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Byzantine and Oriental silks from a Royal Shrine in Denmark AD 1100

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In Denmark, in Odense, the Danish King Canute IV was murdered July 10, 1086, from behind in front of the altar in Albani Church. The king was killed together with his brother Benedict and seventeen of his knights, by Danish rebels. His half-brother Eric I “the Evergood” (ruling 1095-1103) achieved Canute’s recognition as a saint from Pope Urban II in 1098, and in 1100 the shrine containing the body of St. Canute was installed at the high altar of Odense Cathedral.¹ St. Canute’s remains were wrapped in a silk weaving with eagle motif and put into a shrine. Today the shrine is in the cathedral’s crypt, where St. Canute lies on a patterned yellow silk pillow, and next appears Eagles silk in a glass case. The English monk Ælnoth of Canterbury wrote of St. Canute and his silks about twenty years after the after the canonization of St. Canute:

*“wrought a magnificent shrine for the sacred bones,
shining like silver and in the reddish flame of gold
ornamented with lovely blue and yellowish stones,
in it the sacred bones of the saint shall rest.
Silk, saffron-yellow, precious stones,
All in the most splendid trappings”*²

¹ Karsten Fledelius, Introduction to *The Eagle Silk and other silks in the shrine of St. Canute in Odense Cathedral*, Anne Hedeager Krag (Herning, Poul Kristensens Forlag, 2010), 9-10.

² Erling Albrechtsen, “Kong Svend Magnus’ og hans Sønners Bedrifter og Kong Knud den Helliges Lidelseshistorie,” *Knuds-bogen. Studier over Knud den Hellige*, ed. Jørgen Nybo Rasmussen, Stig Holsting, Preben Frosell og Tore Nyborg (Ansgarstiftelsens Forlag 1986), 21-52. Birgitte Bøggild Johannsen og Hugo Johannsen under medvirken af Ulla Kjær, *Danmarks Kirker* (2. Bind. Odense Amt, Poul Kristensens Forlag, Herning 1995), 438.



Illustration 1: St. Canutes reliquary, with the yellow pillow, in the Cathedral of Odense. Photo: The Cathedral of Odense, St. Canute's Church.

The St Canute reliquary is unique because of the fairly well preserved state of the remains of the king and the precious silks found in the shrine. St. Canutes brother, Benedicts remains is also in a shrine besides St. Canutes shrine, but Benedict was never a saint named, and in his shrine there were no precious silks. The Royal shrine belongs to the most important medieval monuments of Denmark and international research regards the silk finds from Odense to be highlights even in European context, mostly attributing them to Byzantium. This article will present an interpretation of the motifs, style and use against a wider European background illuminated by the latest research as well as new colour analyses of the two patterned silk textiles.

The Eagle Silk

The largest of the silks from Odense, dated AD 1050-1100, is the so-called Eagle Silk, 110 x

133 centimetres (43.3 x 52.4 inches) red with a pattern of dark blue eagles.³ The cloth has been trimmed, and, judging from the symmetry of the pattern, the width must originally have been at least 195 centimetres, perhaps as much as 230 centimetres— that is, a very large textile. The silk is woven as samite, the weave is close and the Z-spun warp is relatively coarse, alternating in reddish-brown and undyed silk, while the weft is of unspun red and bluish-black silk in various thickness.



Illustration 2: The Eagle Silk, Photo: The National Museum of Denmark

The pattern of the Eagle Silk appears a bluish-black, almost black against a slightly pale or alternating dark-red ground. The pattern is built up with large oval patterned medallions, interconnected in both height and width, a feature also known from Byzantine and Sassanid silk weaves. The so-called recesses, where the frames meet one another in fours, are filled with small pattern-filled medallions. Inside each large oval medallion is an eagle with spread, patterned wings, spread tail feathers, and with its head in profile. In its beak the eagle carries a jewel in the shape of a crescent ring with a pendant. The large medallions with the recurrent eagle motif are 82 centimetres (32.3 inches) in height and 65 centimetres (25.6 inches) in width.

On the base on which the eagle stands, there is an inscription of which there have been various interpretations. Some scholars think it consists of Islamic characters, others that they are Greek.⁴

³ Anne Hedeager Krag, *The Eagle Silk and other silks in the shrine of St. Canute in Odense Cathedral* (Herning, Poul Kristensens Forlag 2010), 17-26.

