

Notes

THE MAKING OF MAIL AT OMDURMAN

When I was Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology in the Sudan, Sir James Mann, the distinguished curator of the Wallace Collection, suggested to me in 1939 that I should try to find out the origin of the suits of mail used in the Sudan, of which a number had been brought to England as trophies from the battlefield of Omdurman.

I soon discovered that *the* expert on Sudanese mail was Hamid Idris, then a venerable figure of well over seventy, but with all his wits about him. He had worked for the Mahdi and his successor Khalifa Abdullahi as silversmith and craftsman, and, unless my memory deceives me, he told me that he had first made mail as a young man under the Egyptian Government before the Mahdia. In February 1940 I went with him to the Khalifa's House Museum in Omdurman and examined all the suits of mail there. These are all made up of individually riveted rings, and for that reason Hamid Idris pronounced them as all having been made outside the Sudan and imported into it 'from the north', i.e. via Egypt before 1885—some of them possibly many years before 1885. He had no idea where they were made. He told me that in the time of the old Egyptian Government there were very many of these suits of mail in the Sudan, every important tribal chief or *melik* having 200 to 300 of them.

Although mail had been made in Omdurman during the Mahdia and before, no-one in the Sudan knows how to rivet rings, and Hamid thought that they never had had that knowledge. Sudanese craftsmen had usually used butted rings, which were imported and which they bought by weight from the merchants Kyriazi and Sirkis. About 10 kilograms of rings were needed to make one suit, and a good suit of that kind sold for £E25 in Omdurman, and more in the provinces. Suits of riveted mail fetched no higher price—which shows clearly that by that time mail was worn merely for show and not for serious defence. There was also a third kind of mail called 'Huksawi' after the ill-fated General Hicks who fell at Sheikan early in the Mahdia. This was made out of imported split rings.

Of the suits of armour in the Khalifa's House Museum, Hamid Idris said that K 99 is of good quality, K 100B of very fair quality and K 100A of poor quality. Suit K 100B has a seal (maker's mark ?) attached, of which the design is an upward-looking crescent supported by a vertical line, on either side of which is another vertical line.

A few days later, having agreed that Hamid Idris should make me a good suit of mail as made for emirs in the Mahdia, I visited his house, where he demonstrated the various stages in making mail. He has taught his eldest son all the secrets of the art. He needs about a half-a-dozen assistants, and these include several of his sons, who, through merchants of some standing, closed their shops and came to work for him at his summons. The men were well practiced in the work. In 1940 they were still making and selling a few suits of mail for Arabs, particularly the Baggara of Kordofan and Darfur. They were also making small pieces of mail like cavalry shoulder-guards for merchants who sold them to tribes like the Ingessana and Nuba. They made my suit in twelve days, probably not working all day, and I paid them £E15 for it as agreed. It is shown in PLATE XII, 2. They also made a suit for the Ethnological Collection in the Khartoum Museum. Their tools are shown in PLATE X, a.

