

EARLY ISLAMIC RUGS OF EGYPT OR FOSTAT RUGS⁽¹⁾

(with six plates)

BY

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MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I must begin by expressing my hearty thanks to Mr. Gaston Wiet who has kindly given me the privilege of studying the two fragments of carpets, the subject of this lecture, which are in the possession of the Arabic Museum. My admiration of his enthusiasm and zeal for Moslem Art has no bounds. He has infused this zeal into all who have come in contact with him. The great talent and scientific spirit which he exhibited as Director of the Arabic Museum during the past ten years, is fully appreciated by all of us and I venture to hope that by these few words at the opening of my lecture, I express the gratitude felt by all his friends in Egypt.

GENTLEMEN,

The subject of my lecture to-night though, perhaps, of little interest to many, will, I am sure, bring forward the glory of an Egyptian Art of the 9th and 10th Centuries. It deals with an industry which, though known to exist before, as evidenced by the historians El Makryzi and El Yaacoubi who wrote in high words of praise about its produce in El Kalamoun and Asyut respectively, yet only a few specimens of it ever came to light. The industry is «pile carpets».

Several fragments of rugs were found in Fostat. Two of them that were shown to me on a certain occasion, also acquired by the Arabic

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Museum, at once showed their Anatolian origin, both by their designs and material. They were, as a matter of fact, Seljuke carpets of the 15th Century. But the two fragments, the object of this lecture, are quite different to hitherto described specimens, both in material and mode of manufacture.

SPECIMENS.

I. The corner of a carpet. It measures 22×11 cms., is of a dark red ground with a cufic inscription in white.

The inscription is composed of 2-3 words, though legible, yet incomprehensible (plate I).

The rest of the fragment is a part of the border of the carpet. It is designed in two parts: a narrow one made of stripes of green, ochre yellow, dark blue, white, red and ochre yellow colour respectively.

A wider part designed in geometrical lozenges, the main colour of which is red, while the boundaries follow the colours of the stripes. The back shows strong longitudinal threads interlaced by much thinner ones. No knots show at all from the back (see plate II).

II. The second fragment (plate III) is also a corner piece. It is 25 cms. by 14 cms. The design of the main ground is formed of lozenges. The principal ones are of an ochre yellow and dark blue colour. The intervening ones are either green or ochre yellow with a dark red centre; the colour scheme being alternate, that is ochre yellow, dark blue, then ochre yellow again, and so on.

The border begins by a broad dark red border limited medially and laterally by a green stripe. In that part the date سنة ٦٢٥ هـ is written or six and two hundred Hijria which brings us back to the pre-Tolitonide period.

The rest of the border is made up of stripes ochre and red; and a central green cutting two ochre ones, then ochre, green and red again.

The back of this piece is the same as the one previously described with the difference that many of the knots show. And curiously enough they show on the thin weft thread as it dips between two of the strong longitudinal warp threads (plate IV).

MATERIAL.

The pile is made of wool; the warp and the weft are made of flax; the warp is formed of four strong threads; the weft is made of a single thin thread (plate V, fig. 1).

The presence of flax threads in these carpets which were made at a time in which flax textiles and flax industry flourished in Egypt, while cotton industry was little known, proves beyond doubt their Egyptian origin.

THE WEAVE.

The loom for carpet weaving is a longitudinal one. The knots are tied on two of the warp threads in different methods according to the different countries. In some of the old carpets found in Eastern Turkestan and in some of the old Spanish rugs, the knot was tied on one of the warp threads only. As soon as a row of knots was finished the weft threads, one or several, were pressed in place by a special device and a new row started and so on. In this loom the workmen sit on their knees. The carpet started from the bottom and the part that is finished is rolled down to keep it always at a convenient height. Several workmen are always working at the same time on the same carpet. These two fragments could have never been manufactured on such a loom. As a matter of fact I have tried with one of the best experts in Cairo to reproduce a similar piece but we could not do anything as near.

These carpets must have been made on the horizontal loom, which is manipulated by one man using his feet for raising or lowering the warp threads alternately, while with either the right or left hand he passes and repasses the weft threads on which the knots were tied and certainly by the same workman. This must be a very slow process. And the convenient position for him to tie the knots is when the weft threads were presenting to him, i. e. in front; and thus the back of the carpet is free of knots except in the interval between two warp threads where they might show as seen in the second specimen.

That the knots were tied on the weft threads and that that thread

undulated about the warp threads was plainly manifest when a woof thread was pulled out (see plate VI, fig. 1). On this thread the knots were found tied and the thread itself showed the undulations from the pressure of the warp threads. The woof thread of the ordinary carpet is nearly straight.

