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Gammadia on Early Jewish and Christian Garments

John W. Welch and Claire Foley

Among the textile fragments excavated at Masada were the remains of pieces of fabric with L-shaped cloth markings affixed to them. Dating to before A.D. 73, these are among the very earliest known examples of such marked garments. Scholars refer to these markings as *gammadia*, some of them being shaped like the Greek letter gamma (Γ). Though similar patterns have been found in several locations, the significance of these markings remains unknown to archaeologists and art historians. Because these markings seem to appear artistically in conjunction with some hope for life or glory after death, their presence on the clothing found at Masada may reflect something about the religious hopes and convictions of the Jewish fighters who died there.

Gammadia at Masada

Nearly all cloth found at Masada is “fragmentary, representing only a proportion of each original textile as made and first used.”¹ Three of the numerous cloth samples found at Masada contained gammadia, each of which was a purple color, found on both dyed and undyed wool. Of the three, one fragment appears to have been a notched band sewn on wool that had been dyed a salmon-pink color. This marking “is likely to have been part of a ‘notched band’ or possibly a ‘notched gamma.’”² The other two fragments, one of which is “almost certainly from a rectangular mantle,”³ show L-shaped gammas. The ends of one gamma are notched; the other is plain.

Whereas the gammadia from Masada are all quite simple—all appear to be right-angle patterns—in artifacts from other sites, the markings referred to as gammadia could also be of a second design: “a straight bar with two prongs at each end.”⁴ Goodenough notes that the word *gamma* itself gives some idea of what the basic marking looked like, but there are many variations of it: the word *gamma* has been “used for the mark in any shape,” only adding to the perplexity surrounding “the great variety of forms in which the mark could appear.”⁵

Other Gammadia Findings

Additional finds show that these markings were widely used as Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman period. Well-preserved examples of L-shaped gammadia were found at the site of the Bar-Kokhba excavations.⁶ Gammadia have also been found in a cache of clothing believed to be *himatia* (shawls) that was discovered in an embankment at Dura-Europos.⁷ Goodenough notes that only certain Jewish clothing in Dura-Europos would have had these ornaments or marks on them:

It seems to me highly unlikely that the ordinary clothing at Dura was either white or ornamented in the way we see it in the paintings or in original textiles. These ornate fragments may well have come from a sacred vestry instead of from a repository of ordinary clothing.⁸

The Dura findings include another variation in the gammadia: “the ornament sometimes takes the form of a stripe ending in an arrow, which also is represented in the synagogue.”⁹ Interestingly, the Talmud demands that priests execute their most sacred religious duty, that of sacrifice, by applying the blood of the sacrificial animal to the altar in a gamma pattern: “he made the single application in the shape of a Greek Gamma” (Zebahim 53b).¹⁰

Further examples include gamma patterns on a Jewish ossuary from Mt. Scopus dating to the second century A.D.;¹¹ on several coffins and mummy cases from Egypt, one of which features “a short notched band” that “appears on the left shoulder of a woman”;¹² on a sarcophagus lid from Palmyra, Syria;¹³ “in a relief on a stone door of a Jewish tomb”;¹⁴ on “a banner from Roman Egypt”;¹⁵ pieces of art depicting Moses as an infant¹⁶ or Moses as the lawgiver;¹⁷

other paintings including one of “a priest wearing the Anubis mask”;¹⁸ a portrait of Virgil;¹⁹ various wall paintings from Dura-Europos from before A.D. 256;²⁰ a wall painting in the fourth-century Chapel of the Exodus in western Egypt;²¹ and even on textiles from fourth-century-A.D. Egypt, which depict gammas on clothing, drapings, and spreads.²²

These notched bands and gammas are also seen in many early Christian (fifth century A.D.) mosaics found in Rome, Ravenna, and Naples: “almost all the mantles of biblical figures” have one gamma marking near the knee; occasionally, they are depicted with a notched band.²³ Further evidence indicates that mantles were “still in regular use until about the 6th century; in other words, the depictions of men in white mantles with purple gammas frequently found in Christian art of the fourth and fifth century belong to a period when the garment was still current and familiar.”²⁴ In addition to their appearing on clothing, gammas in Ravenna mosaics are pictured on altar cloths and veils.²⁵

What Did These Marks Mean?

