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Tasseled Garments in the Ancient East Mediterranean¹

by

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“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to make a tassel (*tsitsit*) on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put on it a twined cord (*pātil*) of blue. And it will be a tassel for you to see so that you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and will obey them, and will not follow your heart and your eyes which you go whoring after; so that you will remember and obey all my commandments, and will be holy unto your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to become your God.’ ” Numbers 15:37-41.

Thus we read in Numbers how the children of Israel were commanded to wear a tassel on the corners of their garments. (I have translated the word as “tassel” rather than “fringe” to express a flower-like form, for other words which seem to come from the same root are used to refer to flowers, as in Isaiah 27:6 and 28:1,4). There is a similar commandment in Deuteronomy 22:12: “You shall make for yourself twisted cords (*gēdīlīm*) on the four corners of the covering with which you cover yourself.” In this verse the word for tassel is not used. It is possible, though, that *gēdīlīm* meant the same as *tsitsit*, the *gēdīlīm* (twisted cords) constituting each *tsitsit* (tassel). The *pātil* (twined cord) could be one of the *gēdīlīm*, for the roots of both words may signify “twisting.”

However, it is possible that the appendage described in the passage from Numbers was different from the one described in Deuteronomy. They may have belonged to different historical periods, or they may represent different styles within the same historical period (i.e., the appendage described in Numbers may have been a flower-like tassel, while the one described in Deuteronomy may have consisted of but one or a few cords).

There is another difference between the two descriptions. In the passage from Numbers a cord of blue is specified, whereas in the passage from Deuteronomy no color is mentioned. Because no one cord is singled out it is possible that all the cords described in Deuteronomy were to be of the same color. The color may not have been specified because it was not significant or because certain colors were customary for such appendages. Also it is possible that in Deuteronomy knowledge of this cord of special color was assumed.

1. During the research for this paper the writer found a brief discussion of the topic in *Views of the Biblical World*, edited by Drs. Mazar and Avi-Yonah, International Publishing Company, Jerusalem-Ramat Gan, Israel, vol. I, 1958, p. 280. Two color photographs are included, one of the statue of Puzur-Ishtar, the other of the painting depicting the governor of Tunip.

Garments with Cord Fringes

A wealth of material is available from works of art of the ancient East Mediterranean to which we can compare these Israelite garment features. One example is the statue of Puzur-Ishtar (from the time of Ur III, ca. 2060-1955 B.C.), governor of Mari (see J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, plate 433). A garment with cord fringes is also worn by an Asiatic from the days of Sen-Usert II (ca. 1897-1878 B. C.) depicted in a wall painting from the tomb of Khnum-hotep II at Beni Hasan (see G. Ernest Wright and Floyd V. Filson, *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, Philadelphia, 1956, p. 23, fig. 9 bottom left). On a glazed tile from the 18th Dynasty, probably from the reign of Thut-mose IV (near the end of the 15th century), an Egyptian wears such a garment while he drives his chariot (see William C. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt*, vol. II, 1959, color photograph as cover design with discussion on p. 167). And on a painted vase from Mycenae (Late Helladic III) bearded warriors are shown, each of whom wears a short loin-cloth with cord fringes along the bottom edge (see H. L. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments*, Macmillan, 1950, pl. III., la-b).

Evidence of Tassels

There is some evidence from glyptic art that in the second millennium B. C. tassels were worn along the borders of garments. This may be the case on two Minoan seal stones, one from Middle Minoan III and the other from Late Minoan II, both of which seem to depict female deities (see Christian Zervos, *L'art de la Crete, Néolithique et Minoenne*, Paris, 1956, pls. 651c and 634 respectively). However, it is very difficult to determine whether the ornaments on the garments are real tassels (i.e., appendages consisting of loose cords bound together) or whether they just have the shape of tassels. Indeed, there may be much evidence in Mesopotamian cylinder seals of even the third millennium B.C., but again one cannot be sure of the exact nature of the glyptic details.

Turning to literary evidence we find that plaited pendants are spoken of in Homeric epic (I am grateful to Dr. Cyrus Gordon for calling this to my attention). In *Iliad* 2:445-449 the chiefs of the Achaeans marshal their men.

