Amidst the arts and crafts of the Muhammadan period the making of straw mats is the least known. Although fragments of Islamic matting, either plain or decorated with inscriptions, have been found from time to time in Fustat and other Egyptian localities, complete pieces with decoration are very rare. Only two are known to be in existence; one is in the Benaki Museum at Athens, the other was recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum. Our mat, like the Benaki piece, was found in Egypt and shows the highly developed technique of matmaking in the early Islamic period. At the upper and lower ends of the central field are Kufic inscriptions in undyed straw against a purple background, which recall the tiraz bands of Islamic textiles of the ninth and tenth centuries. The two inscriptions are identical and express the usual blessing and good wishes: “Perfect blessing, general well-being, continuous happiness, beatitude, and joy to the owner.” The central field is framed by a band of lozenges between double black lines. At the top and bottom are two purple bands, and at the edges two narrow bands with a checker pattern in natural straw and black.

The technique employed in making our mat represents an advancement over that of the Coptic and other pre-Islamic periods. Coptic matting is known to us from finds in the monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes. In these mats, according to Winlock, there is a true warp, the weft consisting of bundles of grass woven into it. The method used in making the Museum’s mat approaches textile weaving much more closely. The warps, which consist of hemp threads, are placed close together, while the wefts are of fine strips of grass or rush instead of bundles. The texture of our mat is consequently much finer than that of any known Coptic mat.

For convenience the Arab matmaker used short strips of grass, as indicated by the six vertical sections, each about 5¾ inches wide. As in plain cloth weave the wefts pass alternately over and under single warps, but for additional strength four double warps, instead of single ones, are placed where two sections adjoin. On the back of the mat the weft ends of each two adjoining sections are braided together. The design is produced either by change of color or by variation of the weave as in the case of the lozenge border, where the wefts at intervals pass over two or three warps instead of over single ones. For the narrow black bands and the inscriptions, in which two colors are used, the matmaker employed a more complicated method which recalls the lanceé weave used in some Egyptian textiles during the Coptic and early Muhammadan periods. In this method of weaving the weft threads that are not being used for the pattern float on the back.

Our mat was probably made on a vertical or horizontal loom very much like those in use in Egypt and Palestine today, but more elaborate. A simple horizontal loom for making mats was used in ancient Egypt as we know from a tomb painting of the XII Dynasty at Beni Hasan. This ancient loom, like some modern Egyptian ones, has two beams and a holed rod that serves at the same time as a beater. The warp threads are fastened at both ends to the beam and pass through the holes of the rod. Other

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1 The Museum has a small early Islamic fan of plaited straw, decorated with a Kufic inscription on a black ground. Acc. no. 27.170.80. Other matting is in the Arab Museum in Cairo and in Swedish collections (see Carl J. Lamm, “Dated or Datable Tiraz in Sweden,” *Le Monde Oriental*, vol. xxxii [1958]).


4 G. M. Crowfoot, “The Mat Weaver from the Tomb of Khety,” *Ancient Egypt*, parts 1, II (March–June, 1933), pp. 89–90, figs. 1–3.
ABBASID STRAW MAT, FIRST HALF OF THE X CENTURY. IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
STRAW MAT MADE IN TIBERIAS, FIRST HALF OF THE X CENTURY
L. 91\(\frac{3}{4}\) INCHES, W. 45\(\frac{1}{2}\) INCHES. IN THE BENAKI MUSEUM, ATHENS
TWO ABBASID STRAW MATS MADE IN PALESTINE

horizontal looms still used in Egypt, Palestine, and the Sudan, for making both textiles and mats, are provided with a rod heddle and a shed rod. The use of dyed fibers, as seen in our mat, also goes back to ancient Egypt. The partly completed mat in the painting at Beni Hasan is decorated with a checker pattern of green and yellow, which are still the favored colors of modern Egyptian mats. Ancient Egyptian baskets also show colored patterns. Combinations of red and black are the most popular and were used as late as the Roman period.

The Kufic inscriptions on our mat, which recall Abbasid textiles made in state or court factories (tiraz), give a clue to its date. This severe style of Kufic writing, with the wedge-like ends of the shafts, is similar to that on embroidered or tapestry-woven inscriptions of the period of the Abbasid caliphs Mutadid (892-902) and Muktadir (908-932). We may therefore assign our mat to the first half of the tenth century.

The larger mat (91 3/4 x 45 1/5 in.) in the Benaki Museum at Athens has a similar decoration and is of the same date. The two bands of Kufic inscriptions in purple give us, according to Wiet, not only the usual good wishes but also the place of manufacture: "Perfect blessing, general well-being, and continuous happiness to the owner. This is what was ordered to be made in the private factory of weaving at Tiberias [Palestine]." There can be little doubt that our mat also was made in the tiraz of Tiberias, a town famous for the manufacture of fine mats. Nasir-i-Khusrau, a Persian traveler of the eleventh century, writes: "In the town of Tiberias they make prayer-mats of reeds, which sell in the place itself for five Maghribi dinars (or over £2) apiece." Mukaddasi, a geographer of the tenth century, tells us that mats of extreme fineness were made at Tiberias from rushes growing on the banks of the lake. The geographer Idrisi also tells us that mats from Tiberias, called semneh, were of great beauty difficult to surpass. These mats, which were imported into Egypt, must have often been used instead of woolen rugs both for floor coverings and for wall decorations.

Fine mats were made also in Egypt and other provinces. Nasir-i-Khusrau reports that in the sanctuary of Ibrahim in Hebron (el Khalil) in Palestine the floor and the walls were covered with precious carpets and Maghribi matting that were even more costly than brocade stuffs (diba). He saw there a mat which served as a prayer rug and which, he was told, was sent by Amir al Juyush, a slave of the sultan of Egypt, and bought in Cairo (Misr) for thirty Maghribi dinars (or about £15). According to the historian Makrizi, straw carpets embroidered with gold and silver were used for the decoration of the palace of the Fatimids at Cairo, who established a factory in the vicinity of the city. Baghdad in Mesopotamia, Darabjird in Fars, and the province of Sistan in Iran were also known for the manufacture of reed mats.


6 *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe*, vol. III, no. 1542 (Cairo, 1932).