This technique does not permit of any large size carpets; those that can be produced must be of the rug size (Prayer, hearth rugs or runners). A study of the proportions of the second fragment showed from the width of the border, which is complete, and from the small size of the lozenges that form the main ground, that it could not be of a very large carpet.

I have seen two fragments of textile, one in the Arabic Museum and one in the Coptic Museum which appeared to have been made by a similar process and with a pile cut rather long. They might have been pieces of embroidery but the technique might easily be considered the predecessor of pile carpet weaving.

COLOUR AND DESIGN.

The colours are deep and rich and the combination and contrast are excellent, deep green encircling the deep red, and ochre yellow the deep blue. The designs are geometrical. Straight lines are easier to produce in carpet weaving than undulations and circles which are necessary for the production of floral or animal designs. It is not astonishing that this should be so, although the carpets were made in the Fatimite and Tulunidi Periods when art had attained such high development in other branches, e.g. wood work, porcelain and other textiles. The reason for that is, that it took several centuries to develop the art of carpet weaving from the Archaic design to the Floral type at the end of the 15th Century.

CONCLUSIONS.

1. That carpet weaving was flourishing in Egypt in the 9th and 10th Centuries is now proved beyond doubt.

2. That they were produced on the ordinary textile horizontal loom.
3. That flax threads were used for the warp and weft.
4. That the knots were on the weft thread.
5. That they were of the rug size and could not be very large.
6. That they must be of great durability. The pressure on the back of the carpet being minimum.

Appended report by Dr. I. Ragab Fahmy and description of plates.

ALI IBRAHIM PASHA.

REPORT

BY DR. I. RAGAB FAHMY ON THE CARPETS PRESENTED.

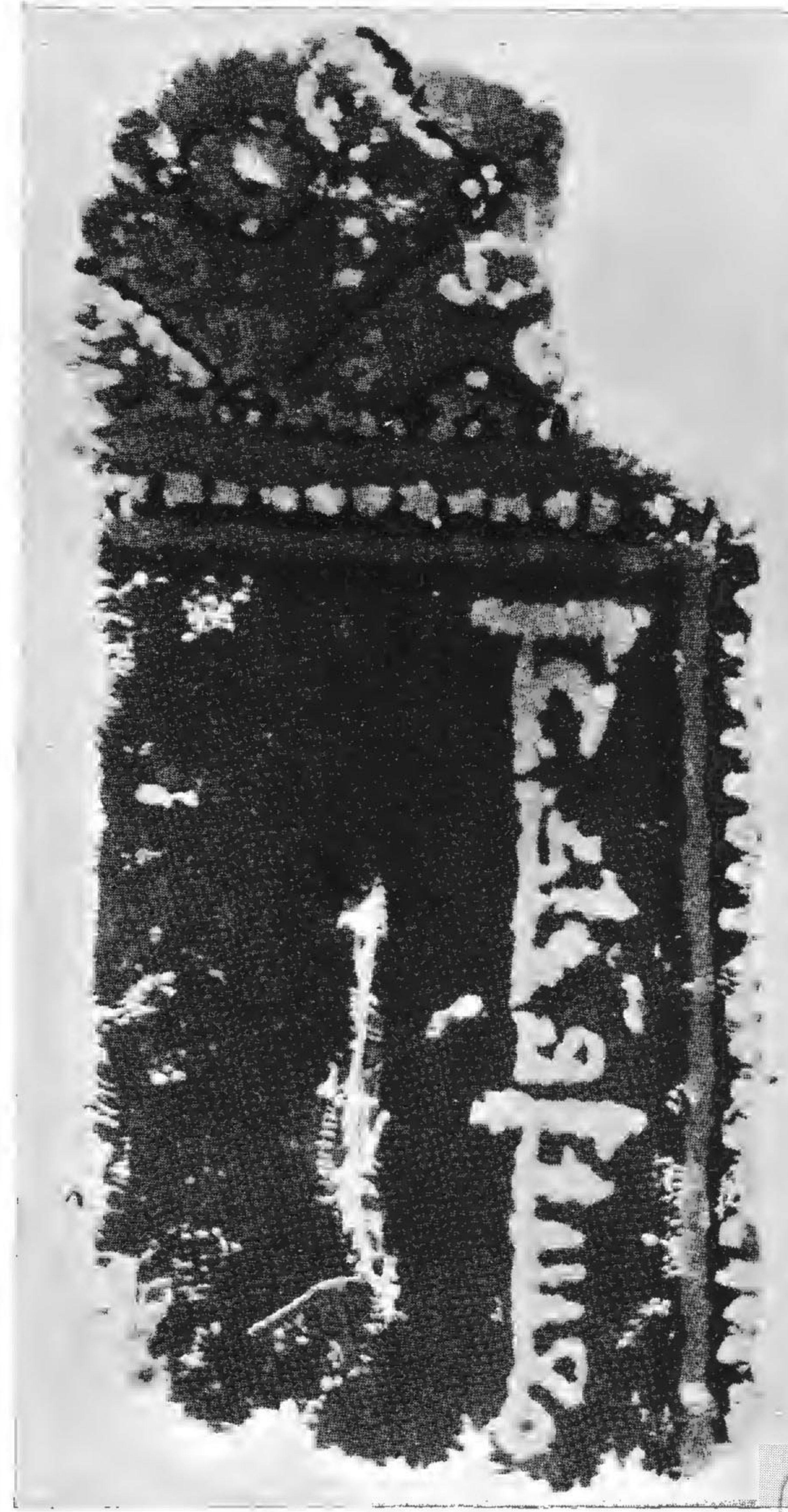
The microscopical examination of the white coloured ground tissue of both carpets, Nos. 1 and 2, shows that it consists entirely of flax fibres which are characterised by their narrow lumen, thick walls and transverse and X-shaped lines produced in the process of preparation.