“. . . and with them was grey-eyed Athena,
Holding the precious aegis, ageless, immortal,
From which hang a hundred pendants all-gold,
All carefully plaited, and each worth a hundred oxen.”

In other lines of the *Iliad* as well (5:738, 15:229, 17:593, 18:204, and 21:400) the aegis is described as having pendants, and in 14:181 Hera is described as girding herself with a girdle furnished with a hundred pendants.

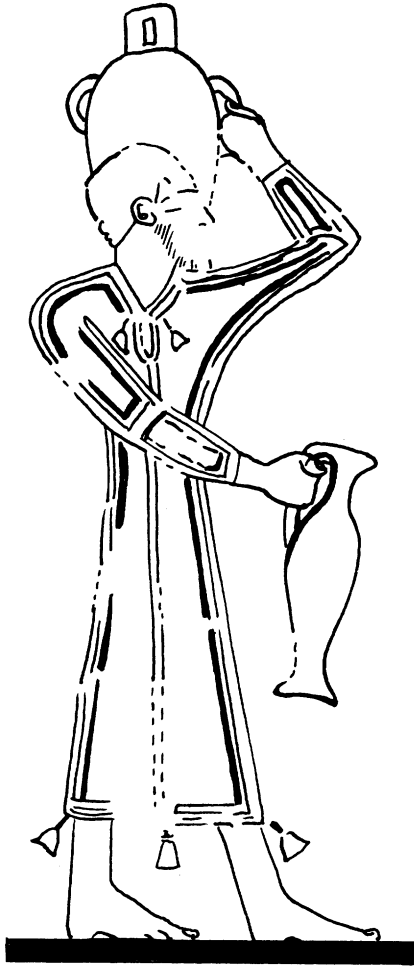


Fig. 16. The garment of one of the Syrian bearers of tribute. After Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-rē' at Thebes*, vol II, pl. XXII, the third figure from the left in the top register. The drawings have been prepared by Miriam Bertman, the author's mother.

From Assyrian art of the ninth century B.C. there are many examples of tasseled garments. On a bas-relief from Nimrud (British Museum, Nimrud Gallery, no. 40; see Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 617) the garments of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B. C.) and his protective genius are both adorned with tassels. The protective genius also wears a couple of tassels around his neck. In other reliefs (British Museum, Nimrud Gallery, nos. 2 and 20) the king as well wears two tassels around his neck.

“On the Corners of Their Garments”

So far we have spoken of cord fringes and tassels which, when used on garments, were attached along the border(s). But an important feature of the appendages described in Numbers and Deuteronomy is that they were to be attached to the corners of the garments.

From the art of ancient Egypt we find illustrations of tassels attached in just such a way. From the time of Thut-mose III (*ca.* 1490-1436 B.C.) come wall paintings depicting Syrians bringing tribute to the pharaoh (see fig. 16). One series of illustrations comes from the tomb of Rekh-mi-Re, who served as Thut-mose III's vizier for Upper Egypt and whose tomb has shed so much light upon the Egypt of his times through both art and texts. The paintings are reproduced in line drawings in Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-rē' at Thebes*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1943, vol. II, pls. XXI, XXII, and XXIII, and in color in his *Paintings from the Tomb of Rekh-mi-rē' at Thebes*, New York, 1935, pls. X, XI, and XII. The accompanying text, translated by John A. Wilson in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton, 1955, p. 248a, describes the Syrians as chiefs of state. Again, in a painting from the tomb of Men-kheper-Re-seneb, who served as Thut-mose III's High Priest of Amon, is depicted the governor of Tunip, a city-state in northern Syria. The painting is reproduced in color in Nina M. Davies and Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Paintings*, The University of Chicago Press, 1936, vol. I, pl. XXI, and in a black and white photograph in Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 45.

Each of the Syrians in these paintings wears a long dresslike garment which has one vertical band running down each side, and one horizontal band around the bottom edge. Sometimes there is also another vertical band running down the middle of the front of the garment. The side bands divide the garment vertically in half, and the front band, where there is one, divides the front vertically in half.

