cross is surrounded by gamma marks (Γ). (Anonymous, *Icon of Christ Pantocrator*, sixth century, paint and hot beeswax. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Spas vsederzhitel sinay," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spas\_vsederzhitel\_sinay.jpg.)



**Figure 8.** This Roman-era Egyptian woman's mummy mask includes a gamma mark (Γ), possibly on a veil, near her right ear. (Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period: Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue*, 3 vols. (New York: Bollinger, 1964), 11, fig. 135.)



**Figure 9.** A male mummy mask from Roman-era Egypt with the eta (H) shape. (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 11, fig. 132.)



**Figure 10.** The golden book covers of Theodolinda's Gospel, with two central crosses, each framed by four gamma marks ( $\Gamma$ ). (Anonymous, *L'Evangelario di Teodolinda nella propria teca presso il Museo e Tesoro del Duomo di Monza*, Circa 603, gold book covers, The Museum and Treasury of Monza Cathedral, Italy. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "L'Evangelario di Teodolinda nella propria teca presso il Museo e Tesoro del Duomo di Monza," [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27Evangelario\\_di\\_Teodolinda\\_nella\\_propria\\_teca\\_presso\\_il\\_Museo\\_e\\_Tesoro\\_del\\_Duomo\\_di\\_Monza.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27Evangelario_di_Teodolinda_nella_propria_teca_presso_il_Museo_e_Tesoro_del_Duomo_di_Monza.jpg).)



**Figure 11.** Possibly a shroud, this nearly life-sized tempura-on-linen portrait shows the deceased between Osiris (as a mummy) and Anubis. A prominent gamma mark ( $\Gamma$ ) extends beyond the edge of his mantle. The Berlin Egyptian Museum indicates it is from the mid-first century CE. (Anonymous, *Mummy Wrapping of a Young Man*, Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection, Berlin. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Shroud from the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty," [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shroud\\_from\\_the\\_time\\_of\\_the\\_Ptolemaic\\_dynasty.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shroud_from_the_time_of_the_Ptolemaic_dynasty.jpg). On Wikimedia it is identified as Ptolemaic. For the later date, see Isabelle Régen, "Ombres Une iconographie singulière du mort sur des « linceuls » d'époque romaine provenant de Saqqâra" *Et in Ægypto et ad Ægyptum*, eds. Annie Gasse, Frédéric Servajean, and Christophe Thiers (Montpellier, FR: Archéologie des Sociétés Méditerranéennes Université Paul Valéry, 2012), 604 and fig. 1.)



**Figure 12.** From the Huqoq Synagogue Floor Mosaics with eta (H) shaped marks on the defenders' robes. Fifth century CE, Israel. Since warriors were unlikely to go into combat with robes draped over their arms, their marked clothing serves to identify them as Jews. (Anonymous, *Huqoq Synagogue Floor Mosaic*, fifth century CE, mosaic tile, Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, University of Washington, jewishstudies.washington.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Huqoq-elephant-panel.jpg.)



**Figure 13.** The Latin Poet Virgil is depicted in a fourth- to fifth-century manuscript in a robe with gamma marks. The manuscript is at the Vatican. (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 11, fig. 127.)



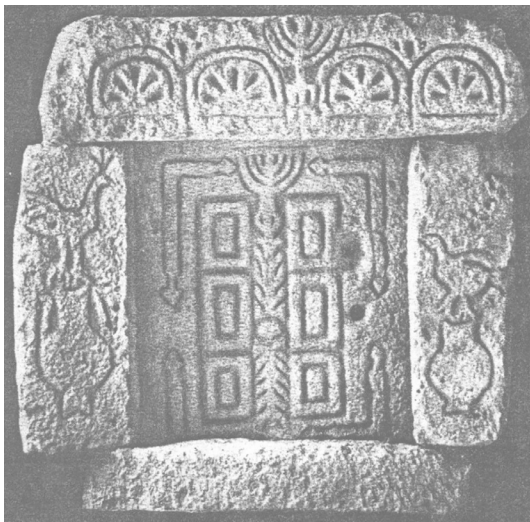
**Figure 14.** A youth, possibly the Apostle John, in a gamma-marked mantle in the Via Dino Compagni Hypogeum, Rome. (Anonymous, *Youth in Toga, possibly the Apostle John*, circa fourth century, fresco, Via Dino Compagni Hypogeum (Via Latina Catacombs) Rome. Image courtesy of the International Catacomb Society.)



**Figure 15.** Gamma marks in floor mosaics from an inner room of a high-priestly house in Jerusalem, destroyed by fire along with the temple in 70 CE. (Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), fig. 164.)



**Figure 16.** Gamma marks filling in the corners of the square around a circular rosette in floor mosaics in the Magdala Synagogue, Galilee. Probably destroyed 67 or 68 CE. It may have been used during Christ's time in Galilee. (Photo by author.)



**Figure 17.** Fifth-century Jewish rock cut tomb, Tamara, Galilee. A rough-hewn tomb with four gamma marks capped with arrowhead or leaf shapes enclose the carved image of doors topped by a menorah. (See נחמן אביגד and N. Avigad, "Relics of Ancient Jewish Art in Galilee / היהודית העתיקה בגליל", *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* (1964): 24 ארץ-ישראל מחקרים בידיעת הארץ (1964): 24 ועתיקותיה ז [jstor.org/stable/23614641](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23614641).)



**Figure 18.** Christ Between Peter and Paul. Six eta (H) shaped gammas are visible. (Anonymous, *Christ between Peter and Paul*, circa fourth century, fresco, Catacomb of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, Rome. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "ChristPeterPaul," [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ChristPeterPaul.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ChristPeterPaul.jpg).)



**Figure 19.** Christ's lifeless body, his waist covered by a cloth on which is a cross surrounded by smaller crosses in circles. Gamma marks frame the crosses. An epitaphios (lamentation upon the tomb) may also be an icon and a liturgical cloth used during Friday or Saturday of Easter. (Anonymous, *Epitaphios of King Stefan of Uros II Milutin Serbia*, circa 1300, Liturgical cloth and icon in silk, velvet, gold and silver wire, gold and silver thread, Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade inventory no. 4660. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Plaštanica kralja Milutina, XIII-XIV stoleće," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pla%C5%A1tanica\_kralja\_Milutina,\_XIII-XIV\_stole%C4%87e.jpg)



**Figure 20.** Saints, crowns in hand, approach Christ in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. A variety of marks appear at knee level. (Anonymous, *Male Saints Approaching Christ*, sixth century, mosaic, Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Ravenna Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo mosaic," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravenna\_Basilica\_of\_Sant%27Apollinare\_Nuovo\_mosaic.jpg.)



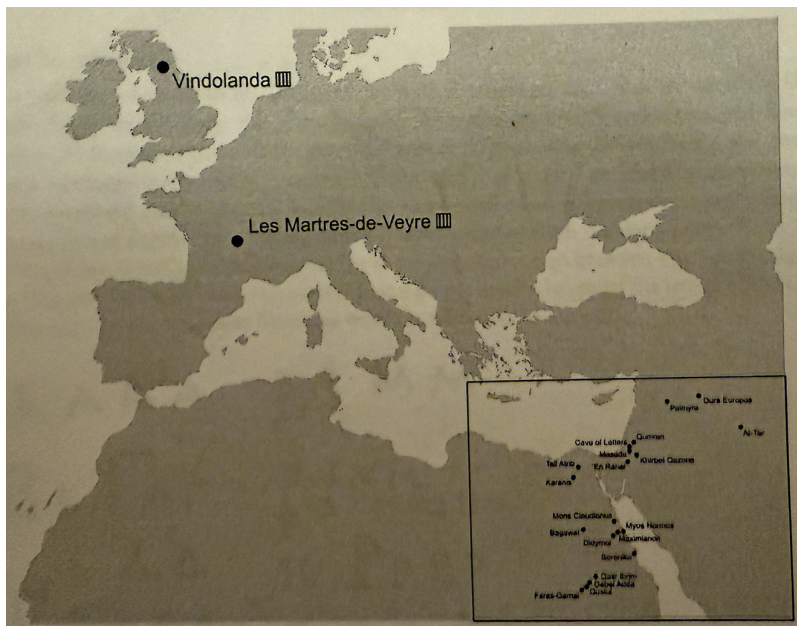
**Figure 21.** Virgin martyrs across the nave from the male saints in figure 20, their crowns in hand, approach Mary and Christ, gold rectangles on their white robes, front and back. (Anonymous, *Virgin Martyrs Approaching Mary and Christ*, sixth century, mosaic, Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Meister von San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna 002," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meister\_von\_San\_Apollinare\_Nuovo\_in\_Ravenna\_002.jpg.)



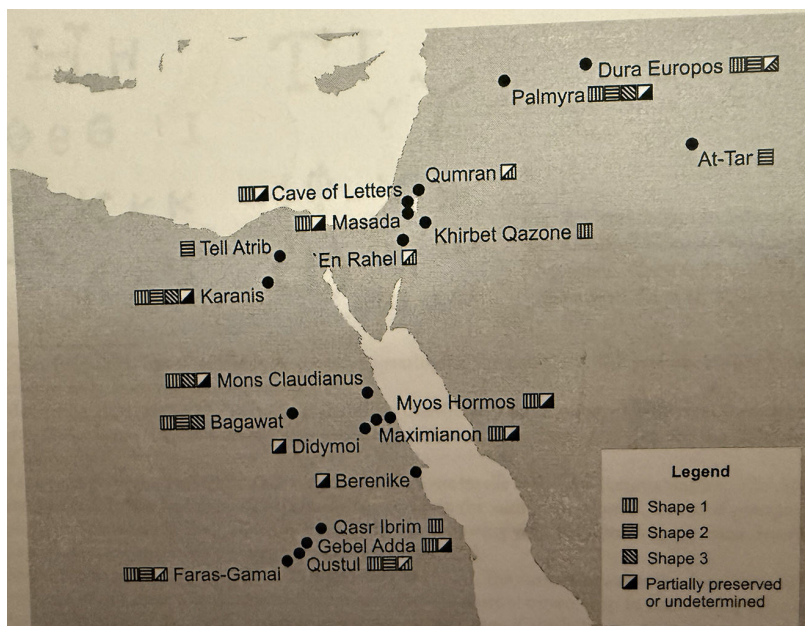
**Figure 22.** Christ enthroned on Mary, a small gold gamma without pronged ends near her gold rectangle. Angels have pronged gammas on their robes. (Frederica Bustreo, *Ravenna Guide to the Masterpieces* (Florence: SCALA, 2013), 72–73.)



**Figure 23.** The screen between the nave and apse in this Orthodox church “follows the model of the unified first millennium Church of both East and West . . . utilizing hanging curtains instead of icons to complete the enclosure.” Shawn Tribe, “The Byzantine Church of Panagia Gorgoepikoös” *Liturgical Arts Journal*, 19 September 2025, [liturgicalartsjournal.com/2025/09/the-byzantine-church-of-panagia.html](http://liturgicalartsjournal.com/2025/09/the-byzantine-church-of-panagia.html). (Image anonymous, *The Interior of Panagia Gorgoepikoös* fourteenth-century Byzantine church, Athens. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. “Panagia Gorgoepikoös interior 2010,” [commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11196635](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11196635).)



**Figure 24.** Distribution map of textiles with marks. (Szymaszek, "Distribution," 191.)



**Figure 25.** An inset map from figure 24 showing the locations where climates were more favorable to textile preservation. Most textiles were found in these areas. (Szymaszek, "Distribution," 191.)

the third century CE from more than twenty sites in the Roman Empire of the time.<sup>5</sup> See figures 24 and 25.

Many were previously unpublished. The bands were most often tapestry woven into woolen cloth with colored wool threads that contrasted with the larger textile. (See figure 29 for a close look at a tapestry-woven gamma.) The tapestry-woven bands were red, yellow, blue, black, or purple.

Of the more than 160 textiles, 54 percent were sufficiently well-preserved to allow Szymaszek to identify the marks' original forms. These fell into three shapes. (See figure 1.) Among these textiles with identifiable shapes, shape one, a right angle—the so-called gamma shape, referring to the capital Greek gamma—is the most common with about fifty-eight examples (36 percent) found at sixteen sites. Shape two, an H—the so-called *eta shape*, referring to the capital Greek *eta*—is less common, with roughly twenty-four examples (15 percent) found in eight sites, while there are eight examples of shape three, which were woven with a checkerboard pattern made from five squares. Eight of these (4 percent) were found at four sites.<sup>6</sup> Multiple sites produced both textiles with right-angle marks and textiles with the H shaped marks.<sup>7</sup>

Though most of the textile remains are small, handkerchief size, a few are considerably larger. The larger textiles indicate the marks could appear near the corners of rectangular fabrics that had been woven to shape. Szymaszek referred to these as mantles.<sup>8</sup> One remarkably intact textile from the Sudan measures more than seven-and-a-half feet long and four-and-a-half feet wide. See figure 26.

