The Adrim or "Virginity Disc"

Marking the Passage to Womanhood in Siwah

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In 1985 a handsome necklace from the Oasis of Siwah in the Western Desert of Egypt was donated to The University Museum by Dora K. Plant in memory of her sister Eva K. Rosengarten, a longtime member of the Museum’s Women’s Committee. In addition to its striking beauty, the necklace (Fig. 3) is important as a rare ethnographic document from an isolated and almost forgotten town. Nevertheless, an informed reader might wonder why this particular object has been chosen to represent the over 10,000 artifacts in the African collection of The University Museum. It is primarily a matter of balance. A study of the Siwan necklace provides a chance to demonstrate the cultural diversity and complexity that exists within the continent of Africa. Publication of this artifact from Northern Africa will complement the exhibit of West and Central African sculpture from our collection recently displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and now traveling within the United States (Wardwell 1986). Moreover, by adopting the perspective of material culture studies (as exemplified within the disciplines of folklore and anthropology) rather than the perspective of art history or aesthetics, it is also possible to demonstrate how a small artifact can be associated with complex cultural patterns. It is no longer controversial to view artifacts as embodiments of the cultural values and norms of their creators and users, as well as utilitarian items and historical documents. Artifacts thus become an intimate part of the symbol system of a culture, and their study reveals the meanings attached to them.

Siwah Oasis

The oasis known today as Siwah was in ancient times an Egyptian cult center, and a cluster of monuments (including the Oracle Temple of Ammon) is still visible (Fakhry 1973; Belgrave 1925). It was known to the Romans as the Oasis of Ammonium, and to the early Arab geographers as Sarthar. Though al Maghrizi, writing in the middle of the 15th century, refers to it by the latter name, he calls the people “Siwan” and their language “Sivi” (1895:696). The people living there today refer to themselves as the “people of Isawan” (Itadim I Isawan), as distinct from the Iarghein, the Bedouin Arabs with whom they trade.

Siwah lies about 300 kilometers south of the Mediterranean coast and ca. 500 kilometers west of the valley of the Nile (Fig. 2). It forms a flat depression in the desert, slightly below sea level, about 75 kilometers long from east to west and in places as much as 30 kilometers broad. It is watered by several salty lakes with marshy borders, and a multitude of spring-fed pools. The nearest inhabited oases are Jaghabub, 140 kilometers to the northwest, and El Garah, 120 kilometers northeast. In the past, Siwah was to some extent isolated by the desert, but was regularly visited by camel caravans. Modern motor vehicles have made the region more accessible.

The economy of the Siwah Oasis depends on the cultivation of scattered areas within the depression. The people export some garden produce, mostly dates and olive oil. In the past, this led to significant profits from the caravans which came to trade or used this oasis as a station in the long journey between Egypt and the Sudan and North Africa. At the end of the 19th century, the number of these caravans was estimated as 245 annually, each caravan having 35 camels on an average (Fakhry 1950). Nowadays many changes have taken place. With motorized transportation, Siwah is less isolated and is much more integrated into the Egyptian national economy. As a result, many aspects of traditional culture have changed.

This article is written in the "ethnographic present"—that is, it describes Siwan traditional culture as recorded by "modern" observers, but before significant modernization had occurred.

The population of the oasis in the early 1870s was estimated at 6000-7000 people. Because of the caravan trade, it has been a meeting place for people of different cultures. At present Siwah is inhabited by a mixture of Berbers, Bedouin, and Sudanese. Most of the Sudanese (an ethnic designation used here in its original Arabic meaning, i.e., blacks or the darkest in skin among them) were brought as slaves from countries to the south of the desert. Among themselves, most Siwans speak a Berber language almost identical with that of Aqilah and similar to the dialect of Sokhnah and El Fokhah in Libya (Walker 1921). Arabic is increasingly important, with most men speaking it as a second or even first language.

Most inhabitants of Siwah are Muslims. Traditionally the people have been divided into two antagonistic factions that are localized in the eastern and western parts of the territory. Though very similar in language and customs, the groups had been intermittently in a state of civil war until the 1920s. As to the origin of this conflict, Siwan oral tradition gives varied accounts. Differences in religious affiliation accentuated the conflict. The westerners subscribe to the Sanihi religious order, while the easterners include both Sanihi and members of the Madaniyyah order (see box). Despite their differences, whatever these factions are at peace, marriages often take place between them (Clime 1936:12).