The Syrians wear tassels attached to their garments. In all but one example (fig. 17f) there are tassels on the bottom edge, either on each side, or only in the front-middle, or on each side and in the front-middle as well. Thus on the bottom edge the tassels occur at quarter-way or half-way points. From a comparison of the lower portions of certain of the garments in figure 17 it may be seen that the presence of a tassel on the bottom edge is independent of whether there is a vertical band or not. What is more basic than the presence of a vertical band is the division of the bottom edge into quarters. For this judgment we must depend upon the reproductions of the paintings. It is possible that before the reproductions were made certain features of the

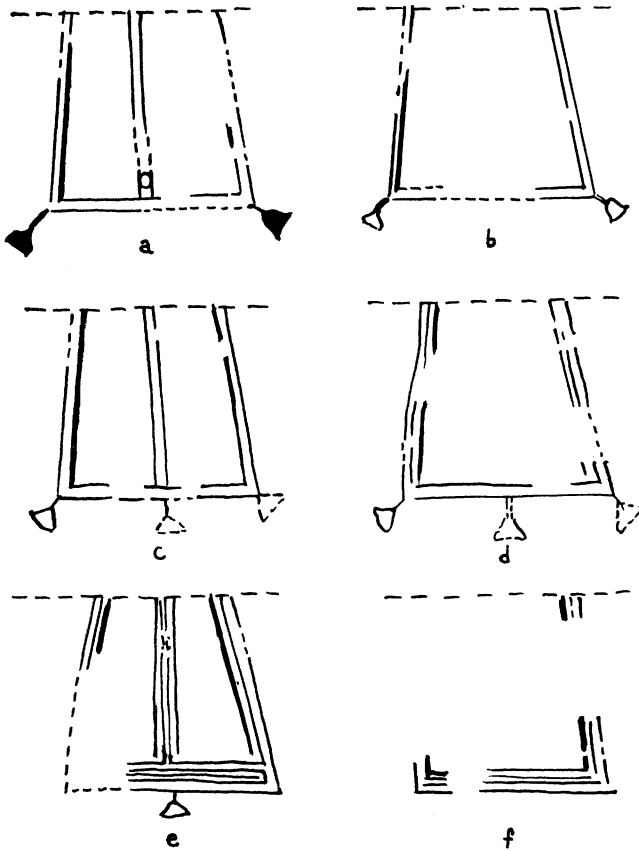


Fig. 17. A comparison of the lower portions of certain of the Syrian garments, showing that the placing of a tassel is independent of whether a vertical band intersects the bottom border. After Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-ré' at Thebes*, vol. II, a and b from pl. XXI, c and d from pl. XXII, e and f from pl. XXIII.

paintings had disappeared, but the evidence now available forces this judgment.

If we consider these quarter-way points to be 'corners,' then Deuteronomy 22:12 may echo this in stating that tassels are to be made on the four corners of the covering. However, in the Syrian garments tassels are not on every quarter-way point, and, because we do not have a view of the back of the garments, we cannot say whether the tassels were worn on the remaining quarter-way point.

An interesting thing we can learn from the paintings is the color of the tassels. In the tomb of Rekh-mi-Re the tassels on the bottom borders are red on

some garments and blue on others; in the tomb of Men-kheper-Re-seneb red and blue tassels occur together in pairs on the bottom border of the same garment.² In the tomb of Rekh-mi-Re tassels are worn also on the sleeves or collars, colored red or blue apparently to contrast with the color of the tassels on the bottom border when such occur. The blue-colored tassels recall to us the 'twined cord of blue' in Numbers 15:38.

From the time of Seti I (ca. 1302-1290 B.C.) comes an Egyptian wall painting in which two Asiatic men are depicted (see fig. 18^a). Each wears a loin-cloth, the bottom edge of which is scalloped and has in front view three corners. Skirts which have bottoms scalloped like these are worn by female figures in reconstructed frescoes from Tiryns and Thebes in Greece (Helmut Bossert, *Alt Kre:a*, Berlin, 1921, pls. 50 and 49 respectively), by a female figure from Mycenae who is depicted in gold plate (Carl Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, Macmillan, 1891, p. 198, fig. 182), and by a goddess on an ivory relief from Minet el-Beida, the ancient port of Ugarit (*Syria*, vol. X, 1929, pl. LVI; and *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 464). From the corners of the loin-cloths worn by the Asiatic men hang cords with tassels. The projections of the scallops have a shape somewhat like that of wings, recalling the Hebrew word for "corner" (used in plural forms in Numbers 15:38 and Deuteronomy 22:12), because another of the basic meanings of this word is 'wing'. Again it is impossible to tell from the painting whether there was a fourth corner on the other side of each loin-cloth.

