Coptic Knotwork

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Copts and Celts

To many people, the word "knotwork" is always preceded by the word "Celtic." That is not true. There are several styles of interlacing designs, and many cultures used them. Panels of knotwork decorated early Coptic manuscripts and textiles from as early as the 4th century, which is about 300 years before it became a part of the Insular design vocabulary.[1] Art historians specializing in Insular design often cite the knotwork in Coptic Bibles as a likely inspiration for the Insular knotwork of the 7th century and later. [2]

The regular Insular interlacing was specifically done using the dots method. It is clear from both manuscript and trial piece sources that the Copts also used the dots method of creating their knotwork designs.[3] The earliest manuscript example appears to be from about the year 500, still over 100 years before knotwork was used in manuscripts in the British Isles.

This paper examines examples of Coptic knotwork in various media: ostraca, textiles, and manuscripts. I have emphasized examples from the first millennium.

Knots on Rocks

Ostraca (singular: ostracon) are "Potsherds and stone flakes bearing writing and/or depictions. They are very common in New Kingdom Thebes and then again in the Ptolemaic, Roman and Coptic Period. The sherds and stone flakes were used as cheaper substitute for the expensive papyrus. Writings on ostraca are often short notes, accounts or literary excerpts in some cases possibly written by pupils." [4] Most were written in ink, but some were incised with a sharp instrument.

Was it common to find knotwork on ostraca? It does not appear so, since so few show up in a Google images search.

Three ostraca in the collection of the Coptic Museum in Cairo show knots in progress. The three discussed here are all limestone rocks that date to some time between the 4th and the 7th century. That date seems to be based on the use of the Coptic alphabet written on them. The writing and drawing are done with a dark ink.

CM Ostracon 4748 appears to be a practice piece. It has a regular grid of dots, partially filled with a knot. There are two breaks in the pattern. The dots are empty circles, so that they would disappear entirely when the knot was complete. The scribe appears to have gotten confused, and stopped.

CM Ostracon 4397 has two simple braids drawn on the surface, among other designs. There are no dots within the strands of the braids. The entire piece seems to be playing with shapes, of which the "lazy S" is one.

Ostracon 4661 has a six pointed star that appears to be in the midst of being turned into a knotted star. [5] This knotted star is very similar to a design seen in at least one surviving textile source.

Textured Textiles

Many of the earliest surviving examples of Coptic knotwork are in their weavings. Not surprisingly, these do not show evidence of dots. Many are simple S-twists, such as one from the Victoria and Albert museum that dates from the 6th or 7th century.

Once source notes that the typical Coptic textile colors are brownish red, yellow, and green [6]. Perhaps it is coincidence, but those are also common Insular colors for knotwork, such as in the Irish manuscript known as the Book of Durrow. Some of the above manuscript examples have also used this color scheme, as well as more vivid ones.

The interlaced designs on textiles appear to be, in general, either a braid or a series of simple loops, rather than complex knots with breaks.

A Coptic Sanctuary Curtain (83.126) of the 5th or 6th century in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts is decorated with a stepped, ringed cross that looks like the Irish great stone crosses, or the Pictish ringed crosses carved on cross slabs. It does not have knotwork, but it does look very like a typical Insular design.

Knotty Books

Authors such as J.J.G. Alexander have pointed to the Pierpont Morgan Library's *Glazier Codex 67* as the earliest decorated manuscript with interlacing. This codex is dated to ca. 500 CE. Folio 215 has an ankh cross filled with interlacing. The dots that control the knots can be seen clearly in several instances. The knotwork is a simple braid without breaks.

In other manuscripts, the text has a characteristic header for the first page of a chapter. It is done as a rectangle or as a rectangle with tabs down either side, forming a sort of stepped archway. This header is often filled with a knotwork design. These usually have complex break patterns, many in the shape of crosses.

Rectangular chapter headers filled with interlacing appear in manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty museum and in the British Library. I visited these in person, and thus had a chance to study them closely.

