

Texts and textiles

Organic material and fabrics decompose easily so it is extremely rare for ancient textiles and papyri to survive in the archaeological record. Fortunately, the hot and dry climate of Egypt has preserved many pieces of ancient papyrus and cloth. The *Texts and textiles* exhibition features rare ancient papyri inscribed in Greek, from Oxyrhynchus—a site in upper Egypt—and Coptic textiles that once belonged to elaborately adorned items of clothing worn in the time of Christian Egypt.

For the past century, the area around Oxyrhynchus has yielded an enormous collection of papyrus texts dating from the time of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods of Egyptian history. Featured in the exhibition are papyrus fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus from the first book of Thucydides; other texts include a declaration concerning the sale of a slave, and various private accounts, receipts and personal letters.

Illegal excavations have brought thousands of Coptic textiles onto the antiquities market. These textiles were probably made when the majority of people in Egypt subscribed to the Christian faith during the fourth to seventh centuries CE. The exhibition includes woollen tunics, or parts of garments such as tunic ornaments, panels, shawls and shrouds. Coptic textiles are notable for the richness of their decorative motifs: geometric patterns, human figures, birds, animals, fish, flora, mythological themes, Nilotic and marine scenes, episodes from the Old and New testaments, and crosses.

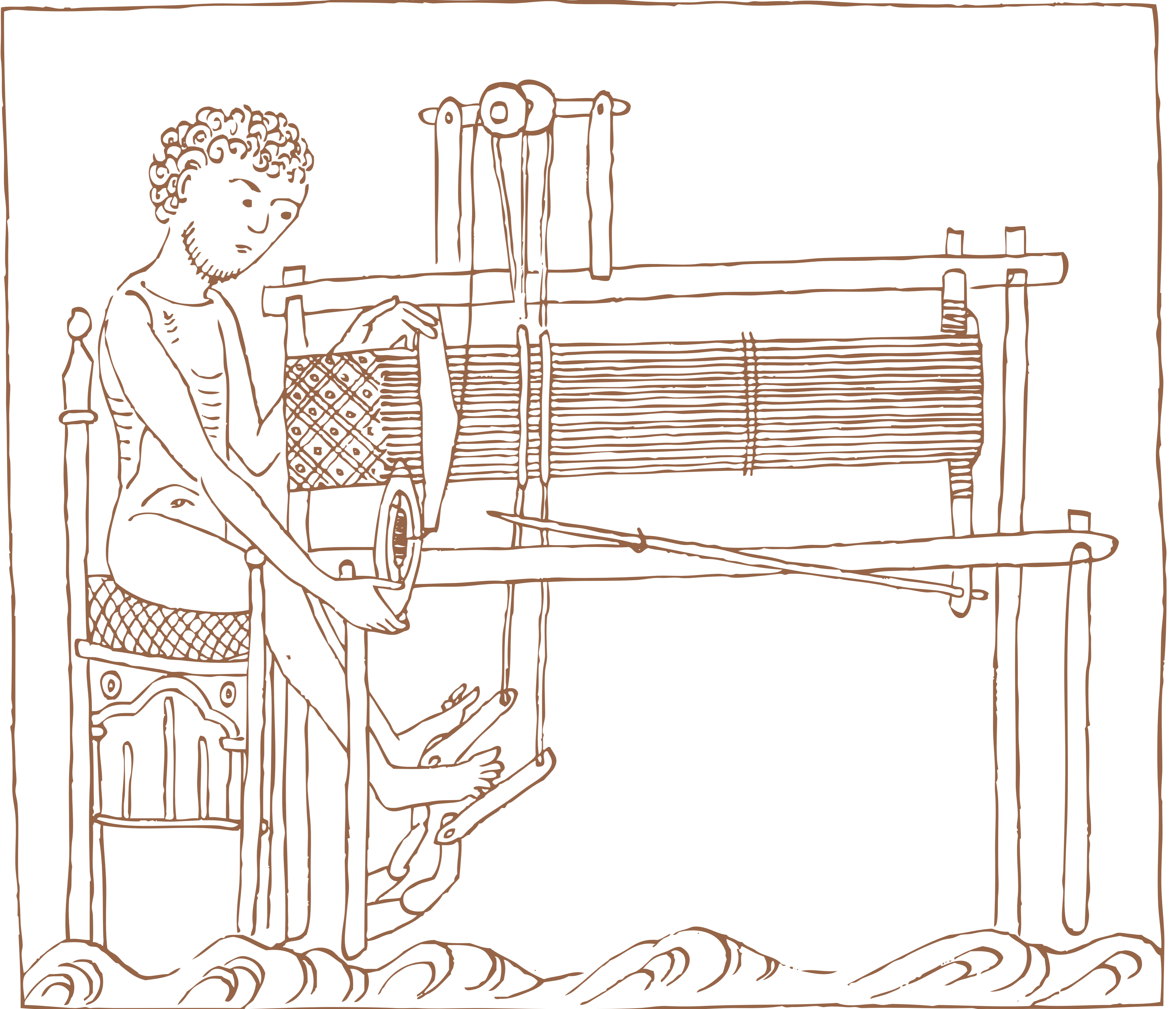
The works featured in the exhibition offer a view into the lives of the owners and makers of these garments and texts through the fragile pages of papyri and delicate woven textiles.

