

Ancient Southwestern Clothing Conserved

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What happened to prehistoric clothing that was excavated from NPS archeological sites in northern Arizona in the 1930s? For the most part, after being taken to museums to be preserved for future generations, many remained in the crumpled state in which they were found, as conservation treatments are time consuming and expensive. Due to creasing, many could not be adequately viewed or studied. In a few cases, acidic mounts were added to display textiles.



National Park Service cotton textiles at the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) before and after conservation treatment. All photos courtesy of Rachel Freer Waters, MNA.

Until now! The Flagstaff Area National Monuments recently received funding to conserve and rehouse rare fragments of ancient clothing from archaeological sites at Navajo, Walnut Canyon, and Wupatki National Monuments stored at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. Funding was obligated through the Colorado Plateau CESU to the Museum of Northern Arizona to hire Textile Conservator, Rachel Freer Waters, to conserve over 300 pieces of clothing from the 1100s and 1200s, ranging from everyday wear to technologically complex clothing with dyes. Now almost finished with the project, Ms. Waters, an American Institute for Conservation Professional Associate, has taken before and after pictures of the textiles, employed a range of cleaning techniques and fiber relaxing treatments, and designed storage systems to provide preventative care.

When the project is finished by 2017, over 300 prehistoric textiles will look almost as good as when Ancestral Puebloans hand-wove them over 800 years ago! The following before and after images are of Wupatki National Monument textiles.



“Before treatment” image of front of 1175 AD sash, WUPA 9.
Notice the hole that was drawn in by someone before it was put on display.



“Before treatment” photo of backing placed on sash, WUPA 9,
in order to hang it on exhibit at the Wupatki Visitor Center in the 1960s.



WUPA 9, after conservation treatment. Notice no more backing or artistically drawn-in hole.



WUPA 9, after conservation treatment, in its new storage mount. Both sides of the sash can now be viewed and studied by researchers.



Fabric bundle, WUPA 19450, before conservation treatment.



After conservation treatment, the various pieces of WUPA 19450 can be viewed and studied by researchers.