KUSH

The various stages in the making of a suit are as follows:--

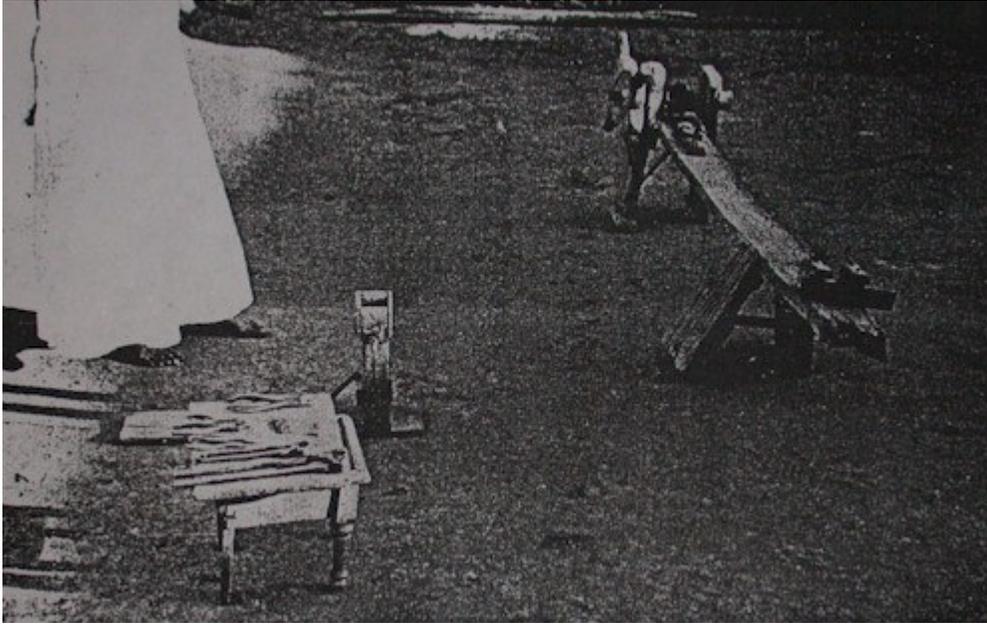
- (1) The wire is drawn down to the size selected by the customer through a draw plate of European manufacture. The drawing tongs and chain are also probably European. Only the draw bench has been made locally (PLATE X, b.)
- (2) The wire is now wound round an iron core or rod giving the desired diameter of ring. This rod is thrust through two blocks of wood fixed vertically to a plank on which the winder stands (PLATE XI, a.) The iron core rod has a ring forged at its end through which passes another rod, probably an alternative size of core. The wire is being wound on to the underside of the core. As it passes on to the core, it rests on a small shelf fixed outside the pipe which lines the hole in the blocks of wood. This keeps the coil tight and the winder does not have to drag backwards on the wire with his left hand. In this way he produces a right-handed coil. In this case the direction of the coil is not important, but in riveted mail the rings have almost always been cut from right-handed coils*.
- (3) A large pair of top cutters is then used to cut the coil into rings (PLATE XII, b.)
- (4) Three men then work together, squatting round a small table. The first man, using two pairs of pliers, closes the gap in many of the wire rings. He first brings the ends of the wire together, and then gives the ring a slight squeeze to restore it to circular shape. (Another man widens the gap in a smaller number of rings.)
- (5) The second man fastens the rings together in groups of five, by clipping an open ring through four closed ones (PLATE XI, b.)
- (6) The third man (the master) clips the groups of five rings together by passing an open ring through a pair of closed rings from each of two groups, and then closing it (PLATE XI, b.) It is in this way that the suit is built up.

Subsequently, I made a number of enquiries aimed at ascertaining whether the riveted mail which had been imported into the Sudan 'from the north' had been made in Egypt, Tripoli, Tunis or elsewhere in North Africa; but everywhere I drew a blank, and am now of opinion that it was not made anywhere in Africa (or in Europe, where it would have been too expensive for the Sudanese market). I am, therefore, inclined to think that it may have come from India, for I am told by Sir James Mann that Lawrence of Arabia failed to trace its source anywhere in Syria or Arabia, although he sought hard for it. I hope that this article may encourage someone else to track this riveted mail down to its source.

