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THE IMPACT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SILK TRADE ON WESTERN EUROPE BEFORE 1200 A.D.

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Introduction

Silk, trade and politics were common spokes in an intricate wheel, propelling Mediterranean influence towards the West. At a time when Western Europe lacked the ability to manufacture silk cloth, Eastern silken stuffs were eagerly sought for secular and ecclesiastical purposes. Byzantium in particular, in return for silks, demanded Western military and naval aid, and her silk trade concessions bore the hallmark of powerful political bargaining counters. The survival of more than one thousand silks in church treasuries of Western Europe, provides unspoken insights into the complex impact of Mediterranean silk trade on the West before 1200 A.D. The purpose of this paper is to explore the broader ramifications of these remarkable influences.

The Mediterranean silk trade spanned economic, political, cultural and religious divides between East and West:

- Its economic impact was reflected by the breadth, scale and regularity of distribution of the silks on the Western market.
- Its political impact was demonstrated by the existence of a 'diplomatic silk trade' allied to a policy of special silk trade concessions in exchange for military or naval aid.
- Its cultural impact was evident in the uses of silks in Western society.
- Its religious impact was crystallised in the widespread and parallel uses of the silks in the Byzantine and the Latin Church.

The economic and political influences were inextricably linked, and these together with the ensuing social and religious influences were spurred along by Western courts eager to rival their Eastern counterparts.

It was not surprising that before the establishment of Latin silk weaving centres under Roger of Sicily at Palermo in 1147, the West should seek large numbers of patterned silks through silk trade with the Mediterranean (Weigand, 1935). Only the survival of large numbers of silks illustrates just how widespread was their distribution across Western Europe (Muthesius 1982 and forthcoming) (Map 1). Over a hundred centres were receiving silks from the Mediterranean region at varying times between the fourth and the twelfth century.

Grouping the surviving silks according to weave

The surviving silks as a whole may best be grouped according to technique and they fall into five main weaving categories:

TABBY, DAMASK, TWILL, LAMPAS and TAPESTRY.

A vocabulary of technical terms explains the particular names used for the weaves (C.I.E.T.A. Vocabulary 1964).

Of these types the twills predominate and the tapestry pieces are rare.

A broad chronology for the different weaving groups is established through a combination of art historical, historical, technological and circumstantial data (Muthesius 1982 and forthcoming). The chronology of weaving types can be expressed in the form of a bar chart (Chart 1).

The earliest surviving silks are damasks or tabbies with a pattern weft and these are found between the fourth and the sixth century. From the sixth century onwards different types of twill weaves appeared, initially with single internal threads or 'main warps'. From the eighth to ninth century these were paired for extra strength (Slides 1,2).

In Central Asian twills the 'main warps' were of gummed untwisted silk, used first in groups of three to four and later in pairs. The change occurred in the eighth to ninth century. The large groups of 'main warps' were composed of sturdy threads and caused the designs on the silks to be particularly stepped in outline, as can be seen on a characteristic eighth to ninth century Central Asian Lion silk at Sens Cathedral treasury (Slide 3). The Central Asian silks are included in this paper because it is likely that some reached the West via Byzantium (Jerussalimskaja 1963, 1967, 1972; Pigulevskaja 1946).

By way of contrast, fine 'Monochrome twills' with designs that appeared incised were popular from the tenth to eleventh century in both Islamic and Byzantine workshops. Delicate 'Monochrome Lampas weave' silks adhered to the same stage of development (Slides 4,5). Tapestry weave was an ancient technique but the surviving silk examples all belong late in date; eleventh to twelfth century (Muthesius 1982) (Slide 6).

