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9-2012

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Gyul, Elmira, "Sogdian Textile Design: Political Symbols of an Epoch" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 689.

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Sogdian Textile Design: Political Symbols of an Epoch

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The history of Central Asia includes a particular period when textiles and politics were directly connected with each other; it started in the Early Middle Ages, where travellers and merchants were active on the Great Silk Road. Silk trade became a main occupation at that time. Thin silk threads connected different civilizations creating an exchange of cultural traditions, religions and technologies from the West to the East and back.

Silk became a kind of international currency, and a prestige symbol. The desire to possess these fabrics and to control the routes and trade of the Silk Road led politicians either to forge friendships and unions or to declare wars. In essence, possession of silk became a way to achieve supremacy by regulating societal and economic relationships in everyday life. The valuable silk was used for payment of taxes, rewards, imperial gifts and so on.

Silk clothing was only available for the nobility, as a sign of high status in the bureaucratic and religious hierarchy (A. Biver). So silk was not only important cultural and economical, but also a political symbol of an epoch.



Figure 1. Sogdian textile on Afrasiab mural, 7 c. Samarkand museum.

The greatest empires of that time – China, Byzantium, Persia, and the Great Turkic Khanate were highly involved in silk trade. However, there was one more main player – Sogdiana. Sogdiana,

historical area, which was located in Central Asian region between two rivers – *Oxus* (Amudarya) and *Yaksart* (Syrdarya), was not an empire or a state, but rather a constellation of small princedoms united by economic interests. At the beginning Sogdiana, using its geographical position, acted only as the intermediary in this trade. From the 5th century, local merchants began to produce magnificent silk fabrics that were quickly known throughout the world. Between the 4th and the 8th centuries, Sogdians were the main suppliers in the trade of textiles between China/Central Asia, Persia and points west (figure 1).

As the result of battles for silk trade, Sogdians turned into skilful masters of international political intrigues. Silk production provided the Sogdians with huge profits, which paid for security during their caravan travels, and helped to manipulate leading players in the political arena in order to expand their influence. They created a real trading empire, with centres in Samarkand and Bukhara and missions in many countries. Their trading routes effectively connected the East and the West – China with Rome and the Byzantine Empire.

We could discuss the topic of “silk and politics” in greater detail, however the basic historical facts of this fascinating subject are known for certain by a wide range of people.

But other question seems more important for us: what role was allocated the décor of Sogdian fabrics in this global political game? It is difficult to assume that the value of patterns was ignored because the possession of these fabrics was a sign of prestige, political will and force.

It is known, that medieval art has been connected with religious and cults. We can assume this connection in patterns of Sogdian fabrics, too. However, Sogdian art was very specific. Local society was ethnically diverse and tolerant. The adherents of all known religions of that time had the possibility to preach there. There were local forms of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity (Nestorian persuasion), Manicheism... In this situation the atmosphere of the mercantile Sogdian cities became the ground for development of secular, not religious art forms. As the well-known Uzbek scholar L. Rempel said, «aesthetic sense conquered religious emotions». Even local and strange idols lost their divine aura and became cultural symbols only.

Using old sacral motives in textile décor, Sogdians provided them new interpretations. As skilled experts in the battle for market domination, they obviously chose designs which could serve any ethnic and cultural environment. At the same time they considered the interests of different religious confessions and the ruling elite, too.

Let's remember that there was a strengthening of the feudal aristocracy in Iran and Central Asia, and a political and economic blossoming of Byzantium during this period. The political atmosphere in these countries, connected to this strengthening of the ruling classes, demanded symbols that emphasized power and stability. Silk fabrics and their décor indicated status, as well as symbolizing the glorification of power. In this regard the Sogdian patterns can be considered in a political context in this epoch. Popular drawings, changing former mythological values, turn into the signs of prestige, political glory, force and firmness of the state.

Religion and policy were two major interconnected factors of development of society for a long time. In the religious cultures of Christian Byzantium and Europe, Zoroastrian, and then Islamic Iran and Central Asia, the Buddhist Far East, the former cult images in the decor of fabrics became expressive political symbols of power. What did the ideological context of Sogdian patterns from "east" and "western" points of view mean?