The Museum’s Necklace

The Siwan necklace (Fig. 3) is a metal torus with a disc-shaped metal pendant. It is made of an alloy of silver and copper that takes on a silvery luster when polished. The torque weighs 364 grams, while the disc weighs an additional 118 grams. This is relatively light, since necklaces of this type are reported to weigh up to 2 kilograms (Blass and Weissenberger 1964). The disc is 13.3 centimeters in diameter, and can be slipped on and off its torque. It was made from a metal sheet that was first cut to size, and then given a backing with a plastic substance such as tar or resin. Next the surface was worked with engravers’ tools, principally a fine chisel and punch. When com-
The Sanusi order, founded by Muhammad Ibn al-Sanusi (ca. 1787-1859), is part of the Sunni or orthodox branch of Islam. Al-Sanusi was disheartened by the internal divisiveness that he saw in the Islam of his day, and sought to revive the simplicity and purity of the early days of that faith. While the Sanusis are within the tradition of Sufism or Islamic mysticism, they are among the most conservative of Sufi orders. Rather than seeking an identification with God, this group sought a spiritual identification with the prophet Muhammad. This goal is to be achieved through a contemplation of the life and words of Mohammad and an imitation of his actions. The use of stimulants and ecstatic aids to transcend the senses (for example, the music and repetitive body movements or "whirling" of the Dervishes) were forbidden by al-Sanusi. He also required that members of his order work for their livelihoods instead of existing on alms.

The first Sanusi lodge was founded in 1843 on the central plateau of Cyrenaica, near the ancient city of Cyrene. By 1909, a network of 146 lodges linked the caravan routes of Libya, Egypt, the Sudan, and Arabia. These lodges were not only religious chapterhouses, they also served as cultural and commercial centers. They were the home to schools, courts, caravansaries, and poorhouses. During the 20th century, the successors of al-Sanusi became involved in regional politics and sought to check the expansion of European colonialism. In 1913, the head of the order, Sayyid Mohammad Idris, became the first king of the independent Libyan. He ruled until overthrown by the 1969 military coup that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power. But he was not the first to ascend to power. The Sanusi had been the first to ascend to power in the early years of the 20th century.

The adrin or "arity of cloth" from Siwah (after Schmamber 1840:fig. 1; drawing by Georgianna Grinstein). The engraved design on the adrin is very similar to that on the piece in The University Museum.

With the exception of the adrin, the silver ornaments are of a type worn by the Bedouin of Tripoli. Every rich woman or girl possesses a quantity of these silver ornaments, sometimes amounting to nearly 18 kilograms in weight. (The adrin alone may weigh up to 1.2 kilos!) They adorn their heads, ears, necks, arms, and legs, and when they walk these objects jingle. A Sanusi admiral makes the female who wears many ornaments and praises her highly. One observer states that if we compare such a woman "with the mare of a prince - we find that it is not wrong." (Fakhry 1950:11.)

Until recently, most Siwah jewelry was produced in Siwah by well-known silversmiths. Nowadays many pieces of jewelry used in Siwah are produced in Alexandria and Cairo. Nevertheless, Siwan jewelry is still regarded as homogeneous and distinctive among other types of Egyptian ornaments. Older pieces show greater richness of form and better execution and finishing, and also have a higher percentage of silver. New pieces are made of base metal.

The traditional clothing worn by Siwan women is brightly colored. Their underwear, as described by Cline (1938:33-33), consists of a pair of white cotton drawers reaching down to a little above the ankles, where the narrow cuffs are decorated with embroidery in colored rectangular designs. Over these drawers they wear a dress of vertically striped cotton, usually black and dark blue. "The sleeves of this dress are so broad that when the wearer extends her arms, one sometimes catches a glimpse of her tawny waist" (Cline 1938:33). The neck-piece of the dress also bears colorful embroidered designs. Women's shoes are made of fine red leather, pointed at the toe, and having a lozenge-shaped tongue shielding the instep.