⁴ Anna Muthesius, *Studies in silk in Byzantium* (Pindar Press 2004), 294, Agnes Geijer, "Sidenvävnaderna i Helige Knuts Helgonskrin i Odense Domkyrka" (Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie, København

Symbols

The eagle motif is ancient. In the Iconography of Christian art the, the eagle with spread wings is a symbol of the power of the world and is associated with the evangelist John.⁵ The motif has been used in connection with the representation of the Passion, where the Lamb, the lion and the eagle symbolize Christ's Death, Resurrection and Ascension. The eagle is also a symbol of generosity. Traditions state that the eagle, no matter how hungry, always leaves half of its prey for other birds. The legions of the Roman Empire fought under the Eagle Standard. This was the sign of *imperium*, the power of the military commanders of the Roman Republic that was later adopted by the emperors as one of their main insignia. The eagle motif continued as an imperial symbol in the Byzantine Empire. An extensive legendary association between eagles and emperors can also be traced in Byzantine sources where figures of emperors and their families are offered protection in the shadow of the wings of an eagle. In the "Book of Ceremonies" edited by Constantine VII (913-959) examples of eagle motifs on textiles used at the Byzantine court are mentioned.⁶

There is a recognized group of surviving eagle silks which have been identified with *panni imperials de Romania ad aquilas magnas*, a designation that appears in Latin church inventories from 1295 in Rome. Otto von Falke labelled them as *Imperial Silks*, and saw them as evidence of the imperial workshops, the Gynaikeia in Constantinople.⁷

From Auxerre and Brixen Imperial eagle silks are known. Both places were important ecclesiastical centres. From the grave of St. Germain at Auxerre, France, an important ecclesiastical centre, and now in the Church of St. Eusèbe, Auxerre, there is an eagle silk which is one of the finest Byzantine silks in existence. The eagles are free standing in horizontal rows across the silk in a yellow and dark-green colour on blue-purple ground. Another, now in the Cathedral Treasury at Bressanone (Brixen) in the southern Tyrol, Italy, another major medieval ecclesiastical centre, can plausibly be identified with a documented "*casula purpura*" decorated all over with a large scale eagle motif, presumably presented as a gift chasuble to Bishop Albuin (975-1006). It is patterned with large dark green eagles, with the details picked out in yellow, on red-purple ground, and with large dark green rosettes in the intervening spaces.⁸

Dyestuff analyses were requested from both the silks from the royal shrine in the Cathedral of Odense in 2008. Ten small thread specimens were taken for dye analysis, which was conducted at the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) in Amsterdam. From the report drawn up by Maaarten van Bommel and Ineke Joosten on 22nd, October 2008, it is evident that nine of the ten threads dyes have been identified.⁹ Results of the dyestuff identification of the Eagle Silk shows the red colour was achieved with indigo or woad and madder species, which, combined, produced the red-brown colour (indigotin, alizarin). The blue colour in the Eagle Silk was achieved with three dyestuffs, weld (*luteolin*), madder species (alizarin), and indigo or woad (*Indigotin*).

1935) Poul J. Riis & Thomas Riis, "*Knud den Helliges ørnetæppe i Odense Domkirke. Et forsøg på en nytolkning*" KUML, Aarhus 2004), 264. Anthony Cutler, "*Imagination and documentation: Eagle silks in Byzantium, the Latin West and Abbàsîd Baghdad*. (Byzantinische Aeitschrift Bd. 96/1, I. Abteilung 2003) 67-72.

⁵ Gertrud Schiller, "*Iconography of Christian Art, Volume 2: the Passion of Jesus Christ*" (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 136.

⁶ Muthesius, *Studies in silk in Byzantium*, 235.

⁷ Otto von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, (Berlin Ernst Wasmuth G.M.B.H, 1936), 3.

⁸ Muthesius, *Studies in silk in Byzantium*, 293.

⁹ Hedeager Krag, *The Eagle Silk and other silks in the shrine of St. Canute in Odense Cathedral*, 39.

The pillow with the bird motif

The yellow pillow-case with the bird motif consists of several pieces sewn together, perhaps re-used, of which one piece, 30 x 40 centimetres (11.8 x 15.7 inches), covers the front of the pillow and about a third of the back, while the rest consists of strips about 5 centimetres (1.9 inches). They have been cut off without regard to the pattern, and cover roughly the other two thirds of the back, possibly reusing a chasuble. The material is very loose in structure. The weave is of the samite type and has a closer density than the Eagle Silk. The silk with the bird motif probably dates to about AD 900. The pattern has been compared to a group of Sassanid Persian silks that go back to the 700s-900s.

The pattern consists of cross-like figures that have a round termination at the top, two short transverse lines and a base piece. It resembles an anchor. The cross-like figure is between opposed pairs of birds with long patterned tails. Between each group at the height of the birds' heads, a heart has been woven. All figures are light blue with faint golden contours against the yellow ground. The size of the pattern repeat varies from 5.5 cm to 6.5 centimetres (2.2 to 2.6 inches) in height and 7 to 9 centimetres (3.1 to 3.5 inches) in width.