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5. Maciej Szymaszek, "The Distribution of Textiles with 'Greek Letter' Signs in the Roman World: The Case of the So-called *gammadia*," in *Textile Trade and Distribution in Antiquity*, ed. Kerstin Dross-Krupe (Wiesbaden, DE: Harrassowitz, 2014), 189.

6. Szymaszek, "Distribution," 193. Yigael Yadin reports two garments with the checkerboard pattern from the Cave of Letters, but the checkerboards were in the middle section of the upper selvage, in contrast to the presumed placement of the right-angle and H-shaped marks nearer the corners. Yigael Yadin, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1963), 225.

7. Szymaszek, "Distribution," 191, fig 1b.

8. Maciej Szymaszek, "On the Interpretation of Textile Finds with Right-angled or H-shaped Tapestry Bands," in *Textiles, Tools and Techniques of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries: Proceedings of the 8th Conference 'Textiles from the Nile Valley' (Research group) Conference Antwerp, 4–6 October 2013* (Tiel, BE: Lannoo, 2015), 170.



**Figure 26.** This gamma-marked textile from Sudan measures over 7.7 feet by 4.6 feet. The right-angle marks were woven in near corners. (Szymaszek, “On the Interpretation,” 170, fig. 4.)

Szymaszek also writes that smaller remnants could have come from veils and tunics based on the gamma shapes’ artistic representations from the period, including from mummy masks and mosaics portraying bands with notched ends.

The textiles were found principally in Egypt, Sudan, and Syria, where the dry climate favors textile preservation, but they were also found across a wider geographic range, including in Vindolanda (a Roman fort in England just south from Hadrian’s Wall), in a burial in central France, and in Israel, Jordan, and in At-Tar in modern Iraq.<sup>9</sup> The Middle East’s dry climates aid in textile preservation, while the textiles

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9. Szymaszek has referenced other examples since his doctoral research, including a gamma-marked textile from Pompeii. See Annette Paetz gen Schieck, Sylvia Mitschke, and Luigia Melillo, “Purpur, Gold Und Seide: Textile Vielfalt Aus Der Asche Des Vesuvus,” in *Antike Welt* (2014): 15–21, 18–19, Figure 6. Szymaszek refers to this in note 1 of his “On the Interpretation.” It is quite possible that Jews, Christians, and initiates into the Isis cult groups that have elsewhere been associated with gamma marks in Late Antiquity each lived in Pompeii. For the possible presence of Jews in Greco-Roman Pompeii, see Jewish Virtual Library, s.v. “Pompeii,” <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/Pompeii>, which points to Hebrew names among established members of Pompeii’s society and among recent immigrants, possibly Jews who fled Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. For the possible presence of Christians in Pompeii, see Bruce W. Longenecker’s *The Crosses of Pompeii: Jesus-Devotion in a Vesuvian Town* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 112–15. Longenecker also notes the presence of Isis worship in Pompeii.

from Vindolanda were preserved when the 97 CE Roman fort was razed to make way for the 104 CE fort,<sup>10</sup> with the old fort's remains covered "by a layer of turf or clay, to provide a clean area for the new structure." The resulting "anaerobic conditions" preserved virtually all the Roman debris.<sup>11</sup> The Les Martres-de-Veyre textiles from the burial in central France were preserved by "the presence of carbolic acid which permeates the region and acts against bacterial or biological degradation."<sup>12</sup>

Szymaszek has more recently facilitated the radiocarbon dating of eleven other well-preserved, tapestry-woven textile fragments with notched bands from burials that were rescued before the flooding by the Aswan Dam in upper Egypt and neighboring countries in 1960.<sup>13</sup> The oldest dates from as early as 130 CE, the most recent from as late as 540 CE. As with the first- to third-century textiles studied in his doctoral work, several textiles appear to have been originally rectangular, with woven-in bands forming right angles or H-shaped motifs near the textiles' corners. Seven of the eleven were clearly in a right-angle shape, and two were clearly in the H or eta shape. See figure 27.

Szymaszek writes that the marks serve no structural function, such as reinforcing the cloth.<sup>14</sup> He also writes that these marks may have served as a "decorative motif" and cautions that "at the current state of research it cannot be confirmed that the signs conveyed a symbolic or religious meaning" (*allo stato attuale della ricerca non si puo confermare che i segni trasmettessero un significato simbolico o religioso*).<sup>15</sup>

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10. Carol Van Driel-Murray, John Peter Wild, Mark Seaward, and Jennifer Hillam, "The Dating of the Periods of Occupation," in *The Early Wooden Forts* (Greenhead, UK: Roman Army Museum Publications for the Vindolanda Trust, 1993), viii, see also 84.

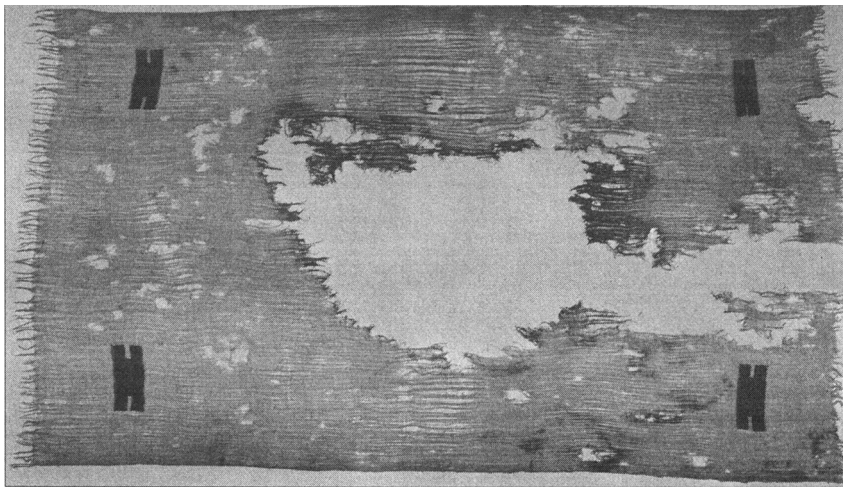
11. Robin Birley, "Introduction," in *The Early Wooden Forts*.

12. Sophie Desrosiers and Alexandra Lorquin, "Gallo-Roman Period Archaeological Textiles Found in France," in *Textiles in European Archaeology: Report from the 6<sup>th</sup> NESAT Symposium, 7–11<sup>th</sup> May 1996 in Borås*, eds. Lisa Bender Jørgensen and Christina Rinaldo (Goteborg, SE: NESAT, 1998), 54–55.

13. Maciej Szymaszek and Lena Larrson Loven, "Radiocarbon dating of Late Nubian textiles at the Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala, and the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago," in *Excavating, Analysing, Reconstructing: Textiles of the First Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries*, eds. Antoine De Moor, Cacilia Fluck, Petra Linscheid (Tielt, BE: Lannoo, 2017), 297, [https://www.spranglady.com/uploads/7/7/0/8/77084287/james\\_medard.pdf](https://www.spranglady.com/uploads/7/7/0/8/77084287/james_medard.pdf).

14. Szymaszek, "Distribution," 189. They are not weavers' marks, designations of fabric quality, nor "used to strengthen corners of the cloth."

15. Maciej Szymaszek, "L'origine delle cosiddette gammadiae nell'arte cristiana



**Figure 27.** This textile, also from Sudan, has the eta (H) shapes woven into the fabric near the corners. Fourth to sixth century CE. (Maciej Szymaszek, “L’origine delle cosiddette gammadiae nell’arte cristiana antica,” in *Acta XVI Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae (Rome 22–28 September 2013)*, ed. Olof Brandt et al. (Vatican: Pontifical Institute for Christian Archeology, 2016), fig. 2.)

He also notes that the widespread occurrence of textile artefacts bearing the same two shapes—the right angle and the H shape—have been repeated in the same way for more than 500 years” (*le forme del signi sono state ripetuti all stesso modo per più di 500 anni*).<sup>16</sup>

He eschews discussion of the textile owners’ ethnic or religious identities. The textiles’ findspots, that is, the physical location where they were recovered, are often complex, as discussed below in “Textile finds referenced in Szymaszek’s work.” His study does, nonetheless, enlarge our views concerning who might have worn or used such textiles. Though artistic and monumental representation show these marked mantles generally on people with elite status or high prestige,<sup>17</sup> predominantly male,<sup>18</sup> the woven artefacts confirm they were worn by

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antica,” in *Acta XVI Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae (Rome 22–28 September 2013)*, ed. Olof Brandt et al. (Vatican: Pontifical Institute for Christian Archeology, 2016), 2410.

16. Szymaszek, “L’origine,” 2417.

17. Where it can be determined who is portrayed wearing a gamma-marked mantle, the marks as represented in Christian and Jewish contexts are predominantly on figures of prestige or, in the case of funerary art in Egypt and Palmyra, the honored dead.

18. Women are less often portrayed than men in frescoes and mosaics generally. In a fourth-century gold glass from Catacomba di Novaziano, Saint Agnes

both genders and at least sometimes by non-elites. His work documents the marked mantles' use by people from many social classes, including miners, quarry workers, soldiers, and Jews under siege at Masada and at the Cave of Letters. The artefacts he catalogues show that they generally seem to be domestically produced textiles rather than imported or luxury goods.

He also documented more than 360 images of these marks from Late Antiquity that show close correlation between textile artefacts and artistic representations, noting Egyptian mummy portraits, Palmyrene sculpture, Jewish mosaics,<sup>19</sup> catacomb paintings, and Christian man-

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is portrayed orant—that is, praying with her hands raised above her head—wearing a gamma-marked mantle bearing the H shape. See Cristina Cumbo, *Le c.d. gammadiae nelle catacombe Cristiane di Roma: Censimento, confronti ed ipotesi interpretative* (Oxford: BAR, 2019), Appendix 4, 218. An interesting version of the gamma mark, a golden rectangle, is portrayed on women in the fifth and sixth centuries. The female martyrs portrayed processing toward the apse in Ravenna's sixth-century Sant'Apollinare Nuovo wear white mantles over their left shoulders with golden rectangles in the corners, parallel to the placement of gamma-marks on the revered males processing on the opposite side of the nave and the males who appear in the register above them. (The males' mantles are wrapped around them as well as draped over the left shoulder.) Mary, holding the Christ Child, also has such a golden rectangle on the corner of her blue mantle, while the Christ Child on her lap has a golden right-angle shape on his robe in a parallel position. In San Vitale, also sixth century, one member of the Empress Theodora's retinue wears a similarly marked white mantle with a golden rectangle. This shape is also portrayed in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo's mosaic of the Last Supper where it is centered on an altar cloth surrounded by right-angle gamma marks and on the hanging of the temple in the mosaic of a Pharisee and a Publican going up to the temple to pray. In the Catacomb of San Gennaro in Naples, the same rectangular shape appears on the robes of the two orant women on either side of San Gennaro (wearing a mantle with a Z shape gamma mark), probably from the fifth century. The rectangle surrounded by gamma shapes appears in the mosaics of *vela*, curtains or veils in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo.

19. Szymaszek's list has not been published. In addition to those he mentioned in "On the Interpretation," fifth-century Jewish mosaics were uncovered in 2012 during the excavations of a synagogue in Huqoq, bringing forward by 150 years the major evidence of the use of these marks in a Jewish context. *Eta* or H-shaped marks appear there on Jewish figures in the elephant mosaic. One other report of a fifth-century right-angle-shaped mark, "on a stone door of a Jewish tomb from the fifth century at Tamara," is shown in figure 17 and was published by Yigael Yadin in 1963. Yadin cites נחמן אביגד and Avigad, "Relics of Ancient Jewish Art in Galilee," 24. See Yigael Yadin, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1963), 230n62, [archive.org/details/findsfrombarkokh0001yadi](http://archive.org/details/findsfrombarkokh0001yadi). Yadin mentions four right-angle shapes capped with arrowhead or leaf shapes found in

uscripts, as well as mosaics and frescoes in public and religious buildings. He writes, “Bands depicted in art closely correspond in shape, colour and position to those seen on archaeological finds from the first to the third century CE.”<sup>20</sup>

Of these more than 360 ancient artistic representations, 85 percent come from Christian contexts, while 15 percent are associated with Jewish, Egyptian, Palmyrene, Roman, and Greek contexts.<sup>21</sup> These “numerous representations in art demonstrate that textiles with the signs have also been known in regions where archeological evidence is not preserved due to conditions unfavourable for fabric survival.”<sup>22</sup>

Previous publications concerning these gamma marks have focused on the marks’ artistic representations,<sup>23</sup> which were likely commissioned by those with at least some financial means. These artistic representations have informed—and perhaps skewed—scholars’ interpretations. The textile remains Szymaszek studied are primary evidence, while the paintings and mosaics are secondary representations or perhaps tertiary evidence, if artists and craftsmen worked from copy books or from other representations.<sup>24</sup>

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relief. The tomb is not far from Huqoq. The carving is rough-hewn and is surmounted by a menorah on the lintel. The four right-angle marks enclose what appears to be pair of doors with three panels each, which are divided by an astragal that is also topped by a menorah.