The filling of the ground tissue which is coloured red, brown or blue consists of pure wool hairs which are characterised by the irregular transverse lines joined by others at right angles to them. Some of the hairs also show a central granular-looking medulla.

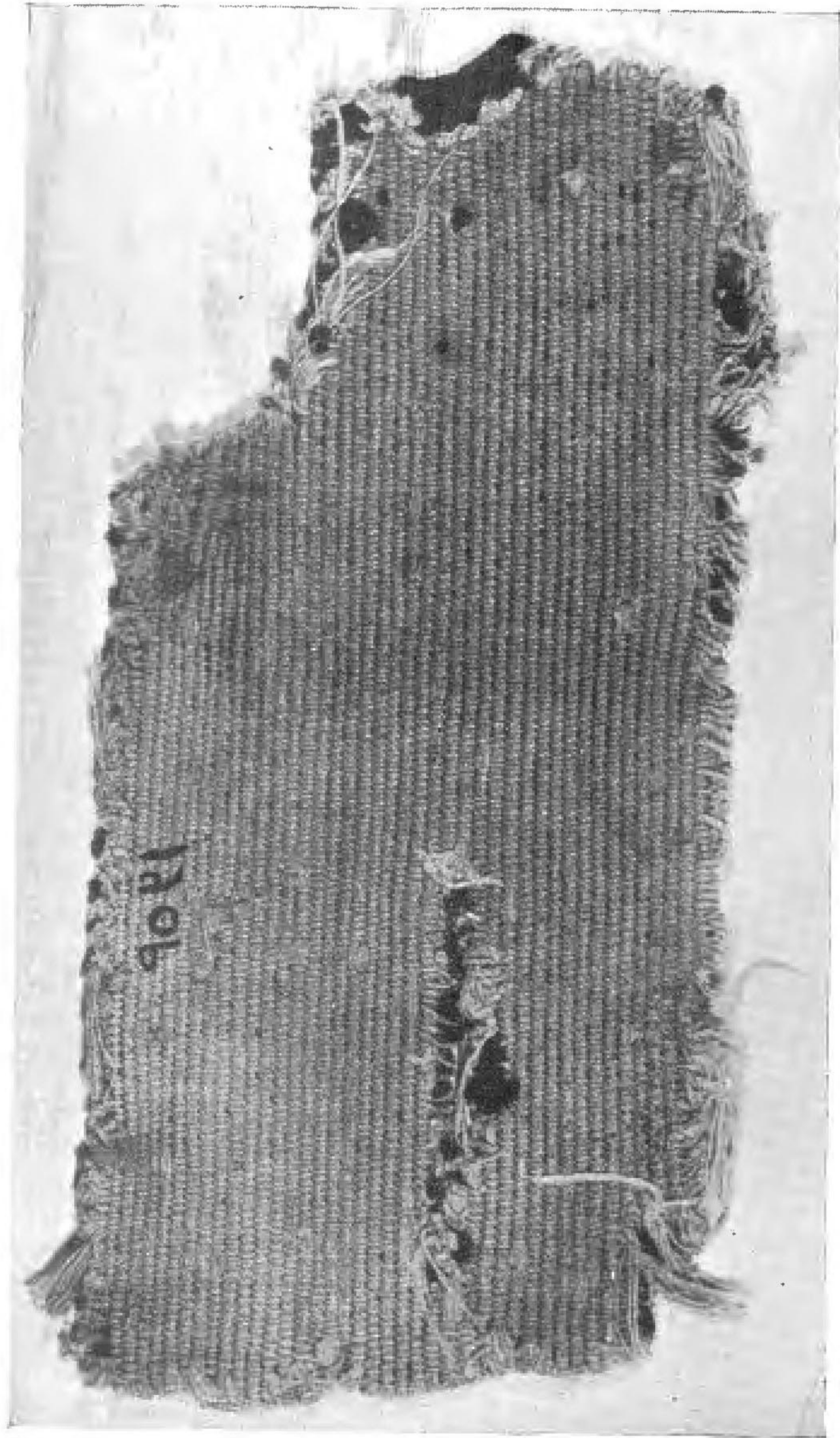
N.B. The colour of these hairs is most probably due to vegetable colouring substances as they were the common dyes used for animal fibres in ancient days.