Pattern of distribution of the silks in the West

A clear pattern of distribution for these different types of silks emerges from a study of the extant pieces. The first silks, tabby weaves and damasks ranging in date from the fourth to the seventh century, found their way to centres in what today are Italy, Switzerland, France, Holland and Germany (Maps 2,3). Of these, the earliest are two fourth century pieces from the grave of the St. Paulinus at Trier (Slide 7). At Sens Cathedral treasury a two-toned tabby weave silk, woven down not across the loom, has scenes of the story of Joseph accompanied by Greek inscriptions. Peculiarities in these Greek inscriptions suggest the silk was woven in sixth to seventh century Egypt prior to the Islamic conquest of 640 (Slide 8).

The early twills ranging in date between the sixth and the eighth century, follow a similar pattern of distribution to the tabbies and damasks described above. Sixth to seventh century twills with both figurative and foliate, and small scale animal and birds designs, are found in Italy, Switzerland and France (Slides 9,10). Central Asian silks were reaching those areas too, but they survive in concentration in the Lowlands in particular (Slide 11). The early twills with single 'main warps' datable to the eighth to ninth centuries were widely scattered in Italy, Switzerland, France, Germany and the Lowlands (Map 4). It is noticeable that the same holds true of the later silks, the twills with paired 'main warps', and the monochrome twills and lampases (Maps 5,6,7).

Mediterranean trade

How does the pattern of distribution of the silks tie in with what we know of Eastern Mediterranean and of Near Eastern trade routes in general? Documentation for Mediterranean trade between the eighth to tenth century is lacking. In comparison there is a wealth of evidence for the earlier and for the later periods with the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and the Cairo Geniza sources (Schoff 1912; Goitein 1967, 1971, 1983). Heyd (1936) considered that the late antique fairs of Alexandria, Tyre, Beirut, and Trebizond continued into the mediaeval period; it was only the Greek and Roman traders who were replaced by other intermediaries: Italian, French and Spanish merchants initially. In Merovingian Gaul the Syrians traded Mediterranean goods, and Italians at Pavia held silk fairs in the Carolingian period.

Lewis (1978) divided economic supremacy in the Mediterranean into different Byzantine and

Islamic phases. Up to 641 he saw Byzantium holding the important industrial and commercial centres such as Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor and the Crimean coast in the east; in the west North Africa, Southern Spain, and the seaport cities of Italy and Dalmatia. Alexandria and Constantinople dominated as trading cities. Marseilles acted as a Merovingian port connected to the interior by way of the Rhone valley, providing a route for import of Eastern silks in the hands of Syrians, Greeks and Jews living in Gaul. With the Arab conquests of the seventh century some of these centres passed under Moslem control but freedom of trade in the Mediterranean continued. Certainly, the West does not seem to have had a break in silk supply at least from the sixth to the twelfth century, in spite of all obstacles to trade. Pirenne's thesis about the devastating economic effects of the Arab conquests in the seventh century have been challenged on several grounds and the extant silks provide more fuel against his ideas (Havighurst 1958).

Following the Islamic victories, Lewis suggested some return of economic power to the Byzantines by the eighth to ninth century. This was achieved at first through a Byzantine blockade of Arab goods such that Arab trade with Byzantium was permitted only through Trebizond (Lewis 1978, 93). Byzantium tried to channel international commerce via Cherson, Constantinople, and Thessalonika as well as Trebizond, restricting activity in Mediterranean centres under Islamic control. There is no evidence of Byzantine trade with Egypt in the ninth century. From this time on Byzantine trade was placed increasingly into the hands of Italian merchants, who carried Byzantine goods to the West. Byzantium did not take part in the raw silk trade of the Islamic Mediterranean in so far as her raw silk could not be exported. Her interest in the Mediterranean trade was principally for spices and culinary herbs and these she could import via Trebizond.

By the tenth century trade was concentrated in Fustat and at Constantinople and Trebizond. Prior to the Fatimid conquest in 969 A.D., a Greek market at Fustat was mentioned, but how far Byzantine merchants traded in Egypt is difficult to say. The book of the Prefect (Nicole 1970) suggested it was usual for foreign merchants to travel to Constantinople to buy silks. The Italians had special quarters in the Capital by the tenth to twelfth century as did the Syrians, who supplied Byzantium with silks in return for fabrics and other goods. Other Moslem traders were apparently still restricted to Byzantine markets of Trebizond, although it is interesting to note that Egyptian silks could be bought on the open market in Constantinople in the tenth century (Haldon 1989).