The significance of these markings is much disputed. Yadin felt that if these markings did at one time have significance later artists and weavers were no longer aware of it and simply used the markings for design.²⁶ He recognizes that “if these signs were misunderstood in ancient times, they are even more so in modern literature.”²⁷

The banner from Roman Egypt mentioned above portrays what could be a figure of Victory, with four right-angled marks with double-pronged ends in the corners of the banner. This has been variously regarded by some as a military banner, a decoration, or a souvenir of war.²⁸ Others, however, believe it is of religious significance, probably having been carried in a procession of “some group that hoped for immortality.”²⁹

Since Victory so commonly appears as a symbol of immortality, and such bars are so artificially emphasized on funerary figures, it seems more likely that the Egyptian banner, which, we assume, came originally from a grave, had had a religious rather than a military use.³⁰

Other evidence supports the idea that these markings had religious meaning. Goodenough notes that these markings often

appear on significant religious paintings and figures.³¹ Admitting that his opinion has not been fully substantiated, he nevertheless believes the importance of the Dura and Palmyra art and textiles in which these markings are depicted substantiates the marks' religious and symbolic significance, calling clothing that contains gamma "ceremonial garments" with "symbolic force," perhaps from a "ritualistic treasure" of items, the nature of which "neither the paintings nor the textiles, unfortunately, make explicit."³²

More evidence for a religious significance, according to Goodenough, comes from documentation that the markings are usually in connection with burial and are usually placed in consistent locations on the clothing—they are not just random decorations. As Hugh Nibley adds, they can also be associated with altar cloths and the veil of the temple.³³ Indeed, the markings on the garments found at Dura, Goodenough remarks, may have had sacral or ritualistic significance, for apparently the gamma was worn by those of high authority in the church or of great power in government:

Near the ends of the himation [shawl] as represented in the synagogue [paintings] usually heavy marks appear, marks that seem always to end in a square prong. . . . This Greek dress of striped chiton [tunic] and marked himation will appear only on characters of especial sanctity—heavenly beings or the very great Patriarchs.³⁴

Nevertheless, the meaning of these patterns, whether at Masada or elsewhere, remains obscure. As Nibley has said in summing up the problem of determining just what these symbols meant, "these things do get around. They become lost; they become simply designs; nobody understands what they are. . . . Thus we speculate as we try to reconstruct them."³⁵

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NOTES

¹Avigail Sheffer and others, "Textiles from Masada—A Preliminary Selection," in *Masada IV: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Reports*,

ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994), 159.

²Sheffer and others, "Textiles from Masada," 199.

³Sheffer and others, "Textiles from Masada," 200.

⁴Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 12 vols. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 9:163.

⁵Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:164.

⁶Yigael Yadin, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1963), 227.

⁷Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127.

⁸Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128.

⁹Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:127. See the dress of the last person on the lower row of figure 339.

¹⁰The gamma is also mentioned in the Talmud in association with the boundaries of Jewish towns, houses, and courtyards (Erubin 55a); the repair of clothing (Kelim 7); the layout of wine cellars (Pesahim 8b); and the shape of an addition to the altar in the temple at Jerusalem (Zebahim 61b; see also Middoth 3.1).

¹¹Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 231 n. 69.

¹²Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 229.

¹³See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163; 11: figure 145.

¹⁴Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 230 n. 62.

¹⁵Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163.

¹⁶Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163-64.

¹⁷Hugh W. Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond this Ignorant Present*, ed. Don Norton, vol. 12 of Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 110.

¹⁸Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," 110.

¹⁹From the fifth century at Tamara. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163; 11: figure 127.

²⁰Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 227.

²¹From the fourth century at Kharga Oasis, Libyan Desert. Ahmed Fakhry, *The Necropolis of El-Bagawāt in Kharga Oasis* (Cairo: Government Press, 1951), cited in Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 230 n. 64.

²²Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 230.

²³Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 230.

²⁴Sheffer and others, "Textiles from Masada," 201.

²⁵Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," 109.

²⁶Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 231.

²⁷Yadin, *Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period*, 230.

²⁸Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163.

²⁹Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163.

³⁰Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163.

³¹Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:162.

³²Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:128, 164.

³³Goodenough recounts the numerous instances of the markings appearing on ancient paintings of garments of important religious figures. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:126-28. Figures include Abraham, Jonah, Solomon, Moses, Elijah, Samuel, Ezekiel, the twelve heads of the tribes of Israel, and others. But do the marks appear on clothing of less significant people?

³⁴Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:88-89, see also 164 n. 300:

The Annunciation and the coming of the Magi: a mosaic at Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome. See the marks on dress at Ravenna in Deichmann, *Früchristliche [sic] Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna*, passim, esp. figs. 316-321, and the mosaics in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo. Among these the mosaic representing the kiss of Judas, fig. 187, especially intrigues us, since Christ and the Apostles have the prong-ended angle [garment mark] on the himation [shawl], but Judas does not. We can draw no conclusions, however, because the artist may have not shown it with Judas simply because in turning for the kiss Judas hides the part of the garment where the mark would normally have appeared.

See also Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," 109:

Another Ravenna mosaic, c. A.D. 520, shows the priest-king Melchizedek in a purple cloak, offering bread and wine at the altar (Genesis 14:18-20). The white altar cloth is decorated with two sets of *gammadia*, as well as the so-called "seal of Melchizedek," two interlocked squares in gold. Abel offers his lamb as Abraham gently pushes Isaac forward. The hand of God reaches down to this sacred meeting through the red veils adorned with golden *gammadia* on either side. The theme is the great sacrifice of Christ, which brings together the righteous prophets from the past as well as the four corners of the present world, thereby uniting all time and space.

³⁵Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," 111.