Map of Egypt



Map courtesy Chandra Jayasuriya, cartographer,
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Textile weaver and loom



Roman period in Egypt

The Roman province of Egypt (*Aegyptus*) was established in 30 BCE after Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) defeated his rival Mark Antony, deposed his lover Queen Cleopatra VII and annexed the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt to the Roman Empire. The province encompassed most of modern-day Egypt except for the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt would come to serve as a major producer of grain for the Roman Empire.

The effect of the Roman conquest was at first to strengthen the position of the Greeks and of Hellenism against Egyptian influences. Some of the previous offices and names of offices under the Hellenistic Ptolemaic rule were kept, but some were changed. The Romans introduced important new administrative systems aimed at achieving a high level of efficiency and maximizing revenue. The duties of the prefect of Egypt combined responsibility for military security through command of the legions and cohorts for the organization of finance and taxation, and for the administration of justice.

Egypt was subdivided for administrative purposes into a number of smaller provinces, and separate civil and military offices were established; the *praeses* and the *dux*. By the middle of the sixth century CE the emperor Justinian was eventually forced to recognize the failure of this policy and combine civil and military power in the hands of the *dux* with a civil deputy (the *praeses*) as a counterweight to the power of the church authorities.

Greek—the lingua franca of the ancient world

When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE he could not have known that the Greek language he introduced into this ancient civilization was to dominate it for more than a thousand years. Until well after the Arab invasion of Egypt in 641 CE, Greek was used for official documents rather than the indigenous language, Egyptian, which was used for religious texts and private documents written in hieratic or demotic script.

The Greek script introduced to Egypt was already many centuries old. The earliest papyri in Greek found in Egypt were written in rather square letters not unlike the letters found inscribed on stone or the printed capital letters of modern Greek. From the Ptolemaic period until the Arab conquest the Greek script used for documentary texts underwent significant changes. It became more cursive and by the first century CE in some cases it had become almost illegible.

During the Roman period scribes developed a cursive Greek script that allowed even more continuous and rapid writing. This was initially used only in documentary texts but by the end of the period the script was also used for writing literary texts.

An important aspect of all documentary papyri is the language in which they were written. The Greek used in Greco-Roman Egypt was no longer the language used by the classical Greeks. The language was well on its way to developing into medieval and modern Greek. The language was also adapted to the new environment, which was largely Egyptian. In this way a form of colonial Greek came into existence, which was also found in other parts of the Mediterranean world.

Papyrus manufacture

Papyrus was first manufactured in Egypt as far back as the third millennium BCE (at least as far back as the first Dynasty), however it was used throughout the Mediterranean region.

Papyrus is made from the stem of the plant. The outer rind is first stripped off, and the sticky fibrous inner pith is cut lengthwise into thin strips. The strips are then placed side by side on a hard surface with their edges slightly overlapping, and then another layer of strips is laid on top at a right angle. The strips may have been soaked in water long enough for decomposition to begin, increasing adhesion. While still moist, the two layers are hammered together, mashing the layers into a single sheet. The sheet is then dried under pressure. After drying, the sheet of papyrus is polished with a rounded object, possibly a stone or seashell or piece of rounded, hard wood.

To form the long strip that a scroll required, a number of sheets were united, placed so that all the horizontal fibres parallel with the roll's length were on one side and all the vertical fibres on the other. Normally, texts were first written on the recto, the lines following the fibres, parallel to the long edges of the scroll. Secondarily, papyrus was often reused, writing across the fibres on the verso.