Goitein has concluded from more than 1200 letters of Jewish traders, that between the eleventh and twelfth century in general, most cloth was traded across two principle areas. These were Spain, Sicily and Egypt, and Egypt, North Africa, Syria and India. The cloths were largely Islamic, although fine Byzantine brocades also reached the markets of Fustat and were much sought after. His research concluded that ninety per cent of Mediterranean trade was between the Moslem East and the Moslem West (Goitein 1973).

Mediterranean trade was directed to Western Europe through the increasingly crucial Italian merchants, who in their intermediary role carried silks both from the Muslim Mediterranean and from Byzantium directly to the West.

Specific trade arteries in the West

It has been suggested from sixth century coin finds that the early mediaeval trade routes carrying Mediterranean goods passed through Italy across the Alps to Switzerland and up river northwards into France, Holland and Germany (Adelson 1958, cf. Wescher 1947). This pattern fits well with that of the surviving silks. Italy certainly seems to have played a leading role from an early date. Procopius in the sixth century already reported Italian merchants travelling between Constantinople and the Italian shores, in the same way as they carried goods to Italy from Alexandria. More exotic travels were undertaken by the Rhandanite Jews, who crossed deep into Central Asia on their way to China. Central Asian silks penetrating the Lowlands in the seventh to ninth century were most probably amongst the wares that these particular merchants carried (Rabinowitz 1948). Some Central Asian silks may have

arrived in the West at second hand. These silks could have been acquired by Byzantine merchants in the Northern Caucasus, and subsequently have been traded on the open Mediterranean market.

The Ottonian Emperors in particular encouraged trade along the Rhine Maas artery and the ample supply of silks in churches along those riverways attests to the success of the waterways in dispersing silks carried to the West by Italian merchants in the tenth century (Baker 1938; Pounds 1973).

The overall pattern of distribution that emerges from at least the sixth to seventh century onwards, is one of widespread dispersal through Western Europe, thanks largely to Italian intermediaries. In exchange for silks the West supplied principally metals, slaves and, where necessary, military muscle to her trading partners.

The provenance of the silks

About two thirds of the silks can be assigned Byzantine provenance on art historical grounds. The early pieces were probably woven in Egypt before the Islamic conquest in 640. Later pieces were largely the work of Constantinopolitan workshops where silk weaving was concentrated by the tenth century. It is difficult to say what types of silks were woven in provincial workshops such as Thebes and Corinth in the twelfth century.

Islamic silk weaving appears to have blossomed after the conquests of the seventh century and it is reasonable to assume that silk production continued in Egypt and Syria under Moslem rule. There was also silk weaving in Islamic centres in Spain, and numerous centres of the Near East (Serjeant, 1942-46).

Only very rarely did a Chinese silk appear in the West before the thirteenth century. One remarkable exception is a small silk from a reliquary at St. Servatius, Maastricht (Slide 12).

Inscribed silks provide useful pointers to the provenance of some silks. Coptic, Byzantine, and Kufic inscriptions survive on a number of fabrics (Map 8). Most of the Greek inscriptions decorate Imperial pieces sent to the West between the tenth and the eleventh century as diplomatic gifts (Loughis 1980) (Slides 13,14). The Kufic inscriptions belong to a variety of silks only some of which can be linked to specific individuals, such as Abu Mansur of Khurasan (executed in 961). The Elephant silk from St. Josse on which his name occurs, may have been carried back to the West by Stephen of Blois, one of the commanders of the first Crusade (Slide 15). A silk at St. Ambrogio, Milan has the name of Nasr ad Daulah, Marwanid ruler of Upper Mesopotamia from 1010-1025. This piece would have been woven in a royal workshop and cannot have arrived in the West by way of trade (Slide 16). Islamic silks available on the open market were uninscribed and altogether less distinguished: for instance, some unpatterned and other simply striped pieces at Sens Cathedral treasury (Slides 17,18).