20. Szymaszek, “Interpretation,” 172n19.

21. Szymaszek, “L’origine,” 2418.

22. Szymaszek, “Distribution,” 195.

23. In addition to mantles portrayed in frescoes and mosaics, these marks are portrayed in gold glass, mummy portraits and masks, book covers, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, stone carvings, and metal work.

24. See Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europos conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report VIII Part I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 383; see Kraeling’s discussion of “copy book art” as it pertains to Dura-Europos. He also speaks of a manuscript tradition. Also note Rina Talgam, “Christian Floor Mosaics,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen, Mark D. Ellison (London: Routledge, 2018), 115. R. Pfister and Louisa Bellinger write that the frescoes in the third-century Dura-Europos synagogue “may be copied from earlier pictures.” See R. Pfister and Louisa Bellinger, *The Textiles: The Excavations at Dura-Europos conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report IV Part II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), 10. Long trains of transmission, not just wide geographic spread, through copy books may be implied.

## Textile Finds Referenced in Szymaszek's Work

Seven of the twenty-two findspots Szymaszek documents are discussed below, chosen here for the quantity of the information available about the findspots and their contexts, for their geographic spread, and for their capacity to add information about the textiles' owners and uses. They also illustrate the difficulties scholars face when trying to identify textiles' owners or when trying to discern what the textile meant to its owner.<sup>25</sup>

### Textiles from Les Martes-de-Veyvre

A second-century woman's burial from Les Martes-de-Veyvre (in central France about 110 miles west from Lyon) reveals her gender and that she was buried in a wooden coffin with a woolen, tabby-woven<sup>26</sup> textile bearing a woven-in, right-angled, denticulate gamma that spanned roughly six inches on the cloth.<sup>27</sup> The researchers who studied this and other Gallo-Roman textiles from across France concluded "the available data are inadequate to risk cultural attributions, and to separate what stems from the Gallic tradition, the Roman contribution or imports." France "includes a part of *Gallia comata* conquered by Caesar and the *Provencia*, Roman for a long time, but under the influence of early Greek settlement and heir to a long tradition of Mediterranean exchange."<sup>28</sup> Obscure though the burial may be, it does contribute at least one important idea: a second-century female burial could include a mantle with a right-angle shaped mark.

### Textiles from Vindolanda

The gamma-marked textile was deposited between 97 and 104 CE at a frontier, wooden Roman fort (a mile south from where Hadrian's Wall would later be built, now in northern England). The fort, which was adjacent to ironstone and lead workings and at that time contained

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25. A majority of the textile finds come from Egypt and neighboring counties. Discussion of the difficulties involved in identifying the users or owner of the textiles is found in Nobuko Kajitani, "Textiles and Their Context in the Third-to-Fourth Century CE Cemetery of al-Bagawat, Khargah Oasis, Egypt, from the 1907–1931 Excavations by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York," in *Textiles in Situ: Their findspots in Egypt and neighboring Countries in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Sabine Schrenk (Riggisberg, CH: Abegg-Stiftung, 2006).

26. Tabby woven or plain weave cloth is a basic weaving pattern, one thread up, the next one down.

27. Desrosiers and Lorquin, "Gallo-Roman," 59, fig. 7.

28. Desrosiers and Lorquin, "Gallo-Roman," 60.

daub and wattle buildings, housed the Ninth Cohort of Batavians<sup>29</sup> from present-day Holland, fewer than 500 men. This early fort enclosed only a few acres. The textile with a gamma mark was one of the nicer ones found among those discarded in the area of the *praetorium* where the fort's leadership and their families would have lived. The woolen textile was woven in a "fine, half-basket weave . . . (with) a tapestry-woven notched gamma inserted into it" in a full basket weave, but with "innumerable faults."<sup>30</sup> J. P. Wild writes, "It began life as a cloak, was carefully remodelled for another, unknown, textile function and finally (perhaps after a tertiary use) was jettisoned with many other rags" in room XII of the *praetorium*.<sup>31</sup> It may have belonged to the Prefect Flavius Cerialis or his literate wife Sulpicia Lepidina,<sup>32</sup> but no textiles found there were imported "eastern exotica."<sup>33</sup> While the prefect and his wife had prestige and were educated people in this frontier Roman fort, it would be hard to argue that anyone there enjoyed exalted status.

### Textiles from the Cave of Letters

The remains from five to eight woolen mantles with notched bands<sup>34</sup> were found in burial niches<sup>35</sup> in the Cave of Letters (five kilometers west from En-Gedi in the Judean desert) where "Jews who were definitely supporters of Bar Kokhba in his struggles against Rome (132–135 CE) diligently adhered to the various *halakhoth* contained in Talmudic literature of the period."<sup>36</sup> See figures 28 and 29.

They were members of families that led the rebellion in En-Gedi<sup>37</sup> and were pinned in the cave by Roman soldiers camped above them

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29. "The Dating of the Periods of Occupation," in *The Early Wooden Forts*, viii. *Coh. VIII Batavorum*.

30. J. P. Wild, "The Textiles," in *The Early Wooden Forts*, 79. No colors are noted, but other textiles from the site have "varying degrees of natural pigmentation" with darker brown or purple woven-in bands.

31. Wild, "Textiles," 84.

32. Sulpicia Lepidina's correspondence in ink on wooden tablets from two other Roman women, including a birthday party invitation from a neighboring commander's wife, are among the earliest known Roman women's letters.

33. Wild, "Textiles," 86.

34. Yadin,  *Finds*, 237, Figure 39-2.54, for a possible gamma mark. For others with gamma marks, see 203 and 238–40.

35. Yadin,  *Finds*, 221. He also writes that the number of gamma-marked mantles and the number of male skeletons are in accord "more or less," 232.

36. Yadin,  *Finds*, vii.

37. Yadin,  *Finds*, vii.



**Figure 28.** A mantle from the Cave of Letters, after washing. (Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kokhba* (New York: Random House, 1971), 76.)



**Figure 29.** A close up of a mark from the Cave of Letters, showing the woven-in, or tapestry-woven, gamma shape. (Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 77.)

who cut them off from both escape and from the only water source in the region.

Only one mantle is well enough preserved to indicate its size: 8.9 feet by 4.6 feet,<sup>38</sup> large enough to be “used as blankets or bed covers” and woven to shape on a very broad loom.<sup>39</sup> Yigael Yadin, who excavated the site, compares the mantle’s shape and size to the dimensions of a Roman woman’s pallium, where the measure from the floor to the base of the neck was equal to the cloth’s width. Its length, which was to be wrapped about the body, was two-and-one-sixth times the width.<sup>40</sup> The gamma marks appear near the mantle’s corners. The gamma-bearing mantles were colorful compared to other textiles from the cave,<sup>41</sup> and Yadin originally identified them as women’s items based on the frescoes in the synagogue at Dura-Europos. They were dyed reddish-brown from madder or blue-black from madder, indigo, and saffron.

One fragment with gamma marks had “a blue thread wrapped around the loose warp ends,” suggesting the presence of *tzitzits*— tassels— on the corners of at least one of the gamma-marked mantles.<sup>42</sup> The *tzitzits* suggest that the mantle may have served as a *tallit gadol*, a prayer shawl. (A *tallit gadol* may also serve as a shroud. See Numbers 15:38 and Deuteronomy 22:12.) Yadin notes that the mantles

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38. Yadin, *Finds*, 223, 238.

39. Yadin, *Finds*, 238. There, see a sketch of the mantle with one corner (and so, one gamma) missing.

40. Yadin, *Finds*, 238. This paper’s author stands roughly 61 inches tall, with a length from the floor to base of neck of about 53 inches. Based on the length of a Roman soldier’s stride, a thousand paces making a mile (*mille passuum*), and since one’s stride, left foot to left foot, is usually about one’s height, the average Roman soldier in the first century CE was a bit less than five foot three inches. In Dura-Europos, the light-colored male mantles are shown to fall mid-calf, while women’s mantles extended below the ankles. The textile’s dimensions would have been adequate for most people of either gender in the Roman period.

41. Yadin, *Finds*, 225. Yadin originally assumed the gamma-marked textiles to be women’s garments, based on the paintings at Dura-Europos where only females, the Widow of Zarepheth, and Moses’s mother and sister display the full shape of the right-angle gamma marks. One is robed in a saffron-colored mantle. On men at Dura-Europos, only pronged ends extending from near the corners of the mantles are shown. The mantles on men are generally white or painted in pastel colors—arguably to break up the whiteness of multiple mantles, for instance, in the group of gamma-marked Jews at David’s anointing.

42. Yadin, *Finds*, 240. *Tzitzit* are associated since ancient times with the *tallit* used by males during prayer, though modern women also use them.

found in the burial niches had no traces of *tzitzits*. He writes, "I do not believe that this is incidental, for it was evidently customary to remove the *sisith* from the mantles of person being buried."<sup>43</sup>

Yadin also reports unattached unspun wool in bundles, tied in the middle with linen thread and dyed by dipping the tufts in blue (or double dyed in madder and indigo, as Orit Shamir writes<sup>44</sup>), presumably for the *tzitzits*.<sup>45</sup> Shamir adds that "they were found in a letters-skin . . . wrapped in a piece of woollen mantle decorated with the H-shaped design and a linen cloth."<sup>46</sup>

The belongings left in the caves indicate a level of prosperity among the people from En-Gedi. A cache of bronze utensils was found hidden in Hall A.<sup>47</sup> Hall C yielded three glass vessels that "had been neatly wrapped and carefully hidden away. . . . Their exceptional packing would indicate that their owners had attached special importance to them, and there is little doubt that they had been packed in En-Gedi prior to flight to the cave."<sup>48</sup> Keys, all iron, left in the cave indicated these refugees possessed locked chests for jewelry and other precious possessions. They also had keys to what were probably doors, some "very thick and heavy doors such as those of a courtyard or fort."<sup>49</sup> The papers of Babata, found in a water skin in the cave, indicated she owned date orchards inherited from her first husband and was wealthy enough to loan money to her polygynous second husband. Nothing in the cave, however, indicates exalted status.

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43. Yadin,  *Finds*, 221. Orit Shamir points out that other mantles found in the cave, which were not used for burial, had no *tzitzit*. Orit Shamir, "Two Special Traditions in Jewish Garments and the Rarity of Mixing Wool and Linen Threads in the Land of Israel," in *Ancient Textiles Series Vol.18, an offprint from Prehistoric, Ancient Near Eastern and Aegean Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, eds. Mary Harlow, Cecile Michel and Marie-Louise Nosch (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 305. Shrouds for Jewish burials of the period usually were made of linen, thought the Cave of Letters was hardly an ordinary situation. See Orit Shamir, "Mixed Wool and Linen Textiles (*Sha'atnez* in Hebrew) from a Nabatean Burial Cave at 'En Tamar," in *Arise, Walk Through the Land*, eds. Joseph Patrich, Orit Peleg-Barkat, Erez Ben-Yosef (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2016), 56.

44. Shamir, "Two Special," 305.

45. Yadin,  *Finds*, 182–87. See 183 for their use as *tzitzit*.

46. Shamir, "Two Special," 304.

47. Yadin,  *Finds*, 17.

48. Yadin,  *Finds*, 101.

49. Yadin,  *Finds*, 100.

## Textiles from Khirbet Qa'azone Cemetery

Excavation at this first- to third-century burial site (southeast from the Dead Sea, now in Jordan) recovered fifty-seven identifiable textile garments,<sup>50</sup> including parts of five mantles.<sup>51</sup> Two have gamma marks at the corners. A red one, which was large enough to be worn around the body and over a woman's head and shoulders as a veil, as shown in the Dura-Europos synagogue frescoes,<sup>52</sup> preserves parts "of at least two of the four gamma motifs that originally decorated it" with "projections or spurs at the corner of the gammas."<sup>53</sup> It was at least two meters wide. One relatively small textile (forty-nine inches by less than 92 inches, perhaps for a child) was coarser, undyed wool and had four simple squares in the gamma or *eta* shapes' places.<sup>54</sup>

Textiles were found scattered on the surface and in looted graves in the cemetery, which was estimated to hold 3,500 graves. Konstantin D. Politis excavated twentieth-three previously intact internments. Some bodies were buried in leather shrouds but others in reused textiles, usually in a simple tabby weave. Most textiles at the site appear to be clothing, repurposed as shrouds.