An unmarried girl can walk in the streets and play with her mates until she reaches a certain age. As a rule, unmarried girls do not put anything over their heads, though some girls from rich families put on colored woolen shawls imported from the Nile Valley. Once she is of marriageable age, like any good Muslim the Siwan woman covers her hair. A colored handkerchief is sometimes worn on the head, but the most important outer garment is a square of blue-gray striped cotton with a wide blue border that covers the head and is wrapped around the body down to the ankles (Fig. 6a). This square is used like the traditional veil, for when the wearer approaches strange men, she pulls it over her face and shoulders. The edges are held together with a string and a clasp known as a "frontlet."
closely over her face as a sign of being a respectable woman. The cloth was especially woven for Siwan women in the village of Ker-
dass in Giza province, Egypt. Parents normally let the hair of a
girl grow till she reaches the age of nine or ten, and then it is tressed or
braided. When the hair is tressed in a certain way it means that those
who think of asking her hand can talk to the parents (Fakhry 1950:12).
For married women, the prevailing traditional hairdo consists of:
a row of bangs hanging nearly to the eyebrows, a braided club of
hair on each side, and braids crossed behind and over the top of
the head in various ways. Some-
times in place of the bangs, braids cross over the forehead. In the
back of the coiffure are fre-
quently set a pair of silver discs. Heavy
rings of lead or silver or large
cylinders of amber, hanging from the sides of the head, give the
effect of earring-pendants when the
head is covered. (Cline 1936:32)

Costume as Symbol

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rom the description of the Siwan woman's dress we can easily infer that it represents a complex symbolic system. Such a system has developed out of the prevailing social, moral, and relig-
ious values and beliefs of Siwan society. It is a relatively conservative society, in which chastity is cher-
ished and virginity is highly valued. In such a society, where women have
separated from men, a code of
dress and ornamentation plays a
significant role in communication
between the two sexes. Elements of
costume make it easy to distinguish
the virgin from the non-virgin, and
the married from the unmarried.
Hairstyle, pieces of clothing,
and a mode of behavior in the
street all help to distinguish a girl
or woman who has never married from
one who is divorced.

It is important to note that in a
society like Siwan where premarital
sex is discouraged, the status of
being a "never-married" woman
necessarily means being a virgin.
The chador or virginity dress is vital in
marking this distinction. Wearing the
disc on the torque means that the
girl is qualified for marriage and

encourages eligible men to go
and ask for "her hands" from the parents.
What makes the chador even more
interesting is the symbolic value
attached to it, in marking the passage
to womanhood. This transition to
womanhood and marriage is marked by
a special ritual, performed at the edge of the spring of
Tamams, which forms an important
part of the wedding ceremony.

Marriage in Siwan

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arriage among the Siwan
is not restricted by kinship
or by religious and social
factions. Like neighboring groups,
they encourage marriage to a first
cousin, especially one related
through the father. Traditionally,
marrige is arranged by parents
who consult a faqih—a religious
and magical specialist—who informs
them whether the names of the
couple form a lucky or unlucky
combination. This consultation pres-
sumably takes place after a young
man has indicated his choice of a
bride. This process is described by
Abdallah:

... if a man wants to marry a
girl, he sends his nearest woman
relative with a dollar or a suit of
clothing to the house of the girl.
This announces the fact to
the girl's mother, who, after obtaining
the opinion of her husband, ac-
ccepts the gift if she finds the
suitor a desirable person. On the
other hand, they refuse the gift if
he is ineligible. (1917:8)

From the time this gift is accepted,
the man is considered to be the girl's
future husband. Nothing further
happens at this time except that
they agree upon the dowry, a sum
of money. In accordance with Mus-
lam law in Egypt, the dowry is not
paid in full when the marriage con-
tract is made. A portion of it (a third)
is held in reserve, and must be
paid to the wife if she is divorced
without her consent, or upon the
death of her husband.

The description of the wedding
ceremony that follows has been
summarized from several sources
(Abdallah 1917; Cline 1936; Fakhry
1950; Maughan 1908; St John 1948;
Stanley 1911, 1912). It applies only
marriage with a divorced woman or a widow is performed by the simple form of
contract prescribed by Muslim law,

preceded by a gift of money, pre-
septs of clothing and ornaments,
and a little feast.