Getty ms. 12 (ca. 10th c.) is colored in red, yellow, and dark green, as well as leaving the parchment uncolored for white. The stylization is quite "squared." Some of the interior dots are placed in a circle of white. There are occasional brown inked dots in the body of the strands, as if the scribe were not too careful, or needed to move the strands. There are some half-breaks, allowing the vertical interlace. This latter stylization is also seen in some Pictish knots. Any relationship between the two is unknown.

Metropolitan Museum ms. 19.196 (ca. 700 – 900 AD) is a Coptic manuscript with at least two folios decorated with interlacing. The dots between the knots are

highly emphasized. The knotwork is outlined in ink, and two colors were used for coloring the strands: red and white (uncolored). The uncolored white areas on the cross form internal circles, and the armpits are white, making the cross look as if it were indented there. The effect is surprisingly similar to the Celtic crosses with their indented armpits.

   British Library ms. Or.6782 (AD 989/90 from the colophon) has a band of knotwork. There are dots on the edges. The vertical figures alternate maroon and sky blue, and the looped line that goes through it all is orange. All colors were rather dull.

   The *Medicea-Laurenziana di Firenze ms. Orient 81* is a 16th c. Persian copy of an earlier copy of Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Nordenfalk apparently feels that this is a faithful copy of the decoration in the manuscript from which this was copied, and that the decoration is as much a part of the transmission of the *Diatessaron* as the words. [6] A cross carpet page, f. 127v of the manuscript, is Figure 13 in Alexander, and p. 20 in Nordenfalk. The knotwork is placed in individual compartments of interlocking crosses and squares. There are dots in the upper right quadrant, in the top of the right arm of the voided cross. It appears as if the scribe were going to add more knotwork, then realized that this was supposed to be voided, not knotted. The plaits are colored to the edges, in what appears to be three colors.

Summary/Conclusions

One can see by these examples that knotwork was used extensively to decorate both manuscripts and textiles in Egypt during both the first millennium and later. The style of knotwork used in the manuscripts is clearly based on the dots method of creation. The ostraca appear to be practice pieces that clearly show us the method of working: sometimes with dots, sometimes without.

   The earliest Coptic versions of knotwork with dots may be from around the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and certainly predate the Arabic invasion of the late 600s. This makes it likely that the flow of information, if there was such a flow, came from Mediterranean sources towards the Isles, rather than vice versa.

   The arid conditions of Egypt have allowed much of this material to survive. It is possible that some of this style of knotwork was done elsewhere in the Roman Empire, as well, and that it simply has not survived. Exploring that possibility will be left for another time. ✤

Endnotes

[1] Jacques Guilmain in the referenced source, p. 92.

[2] Insular art historians such as

   J. J. G. Alexander, in *Insular Manuscripts 6th to the 9th Century*, p. 10 and 14. The footnote to the above says, " The influence of Coptic art in particular has been both strongly argued and strongly denied. See against J. Raftery, 'Ex oriente…', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 95, 1965, 193ff, and the warnings *Palimpsestsakramentar im Clm. 14429 der Staatsbibliothek München* (Texte Arbeiten, Heft 53/4), 1964, 39. In support

see M. Werner, 'The Madonna and Child miniature in the Book of Kells,' *Art Bulletin*, 54, 1972, 1ff."

Carl Nordenfalk, in *Celtic and Anglo Saxon Painting,* pp. 19 – 25;

J. Romilly Allen, in *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, pp. 140 – 307

[3] See the Sherbring "Interlacing" article or van Stone sources for further information on how the dots method works. See the Sherbring article "Knots and Dots: the Evidence" , KWHSS Proceedings 1998, for a review of the evidence that the dots method was used in the British Isles in the first millennium.

[4] **Digital Egypt for Universities**, Copyright © 2003 University College London. http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/ostraka/ (accessed May 2014)

[5] ibid, on the pages for each of the named ostraca.

[6] "Here we see the typical Coptic colors of brownish red (iron oxide red rather than the purple red from the Delta murex associated with the Ancient elite), yellow and green." Item #1 at the University of Alabama at Birmingham site. It also shows the V&A piece previously referenced, as item # 10. http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/um/umg.html (not found, May 2014)

[6] Nordenfalk, p. 19 – 21

Sources

Books

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On-Line Resources

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