Politis wrote, "Most [textiles] are characteristic sleeveless Roman tunics with a purple-colored stripe . . . or rectangular Greek mantles decorated with four symmetrically placed, colored motifs, usually gamma-shaped." He writes, "As exciting and rare as these finds may be, they do not characterize a specific ethnic group nor can they be attributed to a particular religious affiliation; they simply reflect the

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50. Konstantin D. Politis "The Discovery and Excavation of the Khirbet Qazone Cemetery and Its Significance Relative to Qumran," in *Qumran: The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates Proceedings of a Conference held at Brown University, November 17–19, 2002*, eds. Jean-Baptiste Humbert, Jürgen Zangenberg, Katharina Galor (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2006), 216.

51. Hero Granger-Taylor, "Textiles from Khirbet Qazone and the Cave of Letters, Two Burial Sites Near the Dead Sea: Similarities and Differences in Find Spots and Textile Types," in *Textiles in Situ: Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Sabine Shrenk (Riggisberg, CH: Abegg-Stiftung, 2006), 119.

52. Granger-Taylor, "Textiles from Khirbet Qazone and the Cave of Letters," 115.

53. Hero Granger-Taylor, "The Textiles from Khirbet Qazone (Jordan) in *Archéologie des textiles des origines au Ve siècle: Actes du colloque de lattes, octobre 1999*, eds. Alexis Gorgues, Pierre Moret (Montagnac, FR: Monique Mergoil, 2000), 151. Others had "short bands; both were characterized by indentations" or notches at the ends of the bars.

54. Granger-Taylor, "The Textiles from Khirbet Qazone (Jordan)," 151–52.

popular clothing styles of the period.”<sup>55</sup> He writes that the majority of burials were Nabataean, that Greek appears on stelae and papyri from the site, and that “no evidence of Aramaic or Hebrew texts or symbols . . . indicate the presence of Jews . . . at the site.”<sup>56</sup> However Hero Granger-Taylor writes, “It is likely that a portion of the population was Jewish since we know from the Babatha documents [from the Cave of Letters] that there were Jews living the area.”<sup>57</sup>

There were no luxury grave goods. A few burials contained grave goods such as iron, copper, silver, or gold earrings and bracelets. Granger-Taylor writes, “Judging by their clothes, these people were not impoverished but nor were they wealthy.”<sup>58</sup>

Politis mentions the “peaceful coexistence between Jews and Nabataeans in the area” surrounding the harbors at the Dead Sea’s south end, which led to “various intercommunal influences, among which, apparently, were shaft burials. Even intermarriage between the two groups at the highest level was acceptable [including] King Herod the Great, whose father was Jewish, and mother was Nabataean.”<sup>59</sup>

The excavations at Khirbet Qa’azone reveal multiple mantles with gamma marks coming from relatively humble burials and demonstrate how complex it can be to determine who wore them or why.

### **Textiles from Masada**

One clearly gamma-marked textile and two possibly gamma-marked textiles were found among the roughly 2,000 textiles recovered from the hilltop fortress Masada (built on a high plateau in the Judean desert to the west of the Dead Sea). According to Josephus, 960 people chose death over surrender when Romans laid siege, built a ramp, and then breached the walls with a battering ram. Only 122 textile items, or 6 percent, of the 2,000-plus textiles have been examined and published,<sup>60</sup> with others awaiting study and publication.<sup>61</sup>

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55. Politis, “Khirbet Qazone Cemetery,” 216.

56. Politis, “Khirbet Qazone Cemetery,” 216.

57. Granger-Taylor, “Textiles from Khirbet Qazone and the Cave of Letters,” 118.

58. Granger-Taylor, “The Textiles from Khirbet Qazone (Jordan),” 156.

59. Politis, “Khirbet Qazone Cemetery,” 219.

60. Avigail Sheffer and Hero Granger-Taylor, *Textiles from Masada: A Preliminary Selection* (Israel, Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 154.

61. The others have been moved to the Israel Antiquities Authority office in Jerusalem and are being inspected by Hero Granger-Taylor, who has been asked to compile a final report. Orit Peleg-Barkat, email message to author, February 18, 2025.

Among the 122 published items was 28M, a “large fragment with a gamma motif, probably from a man’s draped mantle or *tallit*,”<sup>62</sup> a prayer shawl. The textile remnant is thirty-two by forty centimeters. Two smaller fragments may bear gamma marks but are too small to say conclusively. One, 105N, is a right-angle shape that lacks the characteristic “teeth” protruding from the ends — the entire textile is about ten by fourteen centimeters with the tapestry woven mark filling only a small edge section. Avigail Sheffer and Hero Taylor-Granger write it may have been a baby tunic.<sup>63</sup> It is undyed wool with the mark tapestry woven into it. The third textile, 7M, is salmon pink wool “with part of a notched band and a second band in bright purple tapestry woven into it. It also is small, seventeen by six-and-a-half centimeters.”<sup>64</sup>

We have some information about the people at Masada who might have worn gamma-marked textiles. They were almost certainly Jews, but their more specific affiliations are hard to determine.<sup>65</sup> The Roman garrison there was overcome in 66 CE by people Josephus identifies as Sicarii, or dagger-men. He indicates the people holed up in Masada were urban, from Jerusalem, and espoused religious beliefs and national aspirations that provoked them to murder “men in broad daylight in the heart of the city”:

There sprang up another sort of robbers in Jerusalem, which were called Sicarii, who slew men in the daytime, and in the midst of the city; This they did chiefly at the festivals, when they mingled themselves among the multitude, and concealed daggers under their garments, with which they stabbed those that were their enemies; and when any fell down dead, the murderers became a part of those that had indignation against them; by which means they appeared persons of such reputation, that they could by no means be discovered. The first man who was slain by them was Jonathan the high priest, after whose death many were slain every day.<sup>66</sup>

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62. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor, “Textiles from Masada,” 153 and 199–201.

63. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor, “Textiles from Masada,” 202–3

64. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor, “Textiles from Masada,” 198–99

65. Masada was built by the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties and so had housed both Jews and a Roman garrison.

66. William Whiston, trans., *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian* (1737), 2:254–56, <https://lexundria.com/go?q=J.+BJ+2.254-263&v=wst>.

After the Temple's destruction in 70 CE, more people fled from across Israel, particularly from Jerusalem, to Masada.<sup>67</sup> The Masada textiles' provenance is further complicated because, Josephus writes, the Sicarii "plundered all the villages around the fortress."<sup>68</sup> Textiles may have come from the plunder.

These often-urban Jews had a wider range and better-quality textiles generally than did their neighbors sixty years later, the people of En-Gedi who died in the Cave of Letters. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor write, "The dominant impression given by the textiles [at Masada] is of a wealthy community fallen on hard times" who, previously at least, had been wealthy and well connected,<sup>69</sup> but who were forced to mend, alter, and repurpose relatively good-quality textiles. Josephus does not identify anyone with exalted status at Masada.

### **Textiles from al-Bagawat Cemetery, Khargah Oasis, Egypt**

Textiles from al-Bagawat Cemetery at Egypt's Khargah Oasis provide the strongest archeological evidence for Christian use of gamma-marked textiles.<sup>70</sup> (The cemetery served Hibis, the Great Oasis's capital, which sat on important trade routes a four- or five-day camel journey west from Thebes in the Nile Valley.<sup>71</sup>) Thirty-one gamma-marked textiles were found during the Metropolitan Museum of New York's Egyptian expeditions, 1907 to 1930.<sup>72</sup>

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67. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor, "Textiles from Masada," 242–43.

68. These raids included one on En-Gedi, the location from which the Cave of Letters people fled the Roman army roughly 60 years later. The raid on En-Gedi occurred at Passover and had two purposes, according to Josephus: to plunder (*Jewish Wars*, 4:405) and to combine "against those prepared to submit to Rome" (*Jewish Wars*, 7:254.)

69. Sheffer and Granger-Taylor, "Textiles from Masada," 242–43.

70. This author queried Maciej Szymaszek, "Are there textile remains where you feel comfortable saying, 'Yes, indeed, this was from a Christian context and this textile was worn by a Christian?'" Szymaszek responded, "Religious association is very tricky, and I would say that the textiles from al-Bagawat cemetery in Khargah Oasis are the closest to what you look for." Maciej Szymaszek, email to author, 22 June 2023.

71. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 96. The railroad first reached Khargah in 1907.

72. See, for instance, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York's Accession numbers: 33.10.1; 33.10.2; 33.10.4; 33.10.24; 33.10.50; 33.10.27, each from burials at al-Bagawat and each showing signs of gamma marks. See The Met (website), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search?searchField=AccessionNum>.

***Attributing textiles to one group in Egypt is challenging***

Though Egypt and its neighbors have a rich history of both Christianity and gamma-marked textiles, proof that one group used a particular textile is rare. Sometimes inscriptions, grave goods, and markings, such as a cross or an akh, are so closely associated with burial textiles that it is possible to say with certainty that the person buried with the textiles, or at least their immediate family, belonged to a particular group. More often such certainty, especially in Egypt, is illusive.

- Burial practices and dress in Egypt are rarely unique to one group, so identification from such physical remains alone is problematic. Roman, Greek, Nabatean, Arabic, Muslim, Pre-Christian, Meroitic, Jewish, and Coptic populations all lived in Egypt in the first millennium, and populations appear to have frequently overlapped in time and place.<sup>73</sup>
- Several groups who have left evidence elsewhere that they used gamma-marked textiles, including Jews and Nabateans, lived or traded in Egypt. If only a small number of gamma-marked textiles are identified as coming from an Egyptian findspot, we have not shown that the larger population used or wore them. (Textiles that combined linen and wool were probably not worn by Jews except priests.)<sup>74</sup>
- The antiquities trade in recent centuries often obliterated textiles' provenances, thwarting their owners' identification. In addition, during its infancy, modern archeology also excavated textiles but did not document or conserve them systematically.<sup>75</sup>

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73. The last temple to an Egyptian god, Isis, on the island of Philae was closed in the mid-sixth century CE, while St. Mark was said to have introduced Christianity to Egypt in 46 CE. Arabs invaded Egypt in 642 CE, but not until 850 CE did the majority of Egyptians convert to Islam. Earlier, Rome had occupied Egypt for almost 700 years and Greece occupied it for nearly 300.

74. Shamir, "Mixed Wool," 57. Some gamma-marked Egyptian textiles are linen with woolen patterns woven in and thus less likely to have belonged to Jews.

75. An example of this is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which holds a particularly impressive and complete fourth-century textile from Egypt made of linen and decorated with purple wool, over six feet wide and almost nine feet long. (Wool took dyes more easily than linen.) See V&A, s.v. "Cover," 15 June 2009, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O249067/cover-unknown/>. It was purchased by the museum from "the Parisian dealer Monsieur A P Andrea." Nothing more is said about its origin. The textile includes gamma marks and a large circle with an eight-pointed star and is likely to have been used as a

- Syncretism may have been at play; cultures borrowed each other's manner of dress and burial practices. Families as well as communities may have included "mixed" traditions in what appear to be contemporaneous family groupings — in Egypt and elsewhere<sup>76</sup> — that may include burials that align with more than one ethnicity or religious tradition.
- Graves may have been plundered, with their less valuable contents dumped in surface pits. Graves may also have been re-used for later burials long before archeologists arrived.

Al-Bagawat cemetery shares these complexities with other Egyptian burial sites and middens. Though sometimes referred to a Christian cemetery,<sup>77</sup> the earliest burials at al-Bagawat show no signs of a Christian presence.<sup>78</sup> "The continued presence of pagan burials alongside Christian interments is evidenced in Egypt up until the Arab conquest in the seventh century."<sup>79</sup> Pagans and Christians "were known to have lived side by side" at *al-Bagawat*.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Al-Bagawat provides a strong case for associating Christians and gamma marks***

The Al-Bagawat cemetery has characteristics that, taken together, increase the likelihood that Christian burials there yielded the gamma-marked textiles.

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mantle, as it is not symmetrical. Yadin,  *Finds*, 228, Figure i, identifies it as Coptic—that is, belonging to an Egyptian Christian who is a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church—but the museum goes no further than to say it is Egyptian. In contrast to this textile's completeness are many Egyptian textiles at the Victoria and Albert that appear to be decorations cut from larger textiles deemed less interesting to collectors and early archeologists and so are also stripped of their context, even the shape of the textile they adorned.

76. See Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 105, and Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon, 2007), chap. 2, for a discussion of burials in the catacomb of a mixed pagan-Christian family.

77. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 95n2.

78. Matthew Martin, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel, Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga Oasis, Egypt," in *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, eds. John Burke et al. (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2006), 233.

79. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 233n1. The cemetery was used into the eleventh century.

80. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 105.

First, written records show that the Khargah Oasis had a significant Christian population from at least 250 CE, a population large enough for the Patriarch of Alexandria to appoint a bishop for the area.<sup>81</sup>

Second, its remoteness spared it some nineteenth-century archaeologists' irregularities. Though known in the west in the early nineteenth century,<sup>82</sup> it was not investigated until the early twentieth century by the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, which studied it sporadically between 1907 and 1931. The later Egyptian Antiquities Service's investigation provided the first published archeological report in 1951.<sup>83</sup>

Third, and archeologically significant, the cemetery includes over 260 mud-brick funerary chapels arranged into "streets" as are "known from Rome and Byzantine Italy and best exemplified . . . by the Isola Sacra Cemetery . . . north of Ostia."<sup>84</sup> Twenty-two chapels at al-Bagawat were decorated with Christian symbols and painted scenes. "Seven contain figurative art, the others evidencing just painted crosses or the like."<sup>85</sup> Two chapels have extensive and well-preserved painted decorations that show a Christian context and are similar in style to paintings at the Apa Jeremiah and Apa Apollo monasteries.<sup>86</sup> Christian worthies portrayed in al-Bagawat's chapels include Noah, Abraham, Thekla, and Mary, each identified anciently in Coptic.<sup>87</sup> Burials — and therefore their textiles — are closely associated with the funerary chapels "in shallow rectangular graves around the mud-brick chapels or beneath them, sometimes in multiple chambers, in subterranean *hypogea* accessed by vertical shafts."<sup>88</sup>

The most skillfully decorated chapel at al-Bagawat, the Chapel of Peace, shows two worthies wearing gamma-marked mantles, Noah and Abraham, painted inside the chapel's dome. See figures 30, 31, and 32.

The clothing portrayed on worthies in the chapel frescoes and the cloths in which the associated dead were shrouded bore similar

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81. Matthew Martin, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel, Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga Oasis, Egypt," in *Byzantine Narrative*, 253.

82. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 233.

83. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 233. The Egyptian Antiquities Service did not discuss textiles, but rather the site's layout.

84. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 233–4.

85. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 234.

86. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 235.

87. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 234.

88. Martin, "Exodus Chapel," 234n10.



**Figure 30.** The ceiling of the Coptic Chapel of Peace at Bagawat Cemetery, a funerary chapel, Kharga Oasis, Egypt. (Ahmed Fakhry, *The Necropolis of El-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis* (Cairo: Government Press, 1951), frontispiece.)



**Figure 31.** Detail from figure 30 showing Noah. Note the mark near the left knee on Noah's robe. The accompanying women have their hands raised in prayer.



**Figure 32.** Detail from figure 30 showing Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. To allow free use of both his hands, Abraham has thrown the end of his mantle over his left shoulder; it usually was draped over his left arm. Note the mark on that end. It may be a variation on the eta (H) shape.

gamma marks also placed near the textiles' edges. They strongly suggest that not only were Christian worthies clothed in gamma-bedecked mantles, but so were the Christian dead.<sup>89</sup>

The Metropolitan Museum of New York's Egyptian Expedition retrieved thirty-three bodies—two male and eight female adults and nine infants were identifiable<sup>90</sup>—and preserved ninety-seven textile fragments from al-Bagawat. Thirty-one textiles were from linen burial shrouds without pre-burial use;<sup>91</sup> they had been specifically woven as

89. Al-Bagawat is not unique in presenting both images of the marked mantles on worthies (Noah and Abraham) and their contemporary use. The Dura synagogue, discussed below, also presents marked textiles and images of their use on worthies. These two sites may be the only known examples.

90. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 103.

91. Kajitani writes that most other textiles had also been used to wrap the thirty-three bodies, which were enclosed in multiple layers of cloth. (Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 97). He also notes that he does not know the museum's criteria for retaining or disposing of textiles, writing that textiles that "had decorations in good condition were saved." We do not know how representative the saved sample are.

shrouds.<sup>92</sup> Two of the thirty-one have woven-in right angle gamma marks, fifteen have the *eta* shape, another nine have solid circles, two have *crux gammata*, crosses made from gamma shapes, that is, swastikas. Three have diamond shapes.<sup>93</sup> They are dated from the mid-third century through the early fifth century CE.<sup>94</sup> Some combine wool and linen.<sup>95</sup> One remarkably complete shroud is almost eleven-and-a-half feet long and over a yard wide.<sup>96</sup> All shrouds have slits or have been divided near their ends to facilitate the neat wrapping of bodies. See figure 33.

Al-Bagawat shows that Christians, both male and female, used textiles bearing these marks in death and that such textiles and marks were appropriate for the general population's burial, as well as appropriate for Abraham and Noah, as they were portrayed in the dome frescoes of the Chapel of Peace.

### Textiles from the Dura-Europos Synagogue

The 1932 excavation at the Dura-Europos synagogue revealed extensive and well-preserved third-century frescoes.<sup>97</sup> Among the frescoes, which included many Old Testament scenes, were painted figures wearing mantles that display gamma marks or at least the pronged ends of them.<sup>98</sup> See figure 34 for gamma shapes (Γ) on women. See figure 35 for the pronged ends of some sort of mark on males' robes and for the Dura artists' use of pastel colors, perhaps to break up the monotony of multiple white robes in some scenes.

Dura-Europos was a small garrison and trading city on the river Euphrates, in modern Syria, then on the frontier between the eastern

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92. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 106.

93. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 105–6n35.

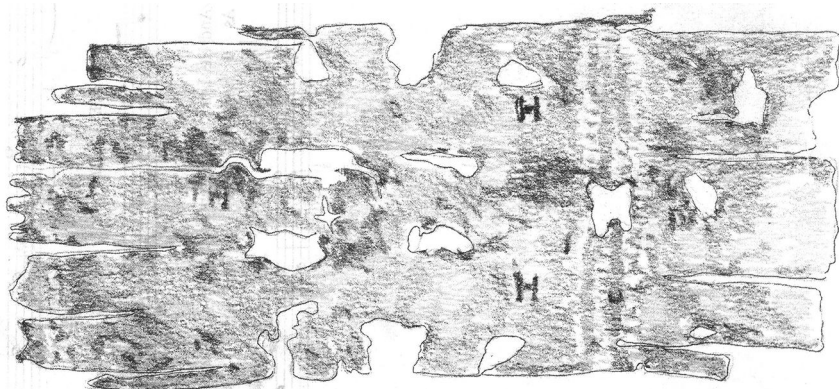
94. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 96.

95. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 107.

96. Kajitani, "Cemetery of al-Bagawat," 106.

97. The synagogue was the second of two at the site. The older one was perhaps 75 years older than the latter one, which had been recently enlarged and extensively remodeled into the second synagogue eleven years before it was destroyed.

98. Dura-Europos was destroyed in 256 CE. The paintings on the synagogue wall were recent at that time; paint drops still in evidence at the time of its destruction. An inscription indicates the edifice was raised in 245 CE, creating a nine-year window in which the paintings were created. The 245-CE synagogue supplanted an earlier synagogue, which had been remodeled and expanded from a house. It can safely be said that the paintings represented the intent of leaders the Jewish community there in roughly 250 CE.



**Figure 33.** Sketch of a Bagawat shroud at the Egyptian Museum show eta (H) marks at corners, with slits or divisions near their ends to facilitate the wrapping of bodies. These would not have been useful to the living as either robe or blanket. (Anonymous, *Burial Shroud, Khargah Type*, undated, woven linen, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Accession number 65796 from CXII West, Burial 3. Drawing by Dorothy Giles; used with permission.)



**Figure 34.** In frescoes in Dura's House of Assembly, two Israelite women (left), perhaps Jochebed and Miriam, display complete gamma marks ( $\Gamma$ ), as they pass the infant Moses to pharaoh's daughter. Elsewhere in the synagogue, men display only the notched ends of bands that may be parts of gamma or eta shapes. The remainder of the shapes are consistently concealed in the folds of the men's robes. (Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europos conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report VIII Part I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), plate LXVII.)



**Figure 35.** In frescoes in Dura's House of Assembly Elijah's white robe is alternated with others' pink attire. The pronged ends of bands are visible on the robes of the priest, who display only the notched ends of bands that could be parts of the gamma ( $\Gamma$ ) or (H) shaped signs. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plate LXII.)

Roman Empire and Persia. The entire city was destroyed during a Persian siege circa 256 CE. The site was buried in sand until the early twentieth century. The excavating archeologists also recovered nineteen tapestry-woven wool fragments that displayed gamma-marks,<sup>99</sup> which "may well have come from a sacred vestry."<sup>100</sup> Though the textile remains are too small to indicate the original items' shape, R. Pfister and Louisa Bellinger, who compiled the textile report for the Yale University-French excavation, wrote that "on the evidence of the pictures [in the synagogue] we may confidently class pieces with decorations of the shape H and  $\Gamma$  as belonging to those garments [the mantles]."<sup>101</sup>

99. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols* 9:127. The last three volumes of his eleven-volume work, volumes 9–11, concern the Dura synagogue.

100. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128.

101. Pfister and Bellinger, *The Textiles*, 15. The gamma shapes they examined were on small pieces of cloth, not attached to mantles, though they may have once been. The tapestry woven marks were probably much denser than the cloth into which the tapestry weaving was inserted and so more likely to

The frescoes showed figures wearing mantles with either complete right-angle gamma marks — on the Israelite women in the Infancy of Moses panel — or what are thought to be the pronged ends of an eta or gamma shape on the Israelite men, with the rest of the mark uniformly obscured in their mantles' folds.<sup>102</sup> Some male mantles also showed three threads hanging from the mantles corners “that have usually been identified with the zizith, or ceremonial threads require by Jewish law for a prayer shawl,” that is, a *tallit gadol*, the covering from which a man could pray.<sup>103</sup>

The male figures portrayed wearing these gamma-marked mantles are frequently large, indicating their importance. “Moses, Elijah, Jacob, Samuel, Ezekial in his triumph, the heads of the tribes in the Exodus scene,” and five more whose identity is disputed, as well as the Throne Mates both of Solomon and the Great King in the reredos by the Torah niche, each wear a gamma-marked mantle.<sup>104</sup>

Their mantles are “generally white”<sup>105</sup> “or “almost always of a light color.”<sup>106</sup> Erwin R. Goodenough, who devoted the last three volumes of his eleven-volume *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* to the Dura-Europos synagogue, notes that on the synagogue's west wall immediately to the Torah shrine's right is the single exception to the light-colored mantles on a major Israelite character. In the Anointing of David fresco (figure 36), Samuel's importance is shown by his large size. Six other men are clad in marked robes like Samuel's, all pastels or white, with three holding their right hands up to about ear level. (We cannot see if the other three are also holding up their hands.) David is alone in wearing a dark robe. Goodenough writes that this has the appearance of a rite of initiation.<sup>107</sup> As Samuel anoints David, David's mantle “conspicuously” has no visible gamma marks.<sup>108</sup>

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survive both wear and burial. The marks also could have been removed from the cloths before they were discarded.

102. Pfister and Bellinger, *The Textiles*, 11. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163.

103. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127. See also Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols* 11: fig 324, 326, 331, 337. Pfister and Bellinger, *The Textiles*, 11.

104. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127.

105. Pfister and Bellinger, *The Textiles*, 11

106. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:125. In panels containing multiple Jewish figures, white, light gold, and pink mantles are also visible, perhaps to relieve the visual monotony of multiple white garments. Kraeling's images are often more intensely colored than the ones Goodenough published. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plates LI to LXXVII.

107. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:188.

108. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:126.



**Figure 36.** Samuel anointing David, painted on the west wall immediately to the right of the aedicule of Dura's House of Assembly. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plate LXVI.)

Goodenough writes, "we shall find this contrast apparently significant."<sup>109</sup> David's hands are hidden inside his dark mantle in the humble position of a suppliant (see figure 20), as one who has not completed an initiation. The scene suggests that David's anointing precedes his clothing in a white, gamma-marked mantle such as those the other men wear. Goodenough writes:

If such a scene, with no biblical identification, had been found in Pompeii or Alexandria, we should at once have supposed the artist was representing the initiation of a neophyte into a mystic cult. His dark dress, the humbly covered hands, would seem to illustrate the novitiate before he had received the new garments of the cult.<sup>110</sup>

The textile fragments buried in the embankment associated with the synagogue included nineteen textiles with "pronged ornaments"<sup>111</sup>

109. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:126.