Three days before the wedding,
female friends gather at the house
of the bride to prepare food for the
feast. The celebrations open with a
large meal at the house of the bride-
groom's father, beginning early in
the morning. At this time, relatives
and friends usually contribute some
money to the general expenses. The
bridegroom himself ordinarily does not
appear. During the three days of
the ceremony, he would feel
deeply ashamed to see or speak to
his father, father-in-law, or uncle.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the
wedding day, in the late afternoon,
a small group of girls and women
take the bride, dressed in her richest
clothes, to the large and beautiful
spring Tid Tammas (Arabic Ayn Tammas) for her wedding bath. Tid Tammas, along with a second spring
called Bir Ahmed, is highly regarded
at Siwan. Their waters are not em-
ployed for household uses, but only
for rituals. For example, women
sprinkle themselves with water from these sources to perform their looks or to
obtains husbands.

The ceremony at the spring has
been described by Belgraves As
the young bride and her atten-
dants walk through the palm
groves they chant a curious tune,
a plaintive melody that sounds
more like a dirge than a wedding
song. "As from infinitely distant
land, Cosmos, air, and roasting
echoes, that convey / A melancholy
into all our day." The
spring's water is very picturesque; the girls and women stand
grouped round the water, their
dresses and silver ornaments reflected in its blue depths.
Very solemnly the bride removes the large, round, silver disc that
hangs on a solid silver ring from
her neck; she then bathes,
puts on different clothes and has
her hair plaited and scented by
one of her friends.

The procession then returns
home, and the "husband" and his wife
are met by another party of women,
the relations of the bridegroom,
who welcome the bride and
welcoming the bride, each according to her
means. An old woman collects

the coins in a silk scarf, carefully
noting the amount given by each
individual. The two parties return together, singing through the
temple pathway: "The Temple
chases of the bride and her friends
stand at the tomb of Sidi Sultman, Siwal's patron saint, and
recite the opening surah of the
Quran.

In the name of Allah, the Beneci-
cent, the Merciful.
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the
Worlds.
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Owner of the Day of Judgment,
They (alone) we worship; They
(alone) we ask for help.
Show us the straight path.
The path of those whom Thou
has favoured; Not the (path) of
those who earn Thine anger nor
of those who go astray.

This surah is customarily recited at
important events in the lives of Muslims, for example when making
a contract.

Late in the same evening the
female relatives of the bride
are led to the house of the bride.
The way is led by small boys who carry candles in their hands. Candles or other offerings of North African
marriages, probably having purificatory significance (West-
markar 1914:147). When the
crowd reaches the house of the bride,
the boys with the candles make a circle around the bride, who sits in the center of the room with one woman to comb her hair and
dress it with scented oil. Meanwhile,
the other women sing to the bride.

The bride is then given a supper
consisting wholly of eggs, after
which she is allowed to sleep. Eggs
figure prominently in North African
weddings, probably as fertility
charms (Westmarkar 1914:144).
The stated reason for eating no
but eggs, however, is that the bride
should have no gas in her intestines when the bridegroom visits her.
During the same evening the festivi-
ties continue, and sometimes the
supper is given to friends and rela-
tives in the house of the family.

...
to carry the bride away at once. Her family tries to keep her for awhile. A quarrel then arises between the female relatives of the bride and those of the bridegroom, and the two groups curse and beat each other. The origin of such sham fights is definitely obscure, but they could be a ceremonial expression of the bride's reluctance to leave her family, or derived from the antagonism of different social groups. Eventually, one of the male relatives of the bride intervenes, and an assigned woman—in some cases a slave girl or an ex-slave woman—usually lifts the bride to her shoulders and hurries down the street towards the bridegroom's house, preceded by boys carrying lanterns to show her the way. She is followed by the bridegroom's people, who cheer and brandish their sticks, and by some of the bride's family who beg her not to take away their girl so fast. The final destination is the bridegroom's house; there the bride is carried to her room by the same

woman, who will not leave until the husband comes and puts his right toe on her right toe. The woman then says to him: "I will sell you this girl; how much will you give for her?" He replies, "I will pay you gold equal to her weight." The woman then expresses satisfaction and leaves them alone (no sum having actually been paid). Although the wedding rituals and festivities last for days to come, taking the wife to the husband's house marks the transition to married status and the beginning of a new life.

In conclusion, admir discs, like other ornaments, could function as embellishments of the wearers, protection against bad fortune, or as a form of investment. For a Swian woman, however, the admir plays a more important role in the transition from unmarried to married life, or the transition from a virgin to a fully grown responsible woman. It marks symbolically the most important event in her life: the passage to womanhood.

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Nigeria." His areas of interest include African art and material culture, African folklore (verbal and visual), museum work, and painting and graphic design.

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