REFERENCES.

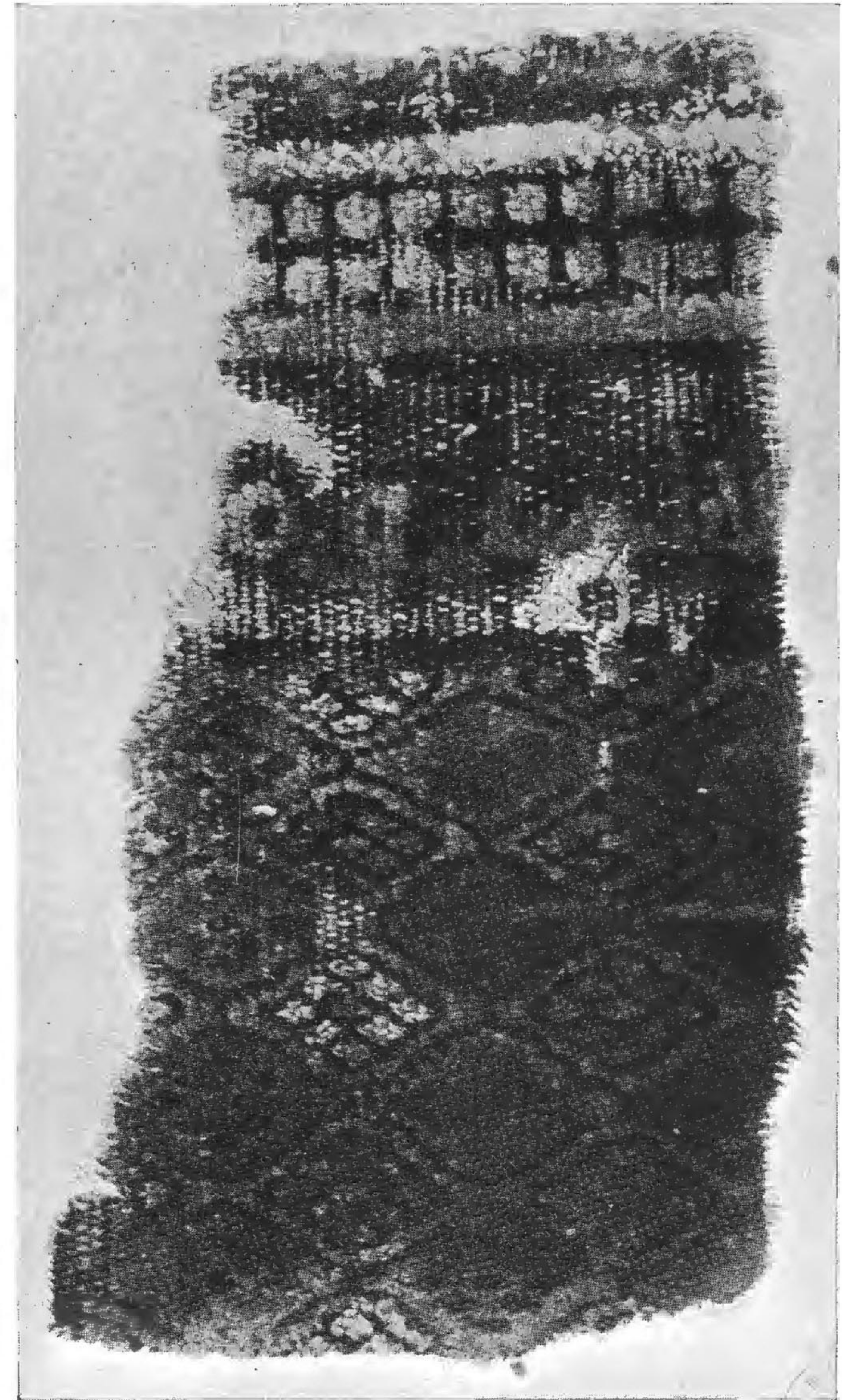
- EL MAKRYZI and EL YAACOUBI, on *Carpets of Kalamoun and Asyut*.
 M. S. DIMAND, *Handbook of Mohammedan Decorative Arts*, pp. 231 and 232.
 G. WIET, *Tapis, X^e siècle*, 2nd Article, *Syria*.