Byzantine silks often harked back to classical precedents. Examples are the eighth to ninth century Charioteer and Hunter silks of Aachen and Maastricht (Slides 19,20). This is not to say that Islamic centres did not copy classical motifs; for instance, there were Amazons wearing scarves with Kufic inscriptions. Byzantine workshops also adopted and adapted foreign motifs into their own repertoire as in the case of certain Sassanian elements in Byzantine hunter scenes. It is remarkable that by the eleventh century there was an 'International style' of silk weaving in the Mediterranean, so that Islamic and Byzantine workshops were producing very similar silks. At that point one might expect the West to have acquired an equal number of Byzantine and Islamic silks from markets centred in Constantinople, Fustat and Trebizond; but this does not appear to have been the case. Byzantium required political allies in the West far too strongly to allow Islamic rather than Byzantine silks to reach the West. Jonathan Shepherd has underlined the way in which Byzantium turned to the West especially, for support against the Normans (Shepherd, 1984). No less than sixteen diplomatic marriages were negotiated between Byzantium and the West from the eighth to the twelfth century and marriage negotiations appear to have been sealed with Imperial Byzantine silks, (Muthesius 1990).

The political impact of the Mediterranean silk trade

Byzantium made no secret of using her silks for political ends. She concluded silk trade treaties with the Russ and the Bulgars involving military and naval assistance, just as she did with the West (Lopez 1948, Muthesius 1991). She even courted Islamic favour by trading her silks with the Syrians on special terms in Constantinople, although other Moslems had to buy Byzantine silks at Trebizond. With Syrians she shared the trade taxes levied at Aleppo in the tenth century, her main intent to retain Aleppo as a buffer state between Byzantium and hostile Islamic neighbours (Farag 1979, 1990).

As early as 812 Byzantium began to approach the West with the promise of trade concessions, although her early promises came to nothing. Venice from 742 was an autonomous state and she carried slaves and timber to Syria and Egypt against the orders of Leo V. By the late tenth century, she had become one of the staunchest of Byzantium's allies. Trading concessions granted to Venice by Byzantium spanned the period 992-1198, endorsed within eight major treaties. Pisa drew up three similar treaties in 1111, 1170 and 1192; Genoa also concluded trade treaties between the 1140s and 1192.

Venice at one stage received 4,320 gold pieces per annum from Byzantium and silk trade concessions in exchange for being on call to defend the Byzantine Empire at all times. Venice was on duty whenever Byzantium needed help; in particular against Robert Guiscard, Bohemond, or Roger of Sicily, but Pisa and Genoa were obliged to provide naval support only if they were in the immediate vicinity at times of unrest. Venice received direct trade concessions in 1082 and in 1147/48 in the face of Norman threats. On the other hand, concessions of 1126 were to prevent Venice turning against Byzantium. The privileges granted to Pisa in 1111 and renewed in 1136 were designed to gain support for a Byzantine offensive against Crusader kingdoms in Syria and Palestine, whilst the Byzantine trade agreement with Genoa in 1155 was an attempt to raise support against Norman Sicily. The Byzantine trade alliances with Genoa and Pisa of 1168/70 were blatant acts designed to raise support against the German Emperor. These treaties were turned on their head when Byzantium changed course in 1170 and instead sought a German alliance. Later trade treaties with the Italians were designed to stop piracy in Byzantine waters. An alliance with Venice in 1189 had the more serious intention of counteracting dangers inherent in the launch of the third Crusade (Lilie 1984).