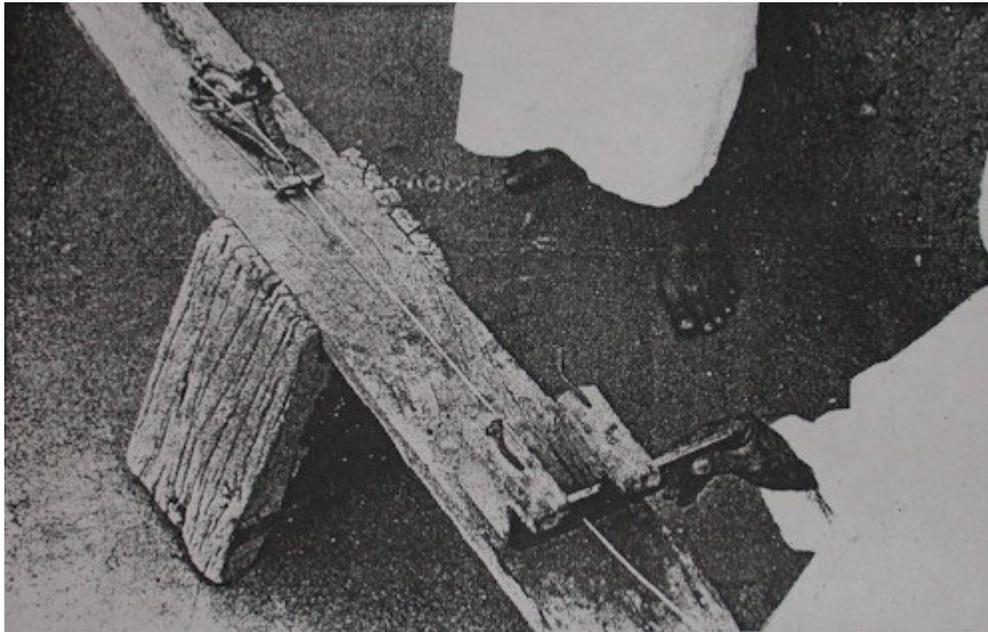
A.J. ARKELL

* Martin Burgess: 'The mail-maker's technique'. *Antiquaries Journal*, xxxiii (1953), pp. 48-55.

PLATE X

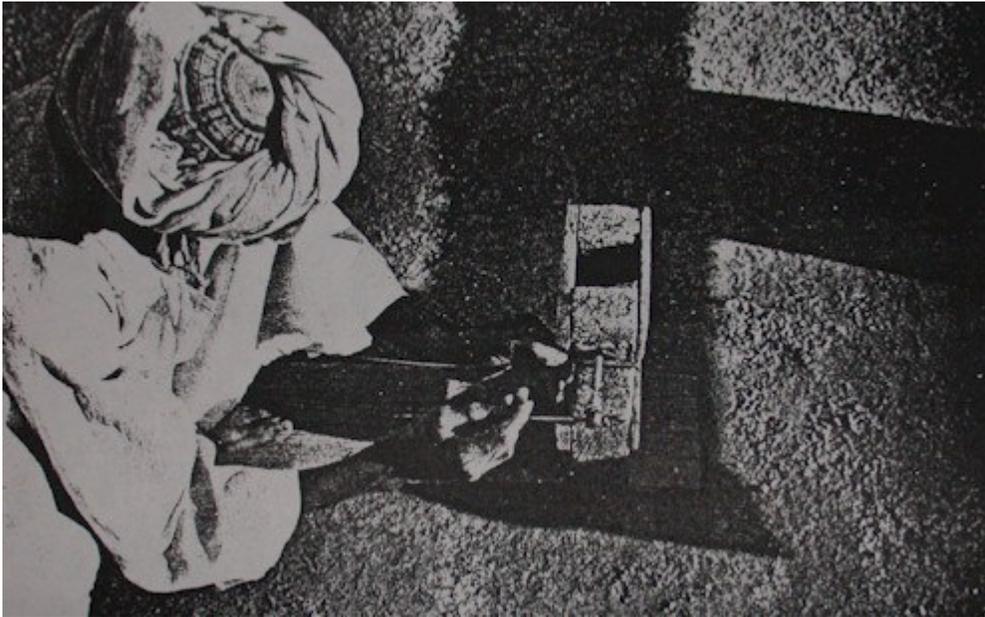


a. THE TOOLS USED IN MAKING MAIL AT OMDURMAN



b. THE DRAW BENCH, WITH EUROPEAN TYPE DRAW PLATE AND TONGS

PLATE XI



a. COILING THE WIRE



b. TWO MEN MAKING GROUPS OF FIVE RINGS, WHILE THE MASTER (R) JOINS THE GROUPS TOGETHER