In a dry climate like that of Egypt, papyrus is stable, formed as it is of highly rot-resistant cellulose; but storage in humid conditions can result in moulds attacking and destroying the material. Papyrus is still being found in Egypt; extraordinary examples include the Elephantine papyri and the famous finds at Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi.

Oxyrhynchus papyri

In Hellenistic times, Oxyrhynchus was a prosperous regional capital, the third-largest city in Egypt. After Egypt was Christianized, it became famous for its many churches and monasteries. It remained a prominent though gradually declining town in the Roman and Byzantine periods. After the Arab invasion of Egypt in 641 CE, the canal system on which the town depended fell into disrepair, and Oxyrhynchus was abandoned.

For more than 1000 years, the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus dumped garbage at a series of sites out in the desert sands beyond the town limits. The fact that the town was built on a canal rather than on the Nile itself was important, because this meant that the area did not flood every year with the rising of the river, as did the districts along the river-bank. When the canals dried up, the water table fell and never rose again. The area west of the Nile has virtually no rain, so the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus were gradually covered with sand and forgotten.

Because Egyptian society under the Greeks and Romans was governed bureaucratically, and because Oxyrhynchus was the capital of the nineteenth nome (district), the material at the Oxyrhynchus dumps included vast amounts of paper (papyrus). Accounts, tax returns, census material, invoices, receipts, correspondence on administrative, military, religious, economic and political matters, certificates and licenses of all kinds—all these were periodically cleaned out of government offices, put in wicker baskets, and dumped out in the desert. Private citizens added their own piles of unwanted correspondence and receipts. The Oxyrhynchus papyri, therefore, contained a complete record of the life of the town, and of the civilizations and empires of which the town was a part.

Ancient Egyptian scribes

The ancient Egyptian scribe, or *sesh*, was a person educated in the arts of writing (using both hieroglyphics and hieratic scripts, and from the second half of the first millennium BCE also the demotic script). Scribes were generally male, belonged to the social elite and employed in the bureaucratic administration of the Pharaonic state. Sons of scribes were brought up in the same scribal tradition, sent to school and, upon entering the civil service, inherited their fathers' positions.

Much of what is known about ancient Egypt is due to the activities of its scribes. Monumental buildings were erected under their supervision, administrative and economic activities were documented by them, and tales from the mouths of Egypt's lower classes or from foreign lands survive thanks to scribes' written records.

During the Ptolemaic, Roman and Coptic periods, in addition to the continuation of hieratic and demotic, the Egyptian scribe was to learn a number of new languages, first Greek, then Latin and finally Coptic. Greek remained in predominant use as the written language during these periods. Demotic was extensively used during the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods but gradually fades after the first century and finally disappears during the fifth century. Hieratic remained in use throughout this time, particularly in the production of religious and literary texts. Coptic grew from the use of Greek as it was the expression of the Egyptian language written in the Greek alphabet with a few additions. Coptic appears regularly from the end of the third century as a response to the Christian Church's need to communicate with the Egyptian-speaking population. The use of Coptic strengthened through the next three and a half centuries until it gave way to the use of Arabic during the seventh century.

Coptic period

The name Copt derives from the Arabic word *Qibt* for Egyptian, which was taken from the Greek word for Egyptian, *Aigyptos*. The term 'Coptic period' is a very broad or approximate one; it may be thought of as running from the third century CE until around the time of the visible decline of Christianity in the ninth century CE. It is roughly equivalent to the Byzantine period elsewhere in the Mediterranean world.

Christianity arrived in Egypt from Judea. It probably first came into Alexandria, which was both an intellectual centre and the home of a large Jewish community. Christianity was heavily persecuted in the third century CE, but was widely accepted by the end of the fourth century. After this time, the number of monastic settlements increased. It was at this time that many ancient rock-cut tombs were inhabited and adapted by Christian monks.

The term Coptic can also be applied to the art and language of the Christian period in Egypt. The churches of the period were often highly decorated with murals showing saints and local bishops. The church buildings were also carved with floral and leafy motifs, sometimes combined with birds and animals. The Coptic language was used for inscriptions including monastic accounts, extracts from the Bible, liturgy and psalms, and the lives of great saints and bishops.