The typical composition of silk fabrics of the Middle Ages are medallions (rondels) surrounded by pearls and dual animals facing each other in a symmetry. It is the most popular textile composition from the 6th to the 13th centuries, widespread on the extensive territory from Europe to the Far East (figure 2).



Figure 2. Typical composition of Sogdian textile – rondel surrounded by pearls and dual animals facing each other. 7 c.

It is known, that rondel surrounded with pearls as a textile pattern, probably appears as an imitation of jewellery adornment. Specifically, Turkic metal plates of polychromatic style, or Achaemenids bracteates (figures 3 & 4).



Figure 3, left. Turkic metal plates of polychromatic style. 3 – 5 C. A.D. Almaty. State museum named after A. Kasteev.

Figure 4, right. Achaemenids bracteate. Date 500-700 BC. The Metropolitan museum.

But the genesis of this medallion is one of the intrigues of ancient art. Certainly, this motif had a cult character. We can definitely guess it is the most ancient cult symbol, the sun image as a statement to One God (it is known also that the meaning of the disc surrounded with points in the Egyptian hieroglyphic letter was, "to shine"; the ring of pearls symbolizes light radiated by the sun). In Central Asia the earliest examples of such drawings belong to the bronze age: it is a deity image with heads in form of similar solar drawings or gods having similar symbols on their faces.

For example, the solar gods from *Tamgaly* (southern Kazakhstan), from the middle of the 2nd millennia BC, were connected with the most ancient solar cults of Eurasia (scientists believe that solar images from *Tamgaly* are some of the most ancient humanoid images of God). During the antique period the medallions with pearls were still an attribute of gods. So, different gods on the reverse of Kushanian coins (Bactria) were represented in a circle of pearls, as a prototype of a nimbus, which emphasized their belonging to the heavenly world. We can find the same solar symbol in the form of a circle of pearls on the forehead and cheek of a goddess from the temple of *Erkurgan* (an ancient capital of Sogdiana, 3-4 centuries AD). It is interesting that the female deities of the Mycenae culture had the same solar signs on their faces (bronze era, 2800-1100 BC).

This analogy gives us the opportunity to consider Sogdiana as one of the main sources of a solar deity being popular in the ancient world.

The solar sign of the bronze era and antiquity as the image or attribute of god or the Sun goddess, became in the early Middle Ages typical for Sogdian craft (fabrics, embroidery, ceramics, metal, architectural decor and so on) and was combined with a huge number of other images (winged lions, horses, wild boar, ram, senmurv, etc.). Apparently, «solar circle with pearls» turns into a nimbus, some kind of totemic ring which surrounds new personages. The wide circulation and stability of a medallion with pearls in Central Asian art allow us to say that this pattern was authentic for this region. As a textile pattern, a medallion with pearls unconditionally, is connected with Sogdiana.

The Sogdian medallion was appropriated by other silk weaving centres and consequently clear attributions of Sogdian textiles remain difficult and disputable. The Sogdians, as skilled experts in marketing, often sold their fabrics as Persian, to get economic benefits (M. Compareti), or used the drawings peculiar to those countries where their production was sold, which also complicates attributions.

As a result, the circle with pearls became a part of the context of Eastern (Zoroastrian) and Western (Christian) cultures as an just embodiment of a nimbus, divine light and power protection, a symbol of glory, spiritual force and prestige.

Another feature of a Sogdian medallion is the image of animals near a tree of life symbol as a principle of heraldic composition. The tree of life is one of the major symbols in both Eastern and Western art. It defines the formal and substantial organization of the Universe. In different cultures the tree was understood as a model of the world, it's centre, a vertical axis of power, and a basis of all vital processes, symbolizing growth, health, happiness, fertility, etc.

It is questionable whether this ancient symbol retained its cult value at the time of the development of more advanced religious systems. Even in three-part compositions the tree motif plays a secondary role (we can see its reduced form). However, the tree in textile decor is still a sign of prestige, and of participation in universal sacral values.

Christianity willingly adapted this prestigious motif, as some kind of «patent on nobility». The tree turned into a cross, as the main symbol for this religion. In this sense works of art from Ravenna (the capital of the Western Roman Empire after 402 years) show fine examples of the formation of the early medieval culture as a process of synthesis of Christian and eastern traditions. Both political and cultic meaning merge into one image, showing unity of religion and government interests.