In an incised relief from the mortuary temple of Ramses III (ca. 1175-1144 B. C.) at Medinet Habu we see five men who were captured by the army of the pharaoh (see Wright and Filson, *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, p. 29, fig. 16). Each differs in appearance from the others either by his dress, or by the style of his hair, or by the presence or absence of a beard. However, both the second and the fourth captives wear the scalloped loin-cloth (see fig. 18^b). It is decorated with broad horizontal and vertical bands, and cords with tassels in groups of three can be seen on some of the corners. The second captive from the right (one of the two who wear scalloped loin-cloths) is clean-shaven and wears a helmet with what seem to be feathers or rope-like cords on top.

This kind of helmet is characteristic of one group of the Peoples of the Sea, those peoples who invaded Egypt once during the reign of Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.), again during the reign of Mer-ne-Ptah (ca. 1224-1216 B.C.), and a third time during the reign of Ramses III (ca. 1175-1144 B.C.). The feathers on the helmet either cover its whole top surface or go around its

2. The writer wishes to express his thanks to Mr. Eric Young, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Egyptian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for his help in ascertaining the color of the various tassels in the Egyptian wall paintings and the date of the glazed tile depicting the charioteer.

perimeter. This can be seen in Egyptian representations where the heads of some of the Sea People warriors are shown full-face or full-rear, revealing that the feathers extended to the side edges of the helmet (see *BA XXII. 3* (Sept., 1959), p. 55, fig. 2, nos. 4-6). Thus this helmet seems to be different from the headdress depicted on the Phaistos disc, the latter being crested (see H. R. Hall, *Aegean Archaeology*, New York, 1915, pl. XXXIII, 2).

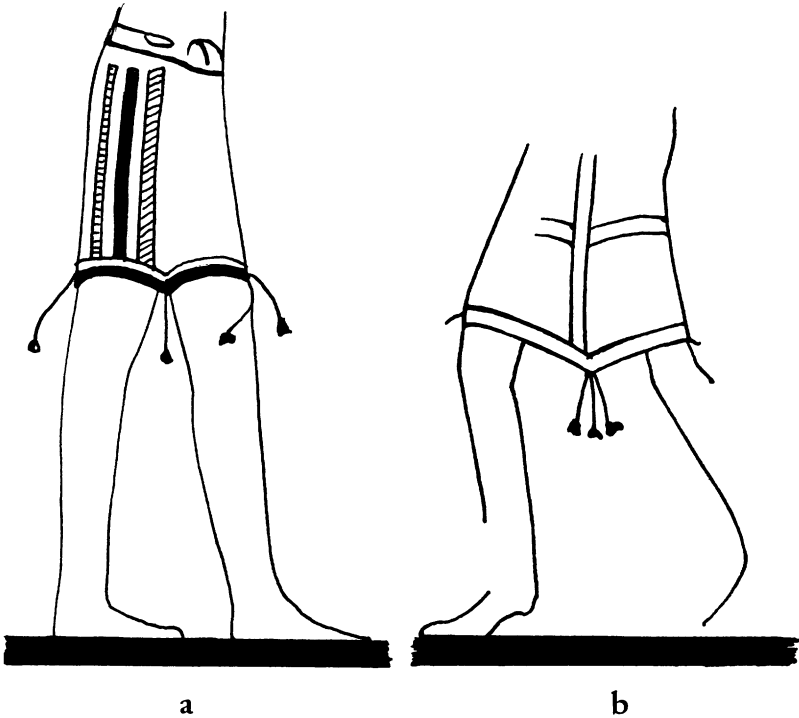


Fig. 18a. The scalloped loincloth of an Asiatic captive. After Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 6. b. The scalloped loincloth of one of the Sea People. After G. Ernest Wright and Floyd V. Filson, *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, p. 29, fig. 16.