Much of our knowledge of the period comes from the multitude of texts which have survived. They paint a vivid picture of the private, business and religious interests of Egyptian men and women of the first millennium of our era. Letters, wills and magical spells speak of family affections and love problems while business contracts inform us about the various ways in which people tried to carve out a living 1300 years ago.

Coptic textiles

It is very rare for ancient textiles to survive because fabrics decompose easily. Many Coptic textiles have survived because they were preserved in the dry desert tombs of Egypt.

The term Coptic textiles is used to describe a diverse range of fabrics found in Egypt dating from the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. Coptic textiles provide a wealth of information about the social classes, daily life, beliefs and customs of the people by whom and for whom they were woven. The major fibres used for making Coptic textiles were linen and wool, and cotton was occasionally used. Dyes were derived from plant, animal and mineral sources.

Textiles had various uses in Coptic Egypt. The household uses of textiles included bed sheets and covers, towels, napkins, tablecloths and carrying sacks. Textiles were used both in households and in public and church buildings as decorative curtains and hangings.

The most common use of textiles was as apparel. The standard form of clothing in Coptic Egypt during Roman times was the tunic, a rectangular shirt-like piece of cloth that fit over the head, sometimes fastened at the waist by a belt. Textiles were also used for belts, cloaks and shawls as well as for burial garments. When mummification was outlawed in the fourth century CE, the Copts stopped wrapping the bodies with linen strips and began using regular clothing in which to bury the dead. Other textiles such as shawls, bed covers and curtains were probably used as external wrappings of the dead.

Coptic textiles: materials and dyes

The two most common materials used by the Copts were linen (made from flax) and wool. Linen was favoured because it is strong and durable. Linen could be woven in different levels of quality, from a very fine and sheer fabric, to a thick canvas-like fabric.

During Pharaonic times the Egyptians did not use wool because it was thought to be ritually unclean. Linen garments were also cooler than wool garments, which was important in the hot climate of Egypt. However, wool was favoured by the Romans and became common at the time of the Roman conquest, around 30 BCE. Egypt became a major centre of textile production for the Roman Empire, and the use of wool increased. Wool has an advantage over linen in that it is easily dyed, while linen must first be soaked in an acidic mordant in order to take on a dye. Wool and linen were used both alone and in combination in the same textile.

In general, the earlier Coptic textiles were monochromatic, while the later textiles (from around the sixth century CE) had more varied colours. Animal and vegetable compounds were used to make dyes. The colours first used by the Copts were purple, red and yellow. The dyes may reflect the Roman custom of colour usage, whereby certain colours indicate social status. Purple was a preferred colour, but it was time-consuming and expensive to produce. Purple dye was made from the secretions of the Murex; a mollusc found in the eastern Mediterranean. Red dye was procured from the madder root and the female coccus insect during early times. Yellow dye was obtained from weld and saffron, and blue dye was obtained from woad and indigo. Later the colours also included green, which was made by dyeing yellow over blue.

Techniques of Coptic weaving

The development of pattern weaving is one of the important achievements of the Coptic weavers that distinguish their textiles from those of the ancient Egyptians. Patterned textiles were brought into the mainstream around the time of Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in the fourth century BCE. Some Greek textiles were patterned and featured the use of dyed wool. Patterned textiles were valued because their production was quite labour intensive.

Coptic textiles are characterized by the 'S-twist' of thread. After washing, the natural flax fibres have an inherent sense of rotation in an anti-clockwise direction. Therefore, when they are spun into thread, they were twisted in this direction, which is called an S-twist.

The Egyptians used the techniques of tabby weave, half basket weave, and looped or Soumak. Tabby weave is the simplest form of weaving, consisting of horizontal threads (weft) interweaving with vertical threads (warp). Soumak had the effect of making distinct outlines of the designs. Brocading and tapestry were among other techniques. The tapestry technique allowed wool decorations to be woven into the surrounding linen. The Copts invented the flying shuttle technique, which uses a second shuttle to insert an extra linen weft thread into the fabric.

While weavers in the Pharaonic era were associated with temples, Coptic weavers were organized into small workshops in towns under the supervision of the state. Alexandria had an imperial centre of textile manufacture during the fifth century CE, and was a trading centre from that time onwards. Interestingly, while it was mainly women who were weavers in Pharaonic times, males were documented as weavers in the Christian era. When the vertical loom was invented, it was mostly operated by men. Men turned textile-making into a commercial industry, although textiles continued to be made domestically.