110. Goodenough *Jewish Symbols*, 9:188.

111. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127.

as well as “ornate clothing.”<sup>112</sup> He writes, “It seems to me highly unlikely that the ordinary clothing at Dura was either white or ornamented in the way we see in the paintings or in the preserved textiles.”<sup>113</sup> Goodenough notes the gamma-marked fragment’s whiteness. “Much of the cloth had apparently not been dyed at all but was what we call ‘unbleached’; and some of these may originally have been ‘white,’ for pure whiteness, as any laundress, knows, is extremely hard to preserve.”<sup>114</sup> Based on a contemporary price list from a third-century textile trader at Dura, white garments were “the most expensive, so we may presume that white was rarely worn.”<sup>115</sup>

Goodenough also notes that “many of them seem to have been rags when dumped into the embankment, but this in no way indicates that the place where they had been kept was a common or ordinary one.”<sup>116</sup> “It is quite possible that they represent a store of garments, especially pieces on which were sacral marking, from a ritualistic treasure.” But this can no more be asserted, he continues, “than that they were ordinary rags. All the textile fragments tell us is that the ornaments shown on the painted costumes of the synagogue were used on costumes of some sort worn in Dura.”<sup>117</sup>

### **What the Textiles Imply Collectively and by Findspots**

Taken as a group, the textile artefacts Szymaszek studied add information to what was previously gleaned from the marks’ occurrence in artistic, funerary, and monumental media. There they were predominantly associated with angels, worthies, or people of high spiritual status, most often male.

Patterns seem to emerge from the information gleaned from the artefacts, patterns that may have implication for our understanding of marks. The artefacts contribute the information that textiles marked with pronged ends were worn by non-elites, both male and female, over at least four centuries in the first millennium CE. They also show an impressively wide geographic range, from northern Britain to

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112. Many figures, including the royalty of Israel’s enemies, are portrayed in the frescoes in opulent clothing.

113. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128.

114. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127–28.

115. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128.

116. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128.

117. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128–29.

Iraq and south to Sudan. These textile artefacts do not appear to be imported or luxury goods but rather locally or domestically produced.

The textiles' geographic range suggests that they were also used in other areas where we find their representations, but where the climate did not favor textile preservation.

Individual findspots — or groups of findspots — suggest additional insights. However, what a textile from one findspot or several findspots implies should not be hastily generalized to all locations and all wearers or users of such textiles. All that can be confidently asserted is that to some people at certain places, the marks may have functioned in a particular way. Nonetheless, these data and insights deserve notice, and when patterns are suggested, they also should be noted.

### **The evidence for local production and for the marked mantles persistent characteristics**

At least three widely-separated findspots — Vindolanda, Les-Martres-de-Veyvre, and Khirbet Qa'azone — attest to local or domestic production. From first- or second-century Vindolanda we learn that a mantle was woven by a less-than-expert weaver into a fine, half-basket weave with innumerable faults. From second-century Les Martes-de-Veyvre, we learn the wool was tabby-woven, the most basic weaving pattern. At first- to third-century Khirbet Qa'azone, the marks appear in coarse, undyed wool. These imply the gamma-marked mantles' weavers were not highly skilled and were probably domestic or local weavers. Yet a tapestry-woven gamma or eta shape inserted into a mantle in a contrasting color required resources — wool dyed a second color, usually in a heavier yarn, to cover the background wool's color. The weaving-in of such marks was not a slight skill for a domestic weaver in the first three or four centuries CE and required additional time and effort.<sup>118</sup>

This raises questions about how and why the weaving tradition — if that is what it was — was transmitted with consistency across centuries and significant distances.<sup>119</sup> On monumental art and in artistic

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118. See Yadin,  *Finds*, 195–97, for specifics.

119. Szymaszek studied prong-ended marks. Archeological reports from the seven findspots examined in this paper mention four other shapes that had been tapestry-woven into the corners of mantles: simple squares on the small, coarsely woven mantle from Khirbet Qa'azone; nine mantles with solid circles, two with *crux gammata* (the swastika shape), and three diamond shapes from al-Bagawat, though many of these are arguably later than the third century. A simple checkerboard shape was noted from the Cave of Letters, but

media the marks' persistence may be explained in at least two ways: Powerful patrons, their architects, designers, or craftspeople may have traveled and thus viewed other works displaying such marks, perhaps studying with the masters who had previously reproduced them. Additionally, artisans may have worked from copy books<sup>120</sup> or other intermediate media. But neither method for transmitting the designs seems to apply to local weavers who would rarely travel nor see copy books. Other transmission methods should be considered to explain the marks' consistency.

An admittedly incomplete answer is that weavers in each community carefully copied existing local textiles for centuries and across thousands of miles. This explanation, however, raises additional questions. What motivated domestic weavers to continue to include the marks? Why were they copied with such consistency?<sup>121</sup> The mark's persistence implies their form carried meanings across multiple transmission chains. Absent other compelling explanations, rituals, which can be highly conservative over both time and space, should be considered as a factor in the marks' spread.

### **The evidence for the marks and mantle's use in burials**

From al-Bagawat we learn that the marked mantles — at least at that findspot — were appropriate for burials, since the shrouds showed no sign of previous use. All have slits near their ends, so they would not have been useful to the living. At other sites, Les Martres-de-Veyre, Khirbet Qa'azone, and the Cave of Letters, it could be argued that gamma-marked mantles were used as shrouds because they were at hand, not because they were specifically appropriate for burial, though if the mantles at the Cave of Letters were indeed *tallitot*, prayer shawls, then their use in burials might be expected. But at al-Bagawat,

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it came from the middle section of the upper salvage edge, not the corners. Szymaszek notes occurrence of eight checkerboard shapes in total in the textiles he catalogued.

120. See Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 383; Talgam, "Christian Floor Mosaics," 115; Pfister and Bellinger, *The Textiles*, 10.

121. The frescoes in the catacombs of Rome, as documented by Cristina Cumbo, show a much larger variation in the marks' shape, as do the sixth-century mosaics in Ravenna. Szymaszek's work on textiles remnants is pioneering and limited to textiles with tapestry-woven pronged ends, primarily in the first to the third centuries, arguably earlier than the catacomb frescos, so it is not possible to state with certainty that the woven marks maintained greater consistency than their artistic representations, though so it appears at this point.

wrapping the dead in a new gamma-marked mantle was a common preparation for internment, the ultimate earthly rite of passage.

These burial textiles combine with multiple instances of the marks shown in funerary contexts, grave markers, tombs, mummy masks, and memorials. Together they suggest the marks and the mantles had—at least to some—specific relevance to burial and the transitions that death and burial imply.

The presence of the marks on shrouds adds weight to Goodenough's comments about the mantles' frequent appearance in funerary art, even as other attire is portrayed elsewhere on the living and the divine. (Here he is not discussing gamma marks specifically, only draped mantles. He uses the Greek word for a mantle, *himation*.) He asks "whether the person depicted is wearing his ordinary clothes or specially recognized holy garb."<sup>122</sup> He notes that more than half of the people portrayed in mummy masks were wearing an *himation*, presumably with the *himation's* end wrapped around the women's heads, as at the Dura synagogue.<sup>123</sup> (See figure 34.) The mantles appeared on memorial statues and were carved in stone or wooden funerary couches, in grave reliefs and tomb paintings, and on grave stele.<sup>124</sup> He writes, "The use of the robe . . . has led us too often to monuments of ritualistic dignity, if not to mystical or eschatological associations or to the gods themselves, for us to suppose that this dress was ever used casually, or merely to correspond to what we might call 'formal' dress."<sup>125</sup> Speaking of mummy masks, Goodenough writes that "the dead are dressed to come into God's presence."<sup>126</sup>

It is also possible that the marks added to shrouds were meant to provide protection to the Kharga Oasis' Christian dead as they encountered whatever challenges awaited them in the afterlife. If so,

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122. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:133.

123. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:144–5.

124. Goodenough explores the role of the *himation* in sacred and funerary art in his chapter "Symbolism of Dress" in volume 9, noting its appearance on gods, priests, mystic philosophers, and Christian worthies.

125. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:143. Goodenough is correct that the *himation* was not "formal dress" and that people of wealth or standing—those who could commission monumental art—had multiple other options for both daily and "formal" clothing. However, the remains of textiles show that for people of limited means, such as those buried Khirbet Qa'azone, the *chiton* (tunic) and *himation* (mantle), remained in use as everyday wear well into Late Antiquity.

126. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:145.

they may have also been used to provide protection for the living who wore them. Archeological evidence is unable to distinguish between what might be an apotropaic device, such as the evil eye, and what might be the evidence for deeply held religious beliefs.

### **The evidence for *tzitzit* associated with gamma marks**

The blue threads on the corner of a gamma-marked mantle in the Cave of Letters shows that—at least at that site—gamma marks were sometimes used on a *tallit gadol*, a large prayer shawl, which made the “little tent” from which a Jew could pray. The apparent *tzitzits* painted on gamma-marked mantles on the Dura synagogue’s walls add additional instances where *tzitzit* and gamma marks both frame the mantles’ edges and may have set apart sacred spaces.<sup>127</sup> (See figures 37 and 38.)

Gamma marks on textiles supplement previous insights gained from the fifteenth-century *Liber Pontificalis*, the Book of Popes.<sup>128</sup> The textile artifacts with marks also support their artistic representations on book covers, altar cloths, and clerical robes, as well as ossuaries, and the image of doors of a fifth-century Jewish tomb with gamma marks. In each case, they may delineate sacred spaces, setting boundaries between levels of sacredness or between the sacred and the profane, this world and the next.

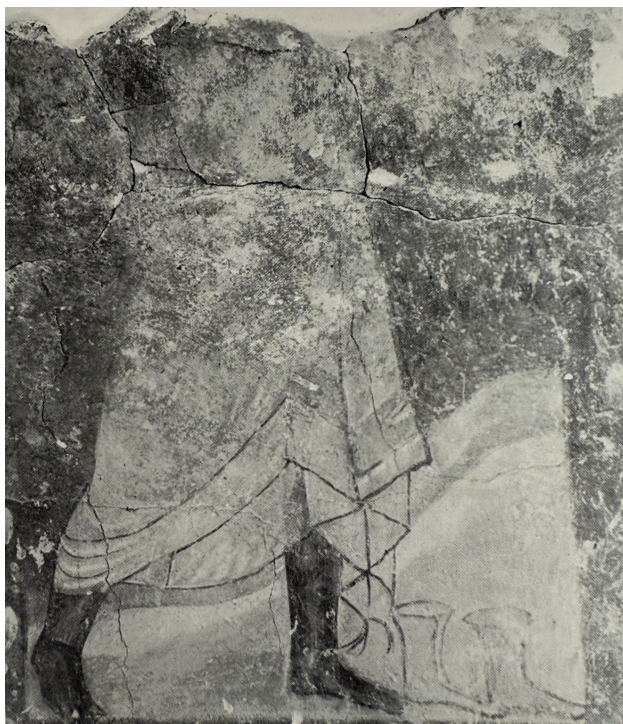
### **The evidence for multiple Jewish users of gamma-marked textiles at three sites across two centuries**

Gamma-marked mantles found at first-century Masada, the second-century Cave of Letters, and third-century Dura shows that the marked textiles’ use endured for several centuries in Jewish contexts. It also suggests that at least in the matter of gamma-marked textiles, the Jews at Dura were not outliers. They shared attire with Jews at Masada and at the Cave of Letters, notably Jews who have strong

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127. Goodenough also sketched *tzitzit* on Samuel in *Samuel Anoints David*, his Figure 337, and on Abraham in *The Wilderness Encampment* and *The Miraculous Well*, his Figure 331, presumably from details not clear in photographs.

128. Maciej Szymaszek, “The Textile Term *Gammadia*,” in *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD*, ed. Salvatore Gaspa, Cécile Michel, and Marie-Louise Nosch (Lincoln, NE: Zea Books, 2017), 484, doi.org/10.13014/K2MW2F9S.



**Figure 37.** Moses Receives the Law. Kraeling photographed this partially destroyed panel on the upper left-hand side of the west wall. It appears to show Moses without shoes, approaching the burning bush. Note the strings hanging from the edge of his mantle by his left foot, below the pronged end of marks on his mantle. Kraeling identifies them as *tzitzit*. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plate XXVI.)

credentials as resisters to compromise, whatever questions scholars may have had about Dura's Jews.<sup>129</sup>

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129. Dura did not demonstrate the Judaism that scholars, including Kraeling and Goodenough, expected, and so the Judaism of the worshipers there was suspect. Kraeling sees considerable influence from—and perhaps compromise with—the nearby pagan cultures, especially in the design and focus of the Dura synagogue, which “relied on old Babylonian temple forms and the other contemporary religious structures of the city and region” (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 21). The Dura synagogue “contrasts sharply with the synagogues known from Palestine and the region immediately to the east of Jordan.” Kraeling contrasts other synagogues’ “structural elegancies” with the “inelegancy of Dura’s House of Assembly, a simple mud-plastered cube, so vivid are the contrasts in general organization and disposition” (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 21). Foundation deposits at the great doors to the synagogue’s House of Assembly also puzzle Kraeling: parts of two human fingers under the main doors, and three human teeth (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 19, 20) at



**Figure 38.** Ezra, Reading the Law, shows both apparent gamma marks and *tzitzit* hanging down on his left side. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plate LXXVII.)