Many images of animals can be considered as symbols of statehood, nobility and the power to be chosen by God. It could be an image of a wild boar, a horse, a ram, a winged lion and so on. In these symbols they saw something that belonged to their own culture. As a rule, animals have wings, as a sign of their belonging to the divine, heavenly beings.



Figure 5. Sogdian silk robe with lion image. 7 – 8 c. Sotheby's.

So, the lion figure is typical for Sogdian fabrics (figure 5). A lion, the king of beasts, is often used both in the East, and in the West, personifying power and prosperity. It is one of the most used symbols of force throughout thousands years. Wearing clothes with the figure of a lion was understood everywhere as a personification of supreme power and glory.

It is a classical solar symbol for the Zoroastrian tradition to see a lion together with solar deities: for example, Ishtar or Mithra astride a lion. A pair of winged lions, as on Sogdian fabrics, are known since the bronze age as symbols of protection and regal power, chosen by God. In Europe this image is also a strong symbol, and embodies the power of the sun and fire, connected with bravery, nobility, justice and triumph.

It is difficult to find other symbols and images which equally successfully satisfied the tastes of the Sogdian *Ishkhids* (local rulers), the Iranian *Shakh-inshakhs*, the Byzantine emperors and the European kings. Old solar symbol in Eastern art tradition, it turns into the most expressive sign of political force and success.

In Christian culture the lion became popular as a heraldry symbol, signifying royal advantage and nobility, the power over citizens. Distribution of a lion symbol on the coats of arms underlines once again its secular value, a political involvement. We can also assume that Sogdian fabrics played a certain role in the popularity of this lion symbol in Europe.

Another universal and widespread symbol is the ram (figure 6). The popularity of this figure has its roots among cultures of the most ancient cattle breeding tribes, where the ram meant man's force, wealth and potency. In city cultures of the early Middle Ages, this symbol had a higher meaning. In Zoroastrianism, the ram symbolized a *farn* (*xardnah*), a known Avesta concept: it is a divine sign, and means benefit, good luck, imperial glory, power, charisma, magnificence, etc. Thus, the ram became the divine entity bringing wealth and might, an embodiment of majestic force. Its main attribute is fluttering ribbons on its neck or hoof (*Kushti*), the signs of élite and sanctity. Such images of a ram, in a Sassanian manner, are found in Sogdian fabrics.



Figure 6. Sogdian or Sasanian silk with ram image. 7 – 8 c.

The Zoroastrian concept of the *farn* was alien to Christians, therefore the image of a ram corresponded with the concept of the Holy or sacrificial Lamb (that is the pure victim), the allegorical image of Christ. Carrying clothing with figures of a ram testified that their owner was chosen by God and became popular in the ruling elite. Other images of hoofed animals – winged deer and horses, became a similar elitist, symbolic meaning (figure 7).



Figure 7. Sogdian or Sasanian silk with winged horse image. 8 c. Sotheby's.

Another symbol of power and the divine nature of the imperial power is a wild boar (figure 8). It was an Veretragna's embodiment, the Avesta god of war and victory. It is known that the head of a boar was a part of the Sassanian State Seal. Certainly, this figure turns into a sign of political domination, demonstration of pressure, even cruelty. It is difficult to imagine the best symbol satisfying political ambitions.



Figure 8. Sogdian or Sasanian silk with wild boar image. 8 c.

Finally, polymorphs, with the best qualities and forces from the incorporated and embodied animals had a similar value. For example, griffins (*senmurv*) symbolized fighting capacity, eminence and power. Fabrics with figures of predators were especially in demand among the military and feudal aristocracy.

So, the Sogdians literally exploited a subject of elitism, stability and power in their fabrics' decor, playing on the hidden and obvious desires of their powerful trading partners. The Christian Byzantine Empire, which had not left yet its "eastern" heritage, willingly adapted Sogdian symbols, transferring them further to the west.

The images of predators and signs of power were not simply decor, they were the symbols meant to increase the power of clergy, military and feudal nobility, supporting their political ambitions. Sogdians produced symbols of the epoch that were in great demand and thus were widely distributed in any cultural and confessional environment. The universality of the Sogdian fabric design made these textiles key factors in symbolizing the political climate of this epoch.