The birds on the yellow pillow are probably peacocks. Perhaps the design showed peacocks placed on each side of a cross or the Tree of Life. In the iconography of Christian art peacocks are a symbol of immortality and resurrection. In early Christian art, especially from Ravenna, one finds peacocks grouped symmetrically in pairs around a vase, a cross or a monogram.¹⁰ The peacock comes from India, where it still lives in the wild today. The opposing pairs of peacocks with a cross symbol or the Tree of Life between them are considered to have been an Iranian motif with its origin in the Sassanid period (226-661 AD).¹¹ Motifs with birds were very common in contemporary silk patterns from Central Asia, and the actual birds motifs are thought to come from Sogdiana, the northeastern province of the Central Asian area in northern Iran, Turkmenistan and Kurdistan. The most important city of the province, Samarkand, developed from the 700s onwards as a centre of Islamic culture, and at the same time it was an important station on the Silk Road. Most recently the pillow with the birds has been compared with similar silks from the village of Zandan near Tashkent in Sogdiana.¹²

The colour-analyses of the yellow bird-patterned silk pillow distinguished six vegetable dyes: two red, the roots of madder and sappanwood; two yellow, weld and Persian Berry; and two blue, extracted respectively from the woad and indigo plants. The red colour, the roots of sappanwood/redwood and the yellow Persian Berry, both used in the yellow silk from the pillow, are remarkable, as both the colours origin are in the Central and Eastern Asia. The roots of sappanwood/redwood is a red dye which was imported to Europe from the Far East. The earliest known textiles identified as having been dyed with the roots of sappanwood/redwood are a group of multicoloured and patterned silk fabrics from Loulan in eastern Turkestan, excavated by Aurel Stein in 1913-16. The silks have been dated to the

¹⁰ The sculpture "pluteus" from the Basilica S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (dated between 493 and 526), shows on its front a vase from which spring two peacocks, facing the monogrammatic cross between them, Guiseppi Bovini, *Ravenna Art and History* (Ravenna: Longo Publisher, 1991), 61.

¹¹ Ernst T. Reibold, *Der Pfau. Mythologie und Symbolik* (Munich: Callwey, 1983), 17, 40.

¹² Dr. Zvezdana Dode, Professor at Stavropol State University, Russia, who has made a comparative study of silk textiles of the Mongolian period in Eurasia, has found an unpublished piece of fabric at the Stavropol Museum that is similar to the Odense bird-silk.

period from the second century BC to the third century AD.¹³

The yellow dye, which was determined by analysis in 2008 to be coloured by both the roots of sappanwood/redwood and Persian Berries, which gave both red and yellow colours, might originally have a colour resembling that of saffron, which interestingly corroborates the earliest written source to describe the assassination of King Canute in 1086 and his canonization in 1100: the account by the English monk Ælnoth, ca. 1160, who records that at the canonization saffron-yellow silk was among the gifts.

Transmission of the Odense silks

On the basis of the various interpretations of the Odense Eagle Silk it can be concluded that it could well have been made in a Byzantine influenced area outside Constantinople between AD 1050 and 1100 AD, perhaps in southern Italy. Two possible routes can be suggested, both involving personal importation by St Canute's brother, the Danish King Eric I "the Evergood" (ruled 1095-1103). In 1098 Eric travelled to Bari in Southern Italy where he convinced Pope Urban II that he should make the Church in Scandinavia independent of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen by raising the Diocese of Lund to an archdiocese for the whole of Scandinavia. Eric may have brought back the Eagle Silk on this occasion. It was possibly a gift from Adèle, widow of King Canute, who in 1091 had re-married to Roger Borsa, Duke of Apulia in southern Italy. In 1103 Eric visited Constantinople, where he could have received the silk as a gift from Emperor Alexios I (ruled 1081-1118). In *Eiriksdrapa*, the memorial poem written in honour of this king by the contemporary Icelandic bard, Markus Skeggjason, it is explicitly stated that among other rich gifts, Eric was presented with an imperial garment, "allvalds skrudi", "the emperor's shroud."¹⁴

The yellow pillow has a pattern showing more Oriental than Byzantine pattern, and colour-analyses support the suggestion that it was probably woven in Central Asia, perhaps near Tasjkent, which was a significant station on the Silk Road. The Vikings knew this area. In 1932, found a coin treasure in East Jutland with 237 silver coins, most originating from the Caucasus, Baghdad, Tehran, Bulgar, Taskjent, Samarkand and Tayaqan, dating the first half of the 900s.¹⁵

Silk that came from Constantinople was of great importance in Western Europe in the Early Middle Ages (c. 550-1100 AD). There was thus a connection between silk, politics and religion. Both the Eagle Silk and the pillow with the bird motif are symbols that can be associated with imperial power and Christianity. In the Iconography of Christian Art peacocks symbolize immortality, and the eagle symbolizes power, and one can hardly conceive of clearer symbols in connection with the murdered king who was later canonized. This symbolic language is likely to be known to the donor when the items were deposited in the Royal Shrine in Odense.

¹³ Judith H. Hofenk de Graaf, *The Colourful Past: Origins, Chemistry and Identification of Natural Dyestuffs* (Riggisberg, Switzerland and London, UK: Abegg-Stiftung and Archetype Publications, 2004), 142.

¹⁴ Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning. Udgiven af Kommissionen for det Arnarnagnæanske Legat*, Vol. I (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, Nordisk Forlag, 1912), 451.

¹⁵ Annette Damm, *Vikingernes Aros* (Moesgaard, 2005), 65.

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