

ANCIENT IRANIAN DECORATIVE TEXTILES: NEW EVIDENCE FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

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In the last few years, very interesting textiles have appeared on the Internet. Since they all come from the antiquities market, they are accompanied only by short descriptions, without any information about provenance and chronology. Authenticity is the main problem with all these textiles, and fake artifacts represent a very big problem for buyers and dealers. However, just on the basis of iconographic analysis, some suggestions can be advanced.

Among the most interesting textiles that appeared on the Internet, two are particularly intriguing because of their typically Iranian decoration [Figs. 1, 2; Color

Plate II].¹ So-called “pearl roundels” with a fantastic animal inside constitute the main patterns. This fantastic animal is a winged composite creature normally called *simurgh* in Farsi (Pahlavi *senmurov*, Avestan *sae-na maregha*). In the present paper, I would like to focus on this type of iconography, leaving technical issues to experts in this very specialist field.

Before discussing possible origins and chronology for those textiles, a short description of the two specimens and the composite creature called *simurgh* is necessary. The first specimen is a silk fragment measuring 42 x 76 cm that was probably part of a saddle. A couple of pearl roundels containing one single

Fig. 1 (below). Silk textile.

Fig. 2 (right). Cotton shirt with silk lining.

Photos courtesy of Carlo Cristi.



composite creature embellishes the central part of the textile while in the upper and lower parts is a row of birds with a vegetal element in the beak alternating with galloping rams [Fig. 1]. According to information that I was able to obtain from the dealer, ¹⁴C testing dates the specimen to the 9th-10th century. The second specimen constitutes only a portion of an extremely well-preserved shirt and is embellished with pearl roundels containing pairs of composite creatures facing each other on a vegetal pedestal [Fig. 2]. According to ¹⁴C testing, this second textile should be dated to the beginning of the 8th-end of the 9th century. Several elements on the bodies of the animals but also the ribbons attached to the neck of the bird in the first textile fragment and the vegetal pedestal in both of them call to mind typical Iranian decorative elements that have been considered in the past to be specifically Sasanian. However, these same elements were adopted also by Sogdian and Byzantine artists and during the Islamic period. For example, the vegetal pedestal seems to be a development of the spread wings motif to be found on one single Sasanian textile (possibly part of a tapestry) and on late Sasanian coinage. In fact, late Sasanian sovereigns can be observed on their coins wearing a crown embellished with spread wings used as a pedestal for astronomical themes.² These same wings were later transformed into vegetal decorations, and, for this reason, those textiles should be dated to the Islamic era. Also the image of two fantastic creatures confronting one another points to the Islamic period, since in Sasanian and Sogdian arts animals are usually represented individually inside pearl roundels or other geometric (or vegetal) frames.³

Contrary to what many scholars insist on repeating, the composite creature with a dog's face, wings, and a peacock's tail does not appear in Sasanian art except at the very problematic site of Taq-e Bustan [Fig. 3]. The most recent publications on Taq-



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After: Marshak 2002, Fig. 16 (slightly modified).

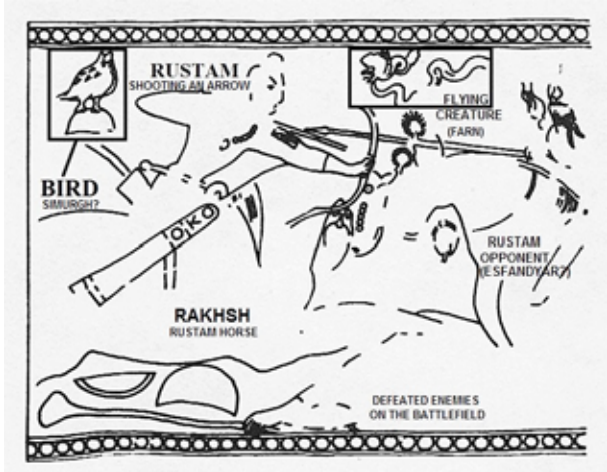


Fig. 4. The so-called "Rustam painted program," Panjikent ca. 740 (Room 41, Sector VI).