In these various treaties Byzantium manipulated the West: her constant aim was for political support in return for the promise of silk trade concessions. Between 1157-1172, her Italian allies kept her safe in particular from the Norman threat, and perhaps it was the paucity of Byzantine naval power to a large extent that was responsible for the transport of Byzantine silks to the West. Political necessity more than economic desire thrust Byzantine silks on to the West.

The uses of Mediterranean silks in the West

The manifold social and religious influences that the silks imparted on the West can be described only briefly here (Muthesius 1982 and forthcoming). The primary uses of the silks were for court dress, especially under the Ottonians, and for ecclesiastical use. The Papacy in the eighth to ninth century imparted a strong taste for silks in the hangings, furnishings and vestments of the churches of Rome. From Rome the fashion for the use of silks spread to the churches further north. The Liber Pontificalis and church inventories (Duchesne 1892; Muthesius 1982) attest to vast numbers of silks over doors, on altars, around ciboria, between nave arcades, across triumphal arches and in every conceivable corner of the churches. Gospels had silk bindings and sat on silk cushions above silk altar cloths. Pulpits had silk covers as did even the host on the altar. Mass was celebrated in splendid silk vestments and the court attended clad in silk, followed by an equally silk clad nobility (Slides 21,22,23).

All the individual uses of silk, whether for court or civil dress or for religious observance, can be paralleled in Byzantium from the fourth century, so that not only the silks but their uses exerted Byzantine influence (Muthesius, forthcoming). The Islamic silks, fewer in number, were used for burial shrouds of Popes on occasion even though they had inscriptions reading 'Blessings to Allah'. The relics

of saints in the West, just as in Byzantium, had to be wrapped in silks and they were held in silk-lined reliquaries and exposed to the faithful on special days. The rise of the cult of relics was accompanied by the fanatical collection of silks for holy purposes, some treasuries having as many as 500 pieces dating between the sixth and the twelfth century.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean silk trade undoubtedly played a major role in the transmission in particular of Byzantine influence to the West. Not only were the silks economic and political pawns on the Mediterranean stage, but they provided perpetual scope for direct cultural and religious intercourse between Byzantium and her Western allies. Byzantium required concrete assistance from the West, whilst the West seemed hungry for the cultural refinement inherent in the silks of the East. That Western Europe should have been held in this silken web for six hundred years or more bears testimony to the all-powerful impact of the Mediterranean silk trade on the West before 1200 A.D.