One of the Peoples of the Sea was called the *Pelast* or *Peleset*, a people who seem later to have settled on the coast of Canaan and whom we know as the Philistines. Philistine coffin lids bearing representations of helmets like the feathered helmets of one group of the Sea People further confirm this connection and strongly suggest that those Sea People who wore the feathered helmet were Philistines (see G. Ernest Wright, "Philistine Coffins and Mercenaries," *BA XXII. 3* (Sept., 1959), pp. 54-66).

In another incised relief from the mortuary temple of Ramses III we see many captive Sea People (see L. H. Grollenberg, *Atlas of the Bible*, Nelson, 1956, p. 63, pl. 183). They wear the feathered helmet and the scalloped loin-cloth. Three of the garments have three tassels on their middle corner; at least one of the garments has no visible tassels.

In a third scene a great naval battle between the forces of Egypt and the forces of the Sea People is depicted. The scene is reproduced in *Medinet Habu*, vol. I, Chicago, 1930, pl. 37, in line drawing, and also in Grollenberg's *Atlas*, p. 64 bottom; for a portion of the scene in enlarged detail see G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, The Westminster Press, 1957, p. 86, pl. 50. Scalloped loin-cloths with tassels on their middle corners are worn by enemies of Egypt who wear the feathered helmet, but also by other enemies of Egypt who wear a bowl-like helmet with horns.

A striking fact is that warriors fighting on the side of Egypt, whose hair is in the Egyptian style, also wear the scalloped loin-cloth with tassels on the middle corner. These warriors may be native Egyptians or possibly mercenaries. In the account of the Asiatic campaign of Ramses II a people known as the Sherden are described as fighting in the army of the pharaoh against the Hittites at Kadesh (see J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. III, §307). They are said to have been taken captive in battle by the pharaoh. These people, the Sherden, were one of the Peoples of the Sea (*Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. IV, §403). It is possible that some Sea People also served in the army of Ramses III, in whose reign the great naval encounter took place. For evidence that the *Pelast* (Philistines) served after this battle as mercenaries for Rames III see G. Ernest Wright, *BA* XXII. 3.

In the naval battle scene are some warriors who wear scalloped loin-cloths without tassels, and, in the middle of the second register from the bottom, two warriors have tassels on the sides of their loin-cloths attached to the middle band. In the same register one warrior has his arms tied behind his back and wears a scalloped loin-cloth. We see him from the back, and on the back of his garment is a corner with tassels, showing that the scalloped loin-cloth had four corners.

The god Resheph, a Semitic deity not indigenous to Egypt, is often represented in Egyptian art. In a stele from the New Kingdom (ca. 1570-1090 B.C.) Resheph wears the scalloped loin-cloth with two tassels on each side and four tassels on the front corner (see fig. 19^a). In another representation he wears a straight-bottomed loin-cloth with two cords extending from each side of the bottom border, one cord coming from the top of the border and one from the bottom (see W. Max Müller, *Egyptian Mythology*, vol. XII in *The Mythology of All Races*, Boston, 1918, fig. 159). In a third representation (*ibid.*, fig. 158) he wears a straight-bottomed loin-cloth with no appendages.

Thus a Semitic god is sometimes represented as wearing appendages on the corners of his garments.

In his article entitled "An Egyptian Statue of a Phoenician God" (*Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, X.6 (Feb., 1952), pp. 182-187), W. K. Simpson discusses our knowledge of Resheph and notes the likeness of Resheph's tasseled garment to the garments in the Egyptian paintings and reliefs discussed above. He then points out that a tasseled loin-cloth very much like Resheph's is worn by the god Seth in a stele from about 1330 B.C. in