Bustan consider that it is a late Sasanian monument and may even have been executed on the cusp between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods (Mode 2006; Cristoforetti and Scarzia 2013, pp. 344-46). The identification of the fantastic winged creature as the *simurgh* of Iranian mythology, proposed more than sixty years ago by Kamilla Trever⁴ and since then never seriously challenged, recently has been reconsidered in the light of Iranian figurative arts and literary texts. In the *Shahnama* (11th century) and its illustrations from the Islamic period, the *simurgh* is a giant magical bird that protects the family of Rustam. As is well known, Rustam and his father Zal were eastern Iranian heroes who originated from Zabulistan. However, the *simurgh* in literary texts and Islamic book illustrations is always a bird. Also, in one early 8th-century Sogdian painting from Panjikent (Room 41, Sector VI), the only representation of the *simurgh* can be identified as a bird – precisely an owl – reproduced behind a person wearing a leopard skin and, for this reason, identified as Rustam [Fig. 4].⁵ In the same Sogdian painting

there is also a flying composite creature in front of Rustam that could be associated with the "pseudo-*simurgh*" at Taq-e Bustan. A very similar winged composite creature is represented in a 6th-century Sogdian painting from the eastern wall of the northern chapel of Temple II at Panjikent. Its protome is part of the support for the throne of

Fig. 3. Detail of the garment on the equestrian statue on the innermost wall of the large grotto at Taq-e Bustan, Kermanshah (Iran).



Fig. 5. Painting on the eastern wall of the northern chapel of Temple II, Panjikent (early 6th century).

an unidentified goddess [Fig. 5] (Belenitski and Marshak 1981, pp. 70–73). The lower part of the winged creature was not preserved in that painting; so it is not possible to state if it was exactly the same creature. However, a little horn can be observed on his head and a flower embellishes its cheek.⁶ The exact same winged creature (but this time complete) appears in another Sogdian painting from Afrasiab (pre-Mongol Samarkand) dated c. 660 on the western wall of the so-called “Hall of the Ambassadors” [Fig. 6] (Comparati 2009b, pp. 75–76). Every detail, such as the dog’s face (even with its dangling tongue), is reproduced on the caftan of a foreign envoy from Bactria-Tokharistan resembling very much the same motif at Taq-e Bistan with very small differences. The two composite creatures look very similar and they are almost contemporary. However, the identification of that kind of composite creature as the *simurgh* of Iranian mythology is incorrect. In Sogdiana it was a symbolic representation used to exalt the importance of nobles or rich people mainly represented in 8th-century mural paintings at Panjikent (Azarpay 1975).

If the *simurgh* in Iranian arts was always a fantastic bird, how should we identify the flying composite creature under examination? Very problematic literary sources suggest that the creature should be identified with the Iranian concept of *farr* (Pahlavi *xwarrah*, Avestan *khwarenah*), that is “glory” or “charisma.”⁷ Moreover, on some 7th-century Sogdian coins imitat-

Photos by author



Fig. 6. Painting on the western wall of the “Hall of the Ambassadors,” Afrasiab (ca. 660).

ing Sasanian emissions of Hormizd IV (579–590) are countermarks in the shape of that flying composite creature together with the inscription “*farn*,” that is, the Sogdian word for “glory” (Farsi *farr*) (Nikitin and Roth 1995). Despite the great importance of the concept of *farr* in late Sasanian Persia, its representation as a composite creature comes from Eastern Iranian lands (Central Asia), as do the first images of the *simurgh*. Furthermore it is worth observing that Biruni called a fantastic animal resembling a flying fox “*Khorasan khorra*” (“Glory of the East”). In doing this, that Muslim author implicitly pointed out the eastern (Iranian) origins of a kind of dragon probably to be associated with the flying dog-faced creature (Cristoforetti and Scarcia 2013, pp. 341–42). The *simurgh* was a fantastic and magical bird that had some connections with the concept of “glory” or “charisma.” For this reason, it was difficult correctly to separate and identify the two iconographies that Kamilla Trever had confused in her studies.⁸ Therefore, the identification of this composite creature as the *simurgh* of Iranian mythology is not justified. Many scholars insist on calling it *simurgh*, but the term “pseudo-*simurgh*” should be preferred.