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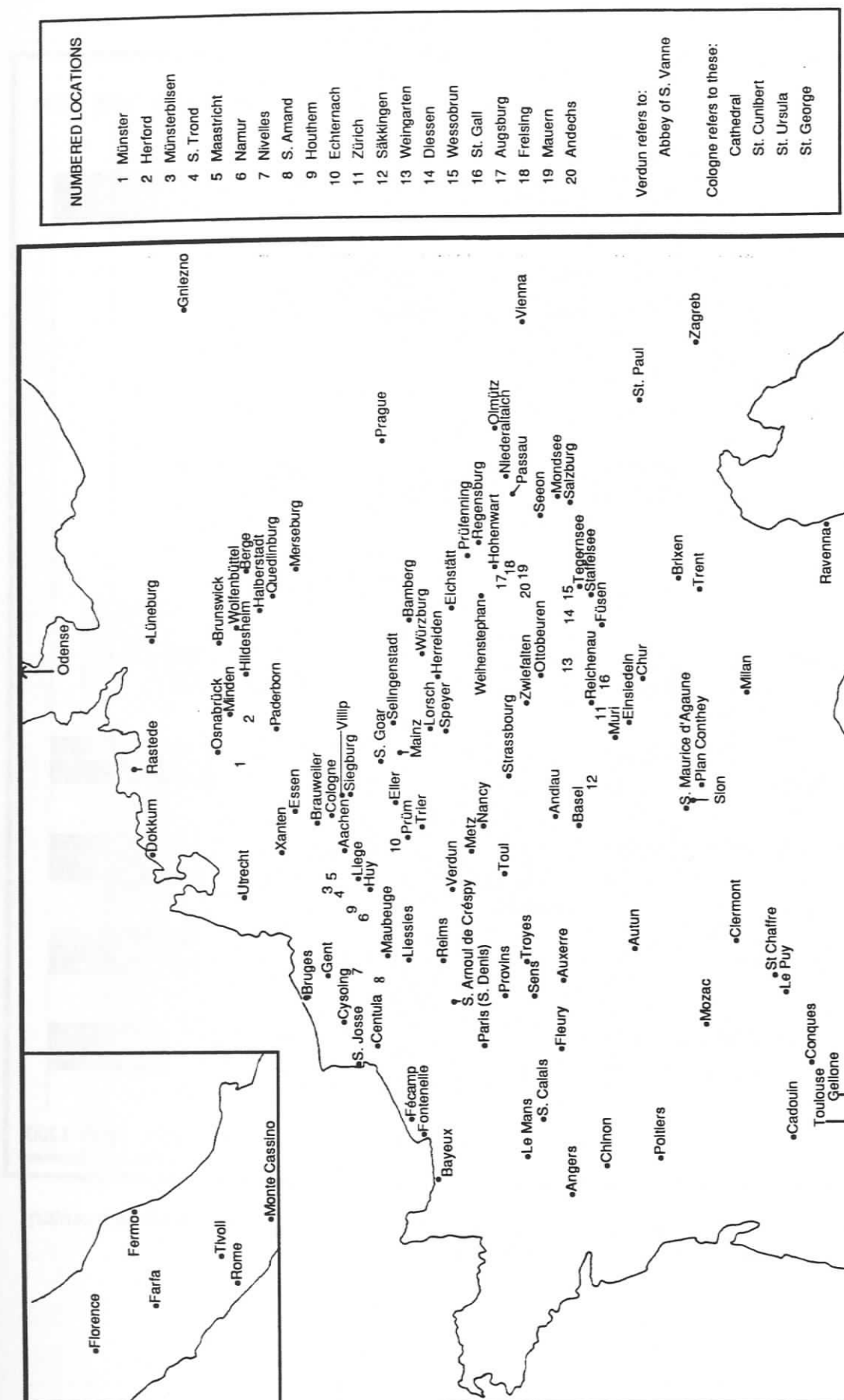
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