These textile artefacts combine with other evidence from mosaics and funerary art, largely discovered since Dura's excavation, to

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the base of the secondary door, which Kraeling indicates was for women to enter (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 19 and 19n86 thereon). Human remains as foundation deposits are known from pagan structures at Dura, but Kraeling writes they are not otherwise known in Jewish literature or synagogues. (Coins as foundation deposits, often worn or low value coins, are widely attested in later synagogues in Palestine.) "Indeed, in Palestine the presence of human remains would have been presumed to render impure both the site and the persons approaching it." Goodenough describes the *Anointing of David* scene as "the initiation of a neophyte into a mystic cult" (Goodenough *Jewish Symbols*, 9:188), where he draws a strong distinction between Hebrew scriptures (history) and "initiation into a mystery religion": "Artistically it represents initiation into a mystery religion, and . . . at the same time it represents the historical anointing."

show the marks' continuing use among Jews from the first to the fifth century: the mosaic floor at the Jerusalem high priestly house, destroyed in 70 CE,<sup>130</sup> the mosaic floor at the Magdala synagogue in Galilee, destroyed in 67 CE or perhaps in the second century,<sup>131</sup> the eta-shaped gamma marks on Jewish worthies' robes shown in mosaics at the fifth-century synagogue at Huqoq,<sup>132</sup> and the rough-cut stone door to a fifth-century Jewish tomb at Tamara<sup>133</sup> and on Jewish ossuaries.<sup>134</sup> The Dura synagogue sits chronologically roughly in the middle of these occurrences of gamma marks.

The gammas' persistence in the land of Israel shows that the gamma-marked mantles at Dura were not necessarily borrowed from local, pagan usage, nor can we say the Syrian Jews were casual about their religion, because the marks and mantles appeared on their synagogue's walls. The gamma-marked textiles at Dura did not show the Jews there were at odds with their coreligionists in Palestine, at least in this matter.<sup>135</sup>

Though the marks appeared with some frequency, except at Dura no evidence links the Jewish gamma-marked textiles to initiation rites, with the possible exception of the remains of blue thread, identified as *tzitzit*, from the Cave of Letters. We can only say that at one spot, Dura, the textiles and initiation rites appear linked. However, it would seem strange if Jews alone in Late Antiquity eschewed initiation rites; such rites were a staple across the Mediterranean. The cults of Mithras, Isis, Dionysus, Bel, Artagastis, and Serapis were highly participatory and apparently involved initiation rites. Adult Christians during this era were washed, anointed, ritually bathed in immersion baptism and clothed in new white garments.<sup>136</sup> Earlier Israelites practiced washing, anoint-

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130. Discovered in 1978.

131. Discovered in 2009.

132. Discovered in 2012.

133. Avigad, "Relics of Ancient Jewish Art in Galilee," 24.

134. Yadin, *Finds*, 228f.

135. The first- through fifth-century uses of the marks in a Jewish context were largely undiscovered or unpublished when Pfister and Bellinger published the textile report from the excavation in 1945. Kraeling published the excavation report in 1956, and Yadin published his *The Finds from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* in 1963. Goodenough published his three last three volumes of *Jewish Symbols*, those concerning the synagogue at Dura-Europos, in 1964.

136. See Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

ing, and clothing, arguably for King David (2 Samuel 12:20) but also for Aaron and his sons (Exodus 40:12).<sup>137</sup> A new Essene was given a robe of white “upon his initiation.”<sup>138</sup>

Carl H. Kraeling—who wrote the reports for the entire Dura-Europos excavation, including the synagogue’s—and Goodenough saw at Dura a Judaism different from that memorialized in Rabbinic sources.<sup>139</sup> Despite the Dura synagogue’s considerable size and impressive frescoes—or perhaps because of the latter—the Dura synagogue did not meet either scholar’s expectations.<sup>140</sup> But the

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Jensen discusses rites of initiation into the cults of Demeter, Persephone, Isis, Mithras, Jewish ablution rites, and Essene initiation (pp. 45–47); the Christian baptismal process which included washings and anointings (pp. 40–43), a three-fold baptism “in the Name of the Father,” and “of the Son,” and “of the Holy Spirit,” (p. 43) and the new, white garment given to the newly baptized (pp. 2–3). She refers to the baptismal rites as “initiation” and “rites of initiation” (pp. 4, 9, 63, 66, etc.).

137. The Dura synagogue “was built by priests.” Matthew J. Grey reports Aramaic inscriptions on ceiling tiles: “This house was built . . . in the eldership of the priest Samuel son of Yeda’yah, the Archon. Now those who stood in charge of this work were: Abram the Treasurer, and Samuel son of Sapharah. Another tile inscription confirms that all of these individuals were priests.” Other inscriptions “indicate that the congregation included other members with priestly or Levitical associations: Phineas, Bethus and Ahiah . . . of the sons of Levi.” Matthew J. Grey, “Jewish Priests and the Social History of Post-70 Palestine” (PhD diss, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 279–80.

138. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:169.

139. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:4–10; Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europos*, 340–6. This type of tension at Dura between how Rabbinic literature describes Judaism and what the physical evidence suggests occurs whenever a group’s written accounts and the physical evidence differ. Goodenough writes that “before the discovery of the Dura synagogue in 1932 anyone would be thought mad who suggested that Jews could have made such a place of worship” (10:197). Matthew J. Grey writes, “Scholars have long recognized that the Dura synagogue displays elements that are in tension with rabbinic *halkhah* from this period.” Grey, “Jewish Priests and the Social History of Post-70 Palestine,” 278.

140. Kraeling is both puzzled by Dura’s deviations from rabbinic norms and dismissive of the Dura synagogue’s variation from known Palestinian synagogues of the era, which were arguably later than Dura’s. He calls the Dura synagogue’s House of Assembly “inelegant,” “a simple mud-plastered cube” and speaks more fondly of the slightly later synagogues built on the plan of a basilica. Goodenough devotes much of Volume 10 of *Jewish Symbols* to exploring written precedents for Dura’s version of Judaism, including an apparent initiation rite signaled in part by the gamma-marked textiles and the frescos. He posits “a mystery religion,” which he identifies as a “Cosmic Judaism.” He writes that the whole program of the frescoes, “the decorations

recently published evidence for gamma marks in multiple other Jewish contexts now makes it harder to dismiss the worshippers at Dura and their peculiar building as pagan or exhibiting a weak or lapsed Judaism. If it was not a poorly executed synagogue,<sup>141</sup> what sort of building was it? The Aramaic inscriptions at the site call the entire building simply *bet*, meaning *house*.

Whenever we are called upon to identify a newly discovered object, the vocabulary we use can either limit or expand the range of the objects' potential meanings and functions. Kraeling and Goodenough described the three spaces in the Dura synagogue using the Greek and Latin vocabulary for pagan temples: *temenos*, *pronaos*, *naos*, *cella*, and *aedicule*,<sup>142</sup> noting similarities and differences between the

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in general at Dura [is] in harmony with two traditions of Jewish mysticism that gave access to the throne of God, the Maaseh tradition and the Hekhaloth tradition, as explained by Gershom Scholem" (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 10:70-71). He writes that some Jews "adored [God] simply in vision from afar, others put on robes, used sacred formulae, and did other things that indicated genuine mystic absorption and identification" (73). He examines Philo's writing for precedents. He also writes that Dura may have represented a poorly informed "Babylonian Judaism before the halachic [rabbinic] reform." He writes that "in A.D. 220, when the first synagogue of Dura was in operation, the great scholar Rav returned to Babylonia from his training in the Palestinian Academy [a Talmudic academy] and went through the Jewish settlements of Babylonia establishing school where his fellow Jews, who he found painfully ignorant of the Law, could be trained" (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:8-9).

141. Beyond "house" we cannot say what the worshippers at Dura called the building nor if they called themselves "Jews," a term sometimes used to distinguish those who returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity from others who had not gone into captivity. The Samaritans in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* told Alexander the Great they were Hebrews but not Jews (Ant. 11.8.6).
142. Kraeling and Goodenough do not always use the words in the same way. The *temenos* (Greek) was an area "cut off" and so was a precinct reserved for a sacred function at a Greek temple (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:28, 30, 36, 37). Goodenough seems not to include the forecourt in the synagogue itself; rather, "it was designed like a sacred *temenos*" (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:28). (One is tempted to think of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.) Kraeling, on the other hand, notes that in pagan sanctuaries at Dura, three elements are normally present: the outer court, the *pronaos* (Greek, "before the dwelling place of deity"), and a *naos* (Greek, the "dwelling place" of the deity), but "in the synagogue, naturally, a true *naos* of the deity is lacking" (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 22n97). Kraeling suggests the Forecourt fills the role of the outer court in pagan temples. Both Kraeling and Goodenough view the House of Assembly as the *pronaos* (Goodenough 9:29, 65; Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 22n97). However, the House of Assembly also resembles a *naos* of pagan

Jewish building at Dura and known pagan temples. We do not know the names the worshippers at Dura used for the spaces in the synagogue. In English, the three spaces at Dura are often called — moving from east to west — the forecourt, the House of Assembly, and the aedicule. The aedicula contained the Torah Shrine — the “House of the Ark,” according to a Dura inscription.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps the two early scholars did not consider that the Hebrew terms *ulam*, *heikhal* and *debir*<sup>144</sup> were warranted in Dura, or perhaps they reserved them solely for the earlier Israelite sacred spaces, the Tabernacle in the wilderness and Solomon’s and Herod’s Temples in Jerusalem, which were each oriented on an axis from east to west and surrounded by a sacred precinct, as were some pagan temples at Dura and elsewhere and as was the Dura synagogue. If the Hebrew terms are also considered when describing the Dura synagogue, additional possible sources or allusion are available for consideration.

Both Goodenough and Kraeling note that the Dura synagogue’s layout resembles not Palestinian synagogues but some pagan temples.<sup>145</sup> Neither scholar reports comparing its layout to Israelite sacred

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temples in terms of its painted decorations, according to Goodenough (9:42). Both Goodenough and Kraeling also refer to the House of Assembly in terms of the *cella* (Latin, “little cell,” a small room, used as a synonym for *naos*, referring to the small, hidden, inner part of a Greek or Roman temple where the image of the deity was housed) (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 66 and Goodenough 9:42). Neither *cella* nor *naos* seem congruous with the House of Assembly’s impressive size. Both scholars agree the Torah niche is contained within the *Aedicule* (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:30, Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 22n97). *Aedicule*, Latin, literally the “little temple,” serves as the inner shrine for the House of Assembly.

143. An Aramaic inscription at Dura reads, “I, Uzzi made the repository of the *Bet ‘arona*” (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 269). Literally, *Bet ‘arona* means mean “House of the Ark.” It is often translated as “Torah Shrine” or “Torah Niche,” though the space in the aedicule was too small to hold “the full range of texts that were utilized in the Jewish sacred calendar in the course of a year,” or even the multiple scrolls of the Pentateuch that might be read from on special holidays or sabbaths. Some scrolls would need to be stored elsewhere. Eric M. Meyers, “The Torah Shrine in the Ancient Synagogue: Another Look at the Evidence” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1997), 311–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40753196>.
144. The *ulam*, אולם, was the porch or portico before the temple. The *heikhal*, הֵיכָל, literally the “palace” or “temple,” was the holy place before the veil in the temple. The *debir*, דְּבִיר, was the inner sanctuary, the most holy place, on the inside of the veil and in the Divine Presence.
145. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 22 and 22n97 thereon. Kraeling discusses the synagogue’s shape compared to three elements of pagan temples: “the outer

spaces. The main spaces in the synagogue at Dura were oriented in almost a straight line, with the entry, the lowest area, on the east and the worship's focus and the highest area, the aedicule, on the west.<sup>146</sup> Goodenough writes that with the remodeling of the earlier synagogue "the shekinah or real Presence was brought to precisely this axis and put into a new little kodesh, the *aron hakodesh* or holy ark behind curtains."<sup>147</sup> Kraeling notes that such "axial organization" resembles "the domestic architecture of Mesopotamia (which in turn shares certain traits with temple architecture)," apparently referencing pagan temples. He notes that "the size of [the House of Assembly] . . . [is] a monumental hall for which parallels exist at Dura only in pagan temples."<sup>148</sup> The Dura synagogue's layout and axial orientation resembled not only some pagan temples, but also the earlier temples at Jerusalem, both of which were entered on the east, with the worshiper ascending to the west, the focus of worship being at the far west end of the structure.