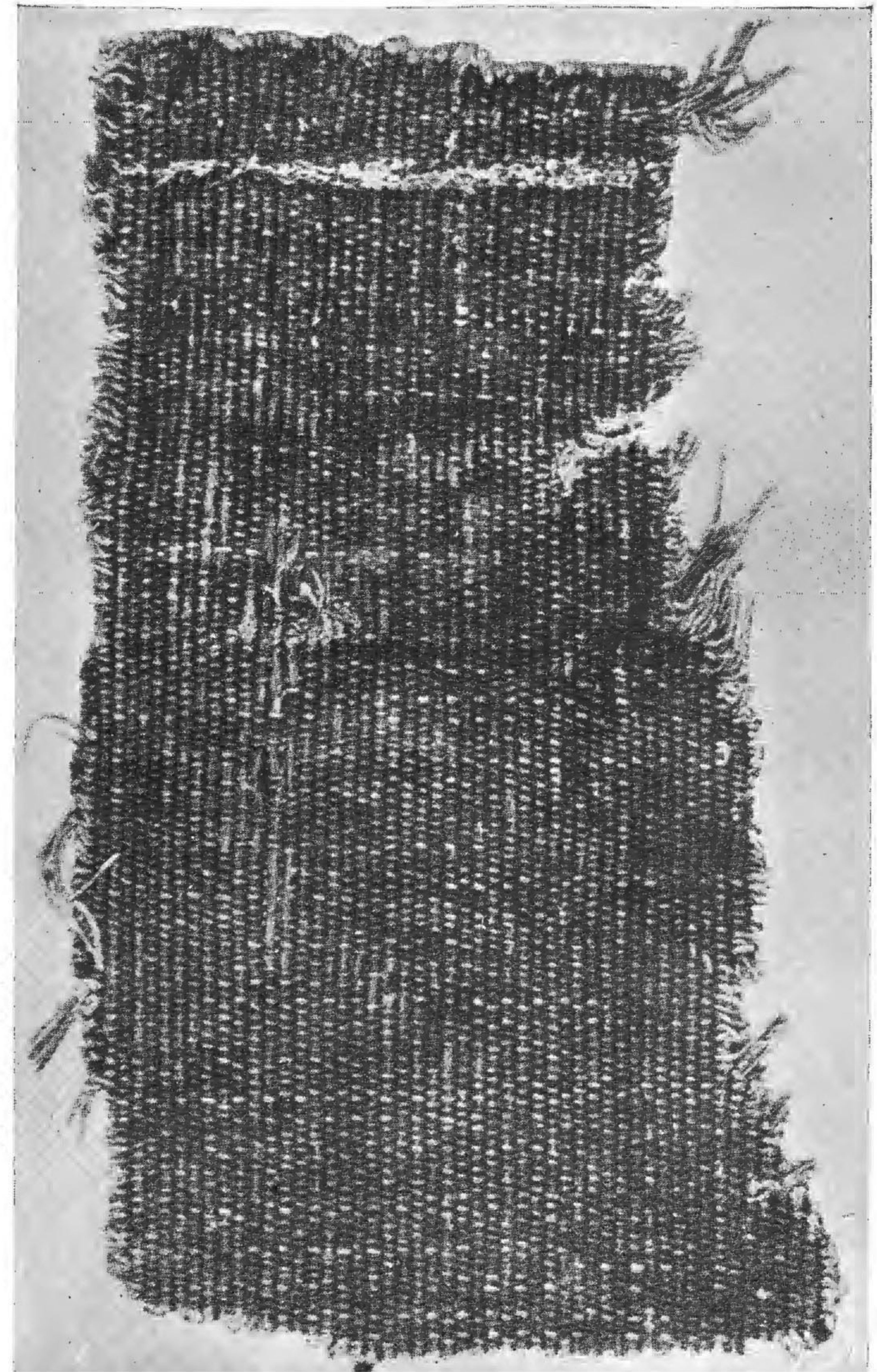
Specimen No. 1 front.



Specimen No. 1 back.