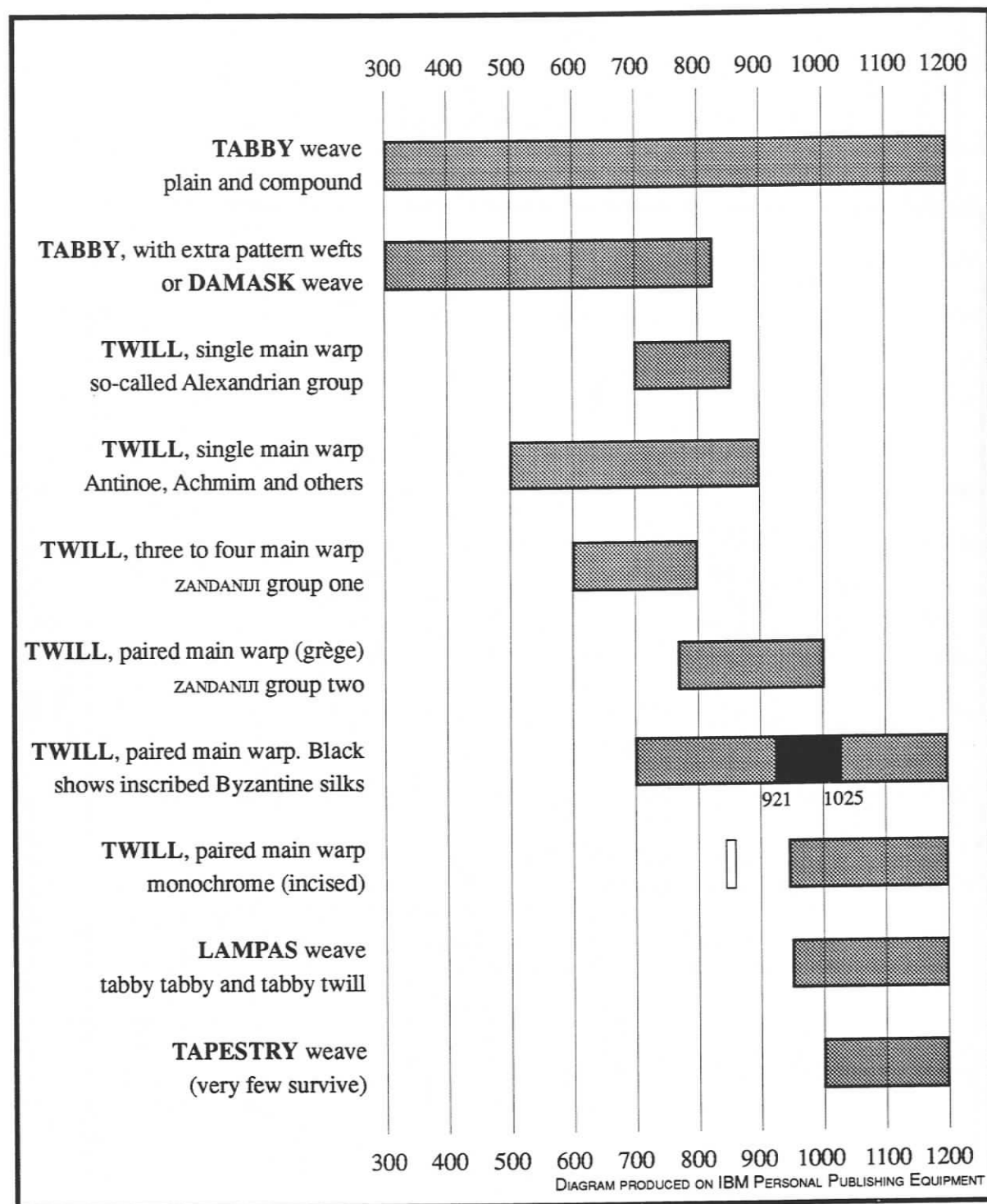
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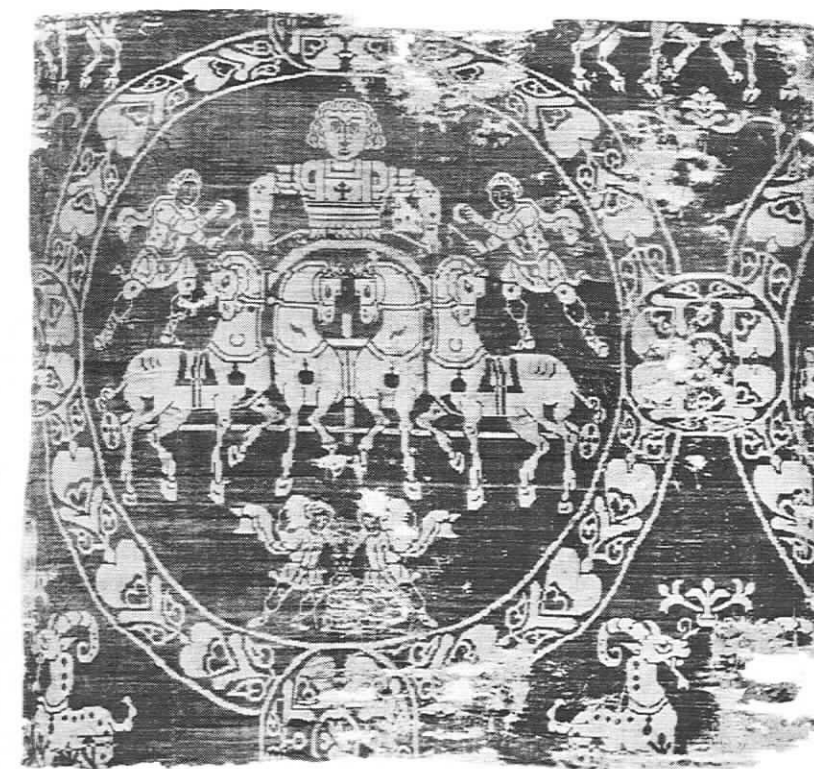
MAP 1