From a purely iconographic point of view that winged creature with a dog’s face is rooted in Graeco-Etruscan art. It was exported to the East and especially to Bactria and northwestern India during

Fig.7. *Ketos*, dolphins, and hippocamp on a decorative frieze from the “Casa del Tramezzo di Legno,” Herculaneum (Naples), 1st century CE.



Photo by author

the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire. That monster is usually called *ketos* in Greek and had definite funerary connections in Classical art, being a very appropriate psychopomp, that is, a creature accompanying the soul of the dead to the underworld. In fact, it combines the characteristics of the dog, which is the animal of Hades, and aquatic ones to cross the underworld rivers and sea. Creatures like this appear not just in funerary arts,⁹ as can be observed in a decorative frieze from Herculaneum (1st century CE). In this latter painting, the composite creature with a dog's face also has a pair of wings, despite the aquatic landscape where it is swimming together with a winged horse (*hippocamp*) and a couple of dolphins [Fig. 7]. Actually, the *ketos* appeared in many myths and as a negative monster as well (for example, in the story of Perseus and Medusa) whose iconography had great success in the Mediterranean basin during the pre-Christian and the Christian periods. Despite the presence of a dog's face and wings, it was considered a chthonian creature to be found very often as the vehicle for Nereids. Its association with water is rendered perfectly in the Biblical story of Jonah where the Classical iconography of the *ketos* was transferred to the *leviathan*.¹⁰ For some reason, the *ketos* (and many other Classical subjects) became very popular in typical Gandharan objects, the so-called “toilet-trays,” and, according to some scholars, its iconography was used in India to render a local monster with very strong aquatic connections, the *makara* (Francfort 1979, p. 89; Stančo 2012, pp. 160–76). The re-appropriation of that creature by eastern Iranian people possibly followed the path of Buddhism (and Hinduism) in Central Asia, and, in fact, the Indian component in Sogdian art should not be underestimated.

In Sogdian Buddhist literature, the Indian mythical bird that was also the vehicle (Sanskrit *vahana*) of Vishnu, *Garuda*, was superimposed on the *simurgh*, specifically in an unpublished version of the *Mahaparinirovana Sutra* (Yoshida 2013, p. 206). It is not clear if something similar could have happened also in figurative arts, although one of the most ancient images of *Garuda* as a royal insignia (called *Garuda-dhvaja*) at Bharhut, in central India (ca. 1st century BCE), has been considered by experts to be an unspecified “Western

Asian” borrowing (Guy 2007, p. 18). The problem of Indo-Iranian interactions from an iconographic point of view cannot be studied in detail because the Iranian aspect is not well known or investigated. Sogdians and Bactrians had very close relations with India, but not much is known about Sasanian Persia. As Guitty Azarpay (1995) observed, Classical and Indian motifs seem to converge in a silver-gilt dish considered to be late Sasanian but most probably produced in Bactria or in the Indo-Iranian border zone [Fig. 8]. In another early 8th-century fragmentary painting from Panjikent (Room 23, Sector I), a bird with something in its beak resembling a snake – and, so, very close to the Indian iconography for *Garuda* – can be observed. Even if from an iconographic point of view that image is definitely rooted in Indian art, some scholars have pro-

Fig. 8. A Bactrian(?) silver-gilt plate 7th century(?). State Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. S-217



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Vaughn

Fig. 9. Detail of Bishapur II rock relief showing triumph of Shapur I.

posed to identify it with various Iranian fantastic birds of Zoroastrian literature (Marshak 1990, pp. 308–09). Other birds with something in the beak (such as a ring or a necklace) appear very often in Sogdian painting as a symbol of exaltation for the people around them. Moreover, Zoroastrian literature (*Zamyad Yasht* 19, 34) explicitly reports that *xwarenah* left Yima in the shape of a falcon and dove into the Worukasha Sea where the god Apam Napat found it (Malandra 1983, pp. 91–93).