Specimen No. 2 front.



Specimen No. 2 back.

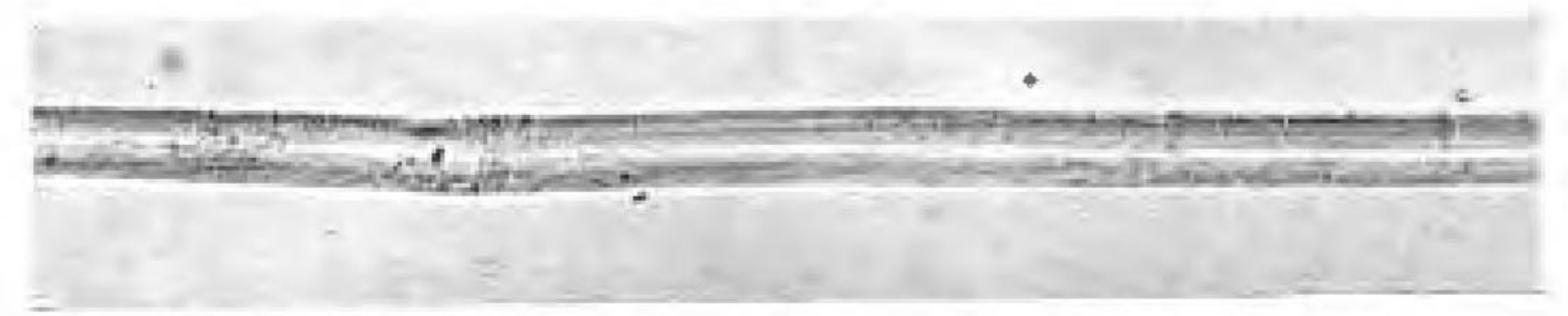


Fig. 1. — Microphotograph flax fibre from specimen No. 1.