DISTRIBUTION OF EASTERN SILKS IN THE WEST BEFORE 1200 AD: THE MAIN CENTRES

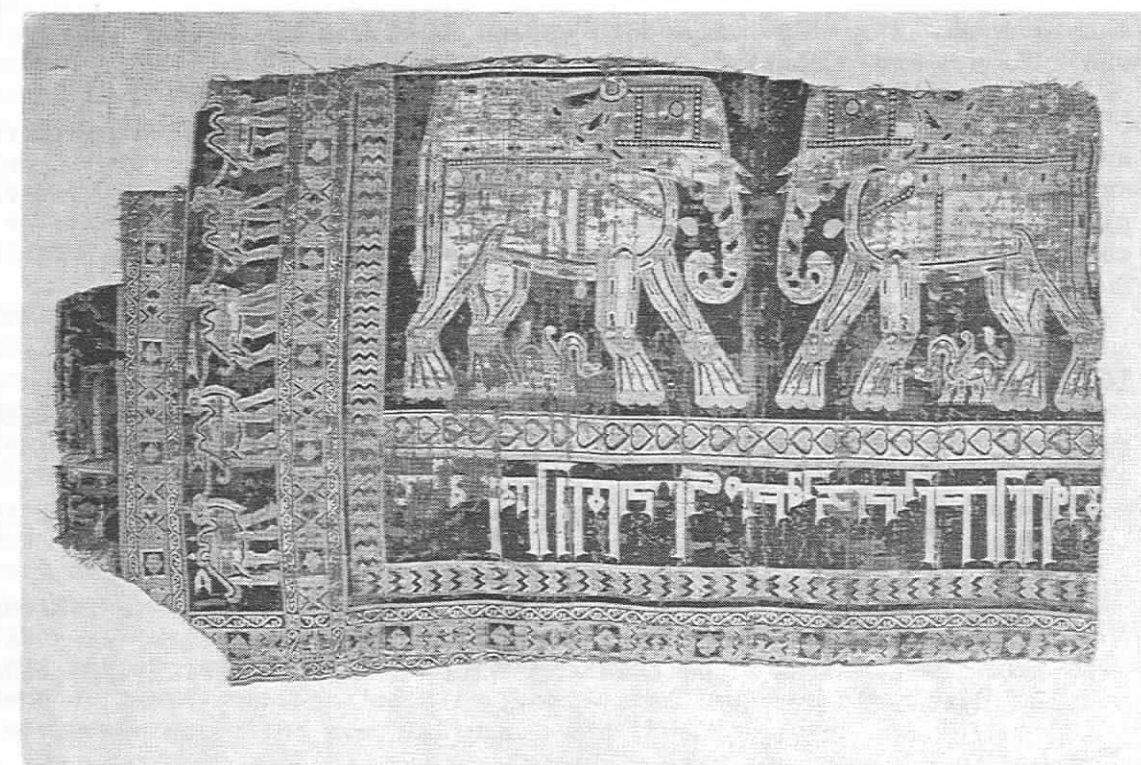


The white box represents the St. Rémi silk at Reims, which cannot be dated to the mid ninth century, as shown in this diagram, and as generally accepted.

CHART 1
DATING OF DIFFERENT WEAVING TYPES IN THE WEST FROM 300 TO 1200 AD



Aachen, Munster treasury, charioteers.



Paris, Louvre, Elephant silk from St. Josse sur Mer.