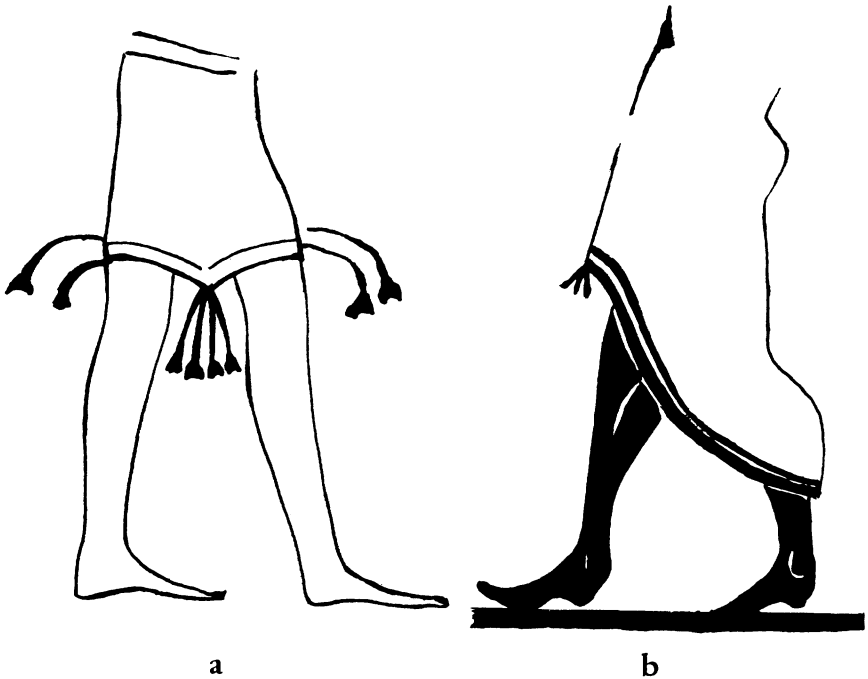


Fig. 19a. The scalloped loin-cloth of the god Resheph. After Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 476. b. The skirt of Hermes from a Pontic amphora in the Glyptothek, Munich. After C. M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience*, World Publishing Company, 1957, pl. 52.

which the god is celebrated as king (see Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pl. 555). Seth's garment, and indeed the person of the god himself, seem to have Asiatic connections, however (see J. A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt*, Chicago, 1951, p. 159).

Our final evidence comes from Greek art. On a Pontic amphora of the second half of the sixth century B.C. Aphrodite, Athena, Hera, Hermes, and King Priam of Troy wear pendants in groups of three and four on corners of their garments (see fig. 19^b); Athena, Hermes, and King Priam upon the

front-center of their skirts; Aphrodite and Hera upon the two extremities of their mantles. And on an Athenian lekythos of about the middle of the fifth century, Hermes is shown wearing two appendages on each of the two corners of his mantle (see M. Rostovtzeff, *A History of the Ancient World*, Oxford, 1929, vol. I, "The Orient and Greece," pl. LXXVIII, 2).

Some Conclusions

We have seen that appendages were worn by non-Hebrew peoples on the corners of their garments. Except for the god Seth and the warriors who may be Egyptian in the naval battle scene, only individuals foreign to Egypt wear quarter-way-point and corner appendages: Syrians, Sea People (some of whom are probably Philistines), the Semitic god Resheph, a Trojan king, and Greek gods.

Concerning chronology, we can only say that the corner appendages make their appearance in the evidence we have studied about the end of the fourteenth century B.C., the quarter-way-point ones about one hundred or two hundred years earlier. That each was in use before the date of its illustration is very probable. Whether they were in use among the Hebrews before their use was commanded we cannot say, except that the injunctions seem to indicate the institution of a new custom.

A more fundamental question than that of form is that of meaning. What meaning, if any, did these appendages have for the non-Hebrew people who wore them? With the evidence we have at present the answer to this question can only be conjectural, for that which has given us light regarding their meaning to the Hebrews, namely literary evidence, is almost completely lacking with respect to their use by non-Hebrew peoples. But there is some evidence from which we may construct a possible answer.

We have seen that the quarter-way-point and corner appendages were worn by gods, by a king, by other rulers (the Syrian chiefs of state), and by warriors. Thus it may be that the appendages were symbols which signified that the wearers had special status. Though the special status of the gods, the king, and the other rulers would seem to be self-evident, it is hard to establish the special status of the warriors. Within this context, though, it would be understandable why such appendages would be chosen as reminders for the children of Israel of God's commandments. For obedience to the commandments was inextricably bound up with the special status of the children of Israel as God's own treasure (Exodus 19:5, Deuteronomy 26:17-18).