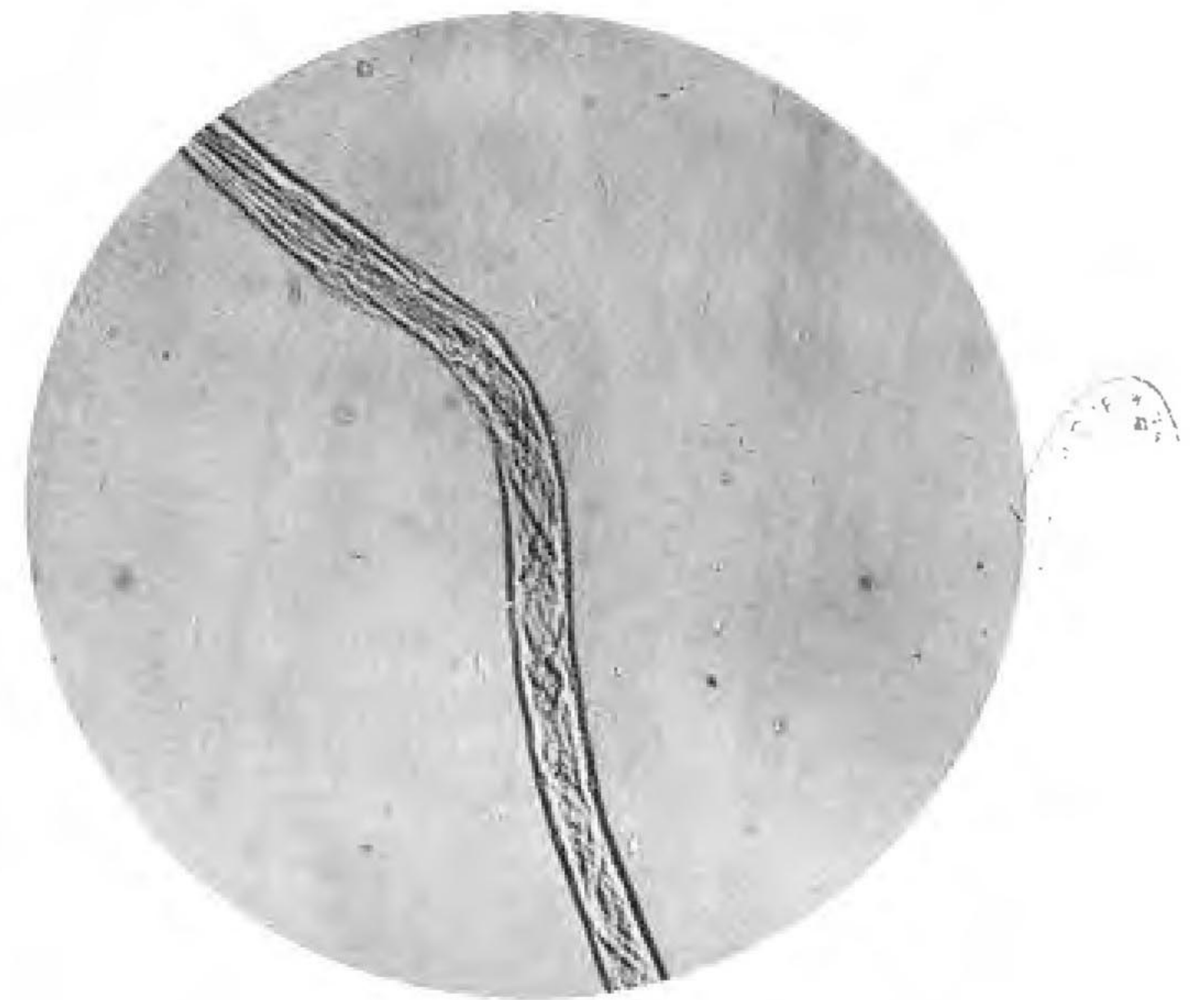


Fig. 2. — Microphotograph flax fibre from specimen No. 2.

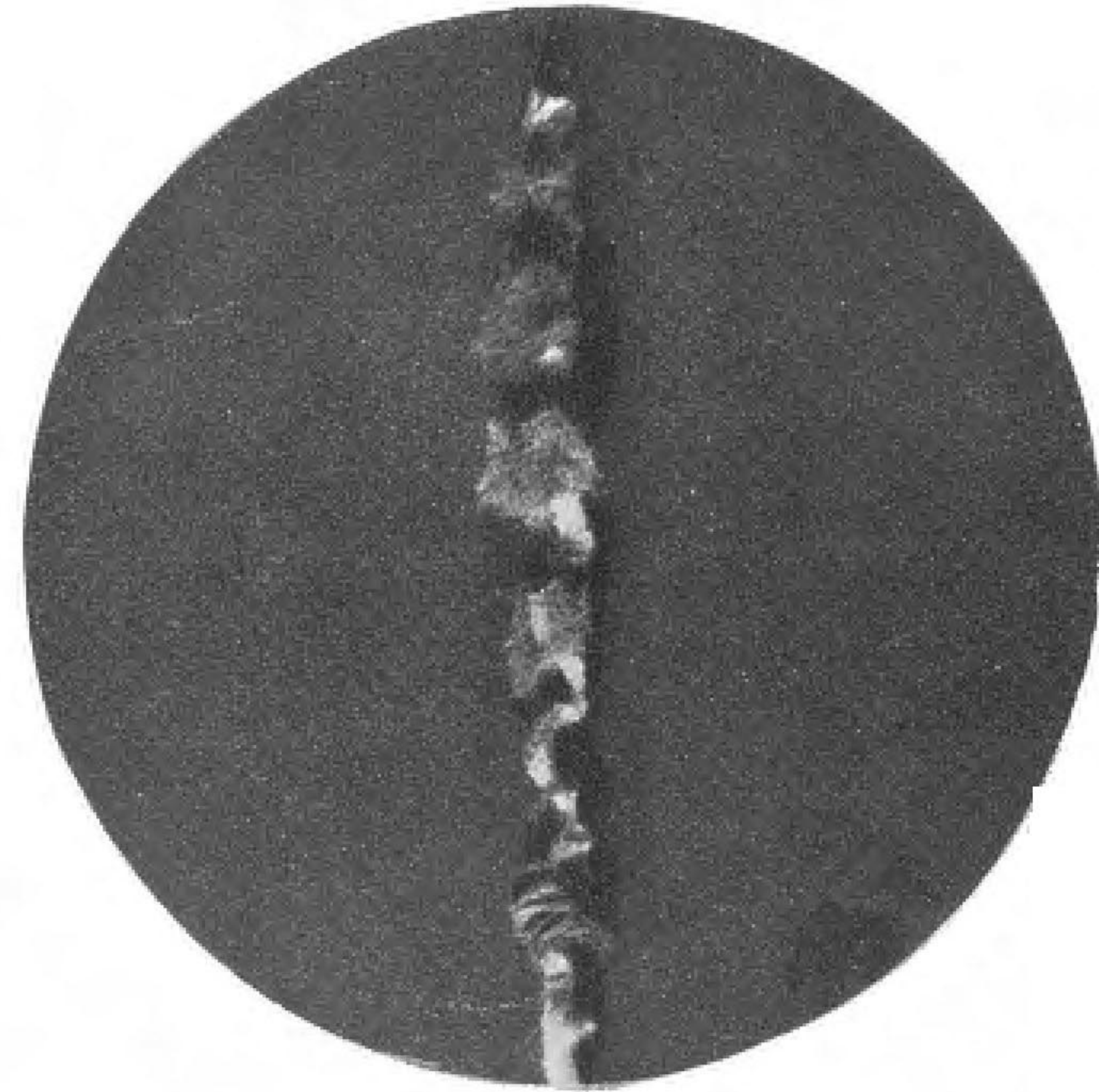


Fig. 1. — Weft thread with knots.