From this long digression, some points should be underlined. The idea of *farr* was expressed according to a wide plethora of iconographies in 8th-century Sogdian paintings (a composite fantastic creature, a bird, a putto, etc.)¹¹ and a couple of times as a flying putto (or Nike) in Sasanian rock reliefs (precisely at Bishapur II and Bishapur III) [Fig. 9] (Hermann 1998). On the contrary, the *simurgh* was always a bird in pre-Islamic Sogdian paintings and in Islamic book illustrations, exactly as it is described in written sources. From the point of view of iconography, the bird in Islamic book illustrations was definitely rooted in Chinese art, and it is very possible that its introduction into Persia was due to the Mongols. Only in a small group of book illustrations of the *Shahnama* probably from early 14th-century Mesopotamia or Fars, the *simurgh* was not following Chinese models, and, in fact, it could call to mind the bird in the Rustam paintings at Panjikent (Swietochowski and Carboni 1994, pp. 32, 46, 71–72, 82, 112–13).

Let us now consider the two textiles from the private collection advertised on the Internet. Several stylistic elements of these two specimens clearly correspond to a type of textiles usually referred to as *zandaniji*. Many specimens belonging to this group of textiles are at present part of European museum collections because they had been imported in great numbers in the Middle Ages as wrappings of precious holy relics. Approximately fifty years ago, some scholars found

an inscription on a piece of silk preserved at Huy Cathedral in Belgium that belongs to this same group. According to W. B. Henning, the inscription was in 7th-century Sogdian language and mentioned the term “*zandanichi*.” This specific term was immediately associated with those textiles celebrated in Islamic written sources as *zandaniji*, that is to say, produced in the village of Zandan, not far from Bukhara.¹² All the evidence seemed to point to the identification of this little understood type of textiles until a close analysis of the Huy Cathedral fragment permitted the determination once and for all that the inscription is not in Sogdian but in medieval Arabic (probably 9th-10th century judging from the epigraphy) (Sims-Williams and Khan 2008). Furthermore, it is worth observing that Boris Marshak (2006) always insisted that *zandaniji* were textiles in cotton and not in silk as is reported in Islamic sources. This does not exclude the possibility that weavers used to work with cotton could have not attempted to produce similarly embellished textiles in silk as well. In any case, the evidence in the sources should not be neglected. Despite Marshak’s uncertainties and the incorrect identification of the *zandaniji* group, it appears very clearly that the textiles of this kind all share very similar peculiarities not only in terms of technique but, above all, in their iconographic decorative elements.

What were the origins of this group of textiles and which chronology could be proposed? The presence of animals such as stags or rams with outwardly spreading horns and geometrical elements on their bodies would suggest an Iranian milieu as do the pearl roundel frames. However, many of these patterns had been accepted in Byzantine art and employed specifically to embellish precious textiles (Muthesius 1997, pp. 94–98). Nothing like this can be observed in pre-Islamic Iranian arts from Persia and Central Asia nor on very rare textile fragments found during excavations or in reproductions in mural paintings. The preference accorded to confronted animal subjects usually inside circular frames would point to the Islamic period. In Sasanian and Sogdian art only single animals can be seen inside roundel frames that usually are not vegetal but geometric. Only the “pseudo-*simurgh*” points to an eastern Iranian, that is to say Central Asian, origin for these textiles. However, the composite flying creature was soon accepted in Byzantine repertoires and especially in luxury textile production. Even the Persian origin itself for some of the best known textiles embellished with this creature inside roundels such as the Victoria and Albert Museum fragment [Fig. 10, next page] (Volbach 1966, Fig. 21) or the so-called Moshchevaia Balka caftan [Fig. 11; Color Plate II] (Ierusalimskaia 2012, Fig. 143) have begun to be seriously questioned.¹³ There is still great uncertain-