Worshippers entered the Dura synagogue's compound through a door off a small street to the compound's north into what had once been a private home. See figure 39.

They passed through a space created from domestic dwellings and used for the synagogue's practical matters, including a travelers' hostel and housing for personnel. Moving west through these formerly domestic rooms and up four steps, a half meter,<sup>149</sup> the worshiper encountered the first space that was built on a grand scale, the *forecourt* as Kraeling called it, the *temenos* for Goodenough, and the *ulam* for Israelite temples. It was enclosed on four sides, and was entered through a door or doors centered in the forecourt's eastern wall and

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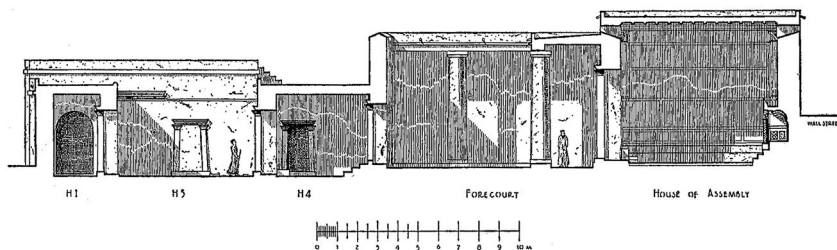
court, the pronaos and the naos. The pronaos bears the closest structural similarity to the form of the Synagogue."

146. Synagogues historically have oriented their Torah shrines toward Jerusalem (though not the fifth-century Sepphoris Synagogue, which was oriented to the west). From Dura, Jerusalem was west.

147. Goodenough writes that the Dura synagogue was an early adapter of the fixed Torah niche behind curtains, a form that later became a common pattern: "It would indeed be a large conclusion that the change was made by the Jews of Dura for the first time. A similar change was taking place in Palestine . . . but that the new idea had been adopted by the Jews of Dura by the first half of the third century can be assumed with confidence" (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:36). Kraeling also hints that this pattern may have originated at Dura (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 25).

148. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 22.

149. "Like a sacred temenos," according to Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:28.



**Figure 39.** The synagogue was entered on the east through a formerly domestic structure. Worshippers would have proceeded upward and in a straight line westward once they entered the synagogue itself. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, Plan VII House H and Synagogue, Section.)

across from the likewise centered and grand double doors into the House of Assembly further west.<sup>150</sup> The forecourt was 43.6 feet wide, 33.6 feet deep, and lined on three sides “with tall, massive columns.”<sup>151</sup> Goodenough and Kraeling write that the columns held up an ambulatory’s roof (implying the room was probably otherwise open to the sky). Both agree the columns were tall, fourteen feet (Kraeling) or twenty feet (Goodenough, citing Kraeling). The forecourt had at least one laver. Evidence left from the earlier synagogue there supports the presence of an altar measuring a yard square.<sup>152</sup>

The House of Assembly (the *pronaos* for Kraeling and Goodenough, sometimes the *cella* for Goodenough, and the *heikhal* for Israelite temples) was a flat-roofed box with fourteen-foot-tall doors<sup>153</sup> and twenty-three-foot-high ceilings. It “formed one of the largest single rooms of which we have knowledge at Dura,”<sup>154</sup> forty-five feet wide

150. The forecourt’s entry door was tucked into the corner of one of the existing domestic rooms, but from inside the forecourt, both doors—including the great door into the House of Assembly—were centered on opposite walls.

151. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:28. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 12.

152. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 13. Goodenough also reports remains of what appear to be altars or possibly braziers buried under the “new” floor when the second synagogue was built. Because they were buried, they escaped complete destruction in 256 CE. One possible altar is two-foot square and in a side room. The second possible altar is a yard square and in the forecourt. He suspects it was an incense altar (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:26).

153. Smaller but still massive doors, also on the east but near the south wall, are said to be for women who apparently could enter the House of Assembly in this the second synagogue built on this spot, though they appear to have been relegated to a side room in the earlier synagogue.

154. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 14.

and more than twenty-five feet from entry door to its western wall. It was lined with benches along all sides,<sup>155</sup> as one would expect in a synagogue, but also decorated with extraordinary frescoes. In pagan temples the statue or god's image would have been displayed as the rituals' focal point in this room. Whatever participatory rites the textiles from the "sacred vestry" imply probably took place in this room under the frescoes. But Dura displayed no cult statue nor divine image, in contrast to pagan analogues. Worship was instead visually focused on the aedicule, which contained a niche built into the thickness of the wall about sixteen inches. It was the room's only architectural embellishment. See figure 40.

For it to be appropriate to refer to the aedicule by the Hebrew word *debir*, the Holy of Holies, it would need to be seen as a separate architectural space, set apart by a higher elevation and approached through a barrier, a curtain, veil, or door. In Solomon's temple, the *debir* would have held the Ark of the Covenant topped by the Mercy Seat on which God (and sometimes the king) sat, though in the Second Temple (Zerubbabel's and Herod's), the space was empty.

The aedicule at Dura framed or enclosed what is variously called the Torah Shrine or Torah Niche or House of the Ark.<sup>156</sup> According to Goodenough, "Where the scrolls are, there is the Shekinah, or Presence of God in all reality."<sup>157</sup> See figures 41 and 42.

The Torah niche was, similar to the entry from the domestic spaces into the forecourt, four steps up. The fourth step, however, was considerably higher than the other three; the fourth step became the niche's floor. Goodenough writes that "the *aron* or box that held the scrolls was laid upon this higher level by men who themselves only ascended the first three steps."<sup>158</sup> This space extended into the wall's thickness in a semicircle, forming a shape not unlike a small, elevated apse that was, when finished, sixteen inches deep. Both Kraeling and Goodenough agree this sort of fixed Torah shrine was not known before Dura.<sup>159</sup>

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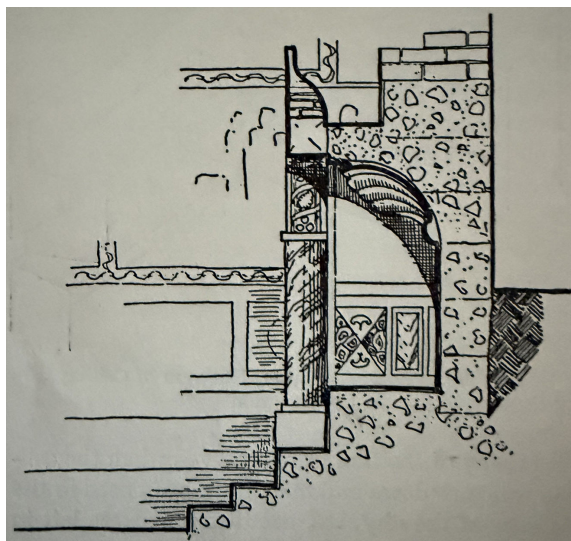
155. The benches could seat 124 people (Meyers, "The Torah Shrine in the Ancient Synagogue," 306).

156. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 269, for Torah Shrine.

157. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:37.

158. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:65. The *aron* would need to be less than 33 inches wide and not much more than 16 inches deep, the platform's dimensions, though it could have been quite tall.

159. Synagogues "from at least the Constantinian period on [306–337 CE] acquired an apse to house the *aron* or Scroll Chest" (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*,



**Figure 40.** The aedicule, seen here in profile, was the only architectural embellishment in the furthest west room of the Dura synagogue, the House of Assembly, which otherwise was a flat-roofed box with fourteen-foot-tall doors and twenty-three-foot-high ceilings. The aedicule was set sixteen inches into the rubble-filled outer wall of the House of Assembly. The aedicule also extended into the House of Assembly sixteen inches and may have been further extended by a sort of baldachin with curtains or veils. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 16, fig. 3.)

Since the aedicule seems to have extended into the Hall of Assembly sixteen inches or so, the enclosed space was, in total, thirty-two inches deep or a bit more, and therefore roughly square. Kraeling reports evidence that the aedicule was further extended into the House of Assembly and covered by an “ornamental and protective covering . . . a baldachin of the type mentioned in rabbinical sources, which would have supported two curtains” before the aedicula. “Clearly the Torah Shrine had an over-all ornamental and protective covering that completed it at the top.”<sup>160</sup> Both Kraeling and Goodenough portray the aedicula as covered by curtains or veils.<sup>161</sup> Worshipers first saw the

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21). When the first synagogue at Dura was constructed, “there may or may not have been a niche for the Torah, since there was none in the earlier Palestinian synagogue, or those in Asia Minor or perhaps at Hamman Lif” (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 10:198).

160. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 257–9. Kraeling notes holes on the wall above and beside the shrine and suggests both an “inner veil and the outer curtain” (259).

161. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 257. He earlier wrote that “a raised dais and baldachin that set off a royal throne [was] transferred to religious architecture in



**Figure 41.** The paint around the aedicule was vivid, even moist, when the archeologists removed the earth and sand that had been used during the mid-third century to fortify the city's wall against Persian attack, filling the western end of the synagogue. The aedicule predated all known Torah niches at the time. (Anonymous, *Photograph of an Aedicula (Torah Shrine) in the West Wall of the Synagogue at Dura-Europos*. Photograph taken 1932–33, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Dura-Europos archival photograph, Synagogue, west wall, aedicula, general view Synagogue," [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dura-Europos\\_archival\\_photograph,\\_Synagogue,\\_west\\_wall,\\_aedicula,\\_general\\_view\\_Synagogue.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dura-Europos_archival_photograph,_Synagogue,_west_wall,_aedicula,_general_view_Synagogue.jpg).)

aedicule from twenty-five feet away, as it was almost directly across the House of Assembly from the massive entry doors.

When the synagogue was unearthed in the early twentieth century, the proposed, more perishable baldachin and curtains were absent as was whatever structure had been anchored in the synagogue's walls to support the baldachin or curtains. The excavators looked directly into the aedicule and Torah Shrine, which most at Dura would

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Greek temple cellae." Both use the term "curtain." Kraeling refers to a "veil" or פָּרוֹכֶת (paroketh). Also, Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:36.



**Figure 42.** The paint on the aedicule was swiftly stabilized against the dry Syrian air, which had begun to fade it, and the aedicule was cleaned and photographed. (Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, plate LI.)

not have seen. The shrine itself resembled an elevated seat, about sixteen inches deep and thirty-three inches wide.<sup>162</sup> Above it was “an elaborate scallop shell . . . heavily imposed upon the semidome rather than structurally integrated with the surface” and painted light blue and dark green. The shell symbol was widely used above “sacred objects of all kinds to indicate the divine character of the object under it.”<sup>163</sup>

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162. Meyers, “The Torah Shrine in the Ancient Synagogue,” 309. Taken with the sixteen-inch space the aedicula enclosed by thrusting into the House of Assembly, the space was not far from square.

163. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:66.

If the Torah Shrine can be seen as a separate and elevated space, then this enclosed space could be called a *debir*. If so, we are justified in considering the Hebrew words for temple spaces, in addition to the Greek and Latin vocabulary. It is possible the synagogue referred to the Tabernacle in the Wilderness and the successive temples in Jerusalem not just in its frescos, but also in its layout, orientation, focus, and perhaps some of its functions.

These gamma marks' multiple occurrences connect the synagogue at Dura with wider strains of Judaism in ways that were apparently not documented in Jewish literature but may have influenced the design of the synagogue. It is possible the worshipers at Dura may have drawn on earlier Israelite temples and on rituals they associated with them as they designed and built the *bet*, the house.

The Anointing of David panel at Dura and the discovery of gamma-marked textiles at Dura may indicate an eastern peculiarity, or they may hold clues to the gammas' meaning in the Jewish context.

### Summary and Conclusion

Physical artefacts illuminate cultures in ways their written records cannot and in ways their monuments and fine arts do not. They give insights into the lives of that majority who could not produce documents nor commission art. Textiles can be especially illuminating. Maciej Szymaszek's study of the tapestry-woven gamma-marked textiles from Late Antiquity reveal their widespread and relatively consistent use by both genders in a variety of social classes in multiple cultures and religious contexts and across great distances. They add to what gamma-marked monuments and art may show. The evidence Szymaszek collected shows that—at least in some cases—the marked mantles were not imported luxury goods but rather were domestically produced and used by humbler classes of people. In some cases, they were associated with death and burial. The textiles, when taken with written evidence from the *Liber Pontificalis*, the monuments, and the art, suggest the marks sometimes delineated boundaries or levels of sacredness. They may have sometimes been associated with rites of passage or other rituals. In the Jewish context, the textiles and the monumental art show the marks' use for more than four centuries in Late Antiquity at multiple sites across the region. They link the textiles found at Dura-Europos and portrayed in the Anointing

of David panel with other Jewish contexts and invite a reconsideration of the influences on the Dura synagogue.



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