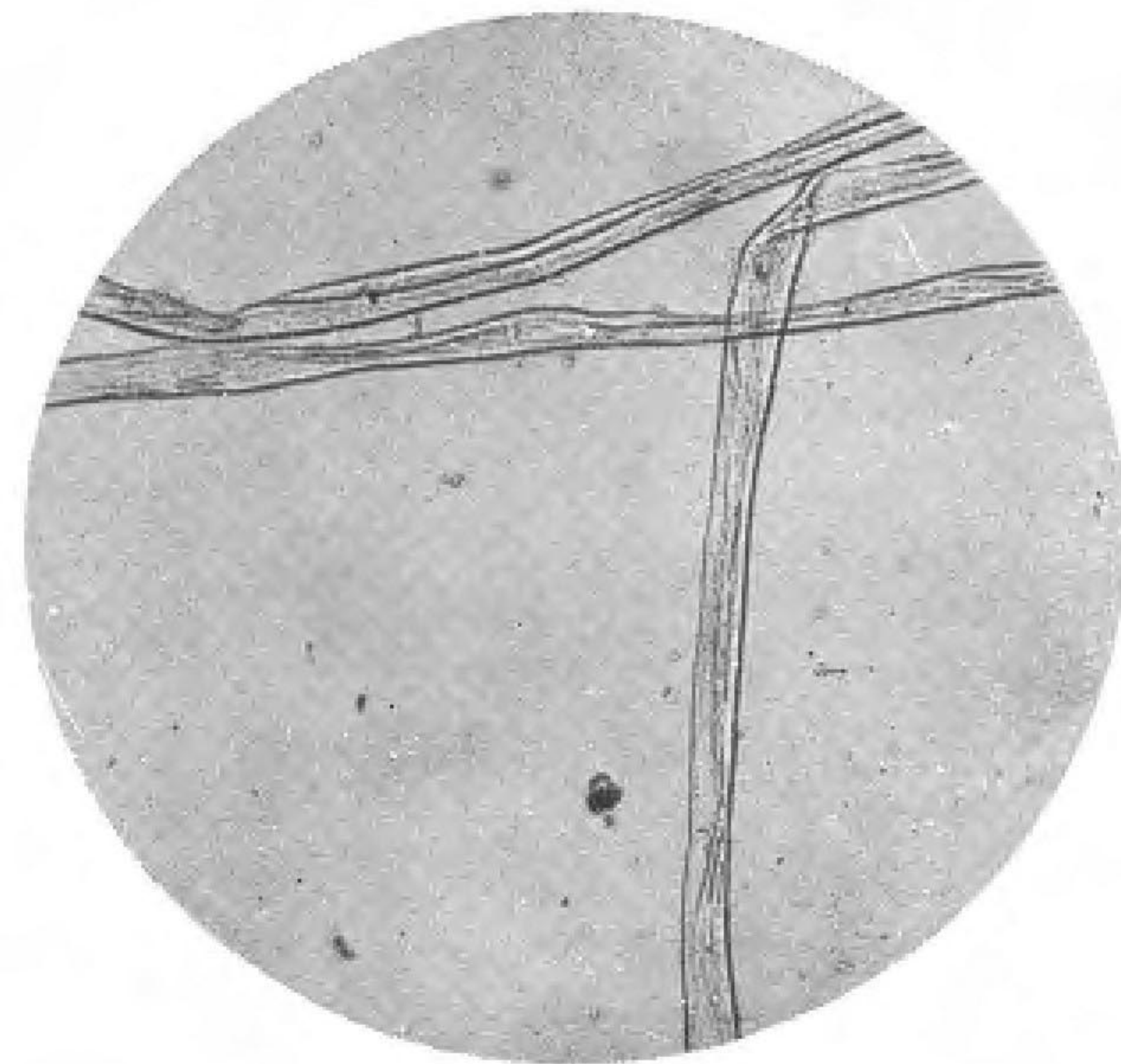


Fig. 2. — Microphotograph of cotton fibre for comparison.