Textiles in the world of Islam played a major economic, religious, social, historical, and political role. Although the heirs of the textile traditions of the Byzantine and Sasanian civilizations, Muslim, particularly Arab designers and weavers, created original techniques, types, and designs. These creations were admired in the West as well as in the Islamic lands from Spain to Iran, Central Asia, and India. Textiles were major trade items, barter, and a means of the transfer of decorative motifs. Thus, they were a primary source of revenue for the state. They were investments and assets, easily traded as money and passed on as an inheritance. Textile production was usually carefully regulated and heavily taxed throughout the process.

Clothing from the simplest to the most luxurious was evidence of social, political, and religious status. Robes of honor bestowed by a ruler were coveted rewards and a mark of social status. Foreign envoys were also rewarded with such gifts. Troussous and downes were made of textiles. They were the furnishings and bedding for home and palace. Walls and floors were covered with splendid, colorful curtains, hangings, pillows, and carpets. Sumptuous tents became temporary pavilions and served as quarters on hunts, picnics, and even military expeditions. Important government documents were often encased in textile sleeves. Household utensils were made of woven stuffs as well as animal trappings. The many categories, and varieties of Muslim textiles are recorded in original textual sources where the types of textiles and weaving center are cited. Unfortunately, not enough of the surviving medieval textiles can be matched to the names recorded in the sources or the cities where they were woven. The publications based on original medieval texts by R.B. Serjeant and S.D. Gotein’s Geniza studies have contributed substantially to our knowledge of medieval Islamic textile terms.

Textile arts date back at least to about nine millennia. Numerous archaeological excavations have unearthed extraordinary examples in Egypt, Turkey, China, Siberia, Syria, and other lands. The finds from Palmyra, Halabiyeh and Dura-Europos were published by Rodolphe E. Pfister. He was a Swiss chemist and amateur of textiles with a specific interest in dye analyses, particularly of pre-Islamic Syrian and Egyptian textiles.

Fifty-seven packages of textiles were his legacy to the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, and in a sense that legacy is an “archaeological” collection. The pieces were either purchased in Cairo antique shops or given to him by the Cairo Museum where he had carried out dye analyses at the request of that organization. They are representative of textiles purchased
in Egypt by many collectors or museum curators in the earlier part of this century before
the export of antiques was prohibited by the Egyptian authorities. The types represented in
this study can be found in many museums and private collections in Europe, the Near East,
India, and the United States. Rarely are complete objects found because most fragments
consisted of the best remaining section of the textile that had been cut out for sale in the art
market. This reprehensible custom has left few ‘‘whole’’ garments or other flat textiles from
the medieval period.

By a fortunate coincidence Mlle. Corru learned of the existence of the Pfister collection
while on a visit to the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana to study Islamic manuscripts. With
considerable research skill, great devotion, and five years of intensive work, she has seen the
project through to completion. Her competence was in the Islamic field both as a historian
and epigraphist. Her competence is underlined by the frequent references to original sources
in the text.

Only textiles with a ‘‘proto’’ or Islamic origin were selected for study from the collection.
M. Pfister had published summarily many of the pieces in this book. Mlle. Corru decided
to include both published and unpublished textiles from his collection. Recent archaeological
finds dating to the ninth to the eleventh centuries came from French excavations at Istabil
Antar in Fustat (Old Cairo). They were comparisons used to arrive at new attributions and
dating for some of the Pfister pieces. Rag deposits from the site were dated to the ninth and
eleventh centuries. Mlle. Corru was able to study these Fatimid pieces. It would be useful
to the field if they were to be published. Parallel pieces were examined by her in collections
in Europe, Cairo and the United States. Some new dye analyses were carried out, and a
complete technical analysis was made for each piece, many by Mlle. Valansot. She also drew
the technical charts of the weaving structures. Mlle. Meyer examined the yarns of some of
the pieces, and other colleagues and institutions helped with examinations of metals and
dyes.

Each fragment was given a complete and thorough cataloguing. Museum and Pfister
inventory numbers are noted. A technical analysis, pattern description, condition report,
inscriptions and terms are elaborated. Comparative material in other collections and media
is perceptively used for attribution and dating. Bibliography and copious footnotes complete
the entries. Photographs of each textile, some with details, are with few exceptions clearly
printed with good contrast. However, there are motifs pointed out in the text that are very
difficult to discern in the plate. A few handsome color plates are supplied.

After a brief introductory section, the text is divided into two sections. The first is an
extensive discussion of each textile. Two glossaries for general and technical terms, a notice,
brief chronology of selected Muslim rulers mentioned in the next, an annex, and a concord-
ance complete this part. The second section is devoted to photographs, sketches of decorative
motifs, maps, weaving charts, and a concordance.

Textiles are grouped somewhat chronologically by type into proto-Islamic, early Islamic,
Yemeni, Fayyum, Abbasid, Fatimid, Mamluk, ‘‘printed’’, and straps/belts. The Pfister
collection is not representative of the complete range of Islamic textiles but includes the types
common to or imported into Egypt from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries.

This reviewer agrees in general with the attributions and chronology with one minor
exception to be discussed below. A great contribution is the author’s attempt to characterize
the weave, pattern, color, and make comparisons for each group. It is, however, painstaking
to select these characteristics from the entries where they are scattered between attribution,
comparative material, and footnotes. It would have been helpful to have had a brief sum-
mary at the end of each section to highlight the major trends in the development of style and
technique, especially for the early and medieval period. It is, however, almost impossible to
recreate the original position of the fragments in a complete piece. The reviewer will attempt
to summarize some of the general features noted in each category. Comments on the
technical analyses and weaving diagrams cannot be made until such analyses for com-
parative textiles are published.