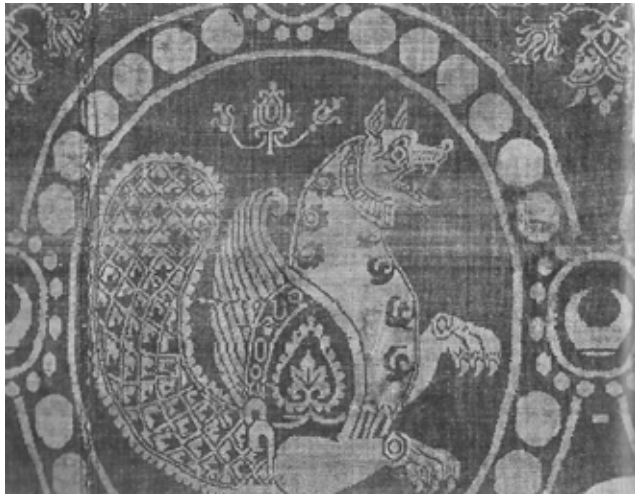


Fig. 10. Silk textile fragment, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

ty about attribution, although it is now evident that these textiles cannot be attributed to Sasanian manufactures. In fact, they are too late to be Sasanian and, in any case, the “pseudo-*simurgh*” appears in Persian arts only during the Islamic period with the only exception Taq-e Bustan, where garments and accessories too seem to be external borrowings. These textiles cannot be considered pre-Islamic Sogdian either, because, on stylistic analysis, they do not have precise parallels in Panjikent paintings.

It is not possible to imagine eastern Central Asia or the Far East as a place of origin for these textiles. In fact, the pseudo-*simurgh* is not attested in the Tarim Basin despite the great number of Sogdian immigrants who lived there and the recovery of many funerary textiles embellished with Iranian motifs in the region of Turfan (the so-called *fumian*). Indeed, in

Fig. 11. Decoration of a silk caftan from Moshchevaia Balka, Russia. State Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. Kz 658



Photo by author

Chinese art and especially in Sui-early Tang funerary paintings (6th–8th centuries), there is no evidence for the use at court of Iranian motifs on textiles (Compareti 2006c, p. 163). However, Chinese written sources clearly state that in the late Sui period (early 7th century) the person responsible for the production of textiles embellished with “Persian motifs” and other exotic goods was a Sogdian called He Chou (Compareti 2011). Why produce these textiles then if they were not going to be used by the Chinese? Most likely they were produced to be exported or presented as gifts to “barbarian” courts that had diplomatic relations with China. A great number of textiles embellished with pearl roundels containing typical Iranian motifs such as the boar’s head, the winged horse, or a bird with a necklace in its beak have been found in abundance outside of China proper. These sites are mainly cemeteries such as Turfan, Jargalant in Mongolia, Dulan (Qinghai or Amdo, that is to say, Eastern Tibet), and even Japan (Compareti 2006c, pp. 155–58).

If Iranians who lived in China and the Tarim Basin were involved in the production and exportation of this kind of textiles, why is there not even one single example of the pseudo-*simurgh* in these territories? Unfortunately, it is not possible to answer this question. For some reason, the composite creature that we call pseudo-*simurgh* did not have great success among the people who inhabited the Tarim Basin. On the other hand, it is possible that the pseudo-*simurgh* was not favored in a Buddhist milieu. Not only in the Tarim Basin but also in other regions of Central Asia where Buddhism was the main religion such as in Bactria-Tokharistan and the kingdom of Bamian, this motif was completely unknown.

Until the publication of those textiles on the Internet, the pseudo-*simurgh* was completely foreign to the decorations of this group of textiles. It is also very difficult to determine their authenticity, although every detail seems to point to genuine ancient specimens. It should be admitted that the composite creature under examination could be expected to appear among those textile decorations, although it would have been much better to find it during controlled excavations.

That same composite creature was also a favorite subject on Islamic textiles and decorative arts during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. Christians too appreciated it very much, and it is in the paintings of an early 13th-century Armenian church at Ani that we can find the last occurrence of the pseudo-*simurgh*, possibly just imitating precious textiles (Compareti 1997–1999, p. 92). For some unclear reason, that composite creature was much appreciated in every cultural milieu in contact with the Iranian world for a very long

period, the only exception being those regions where Buddhism was the main religion.

In conclusion, the most probable place of origin for those textiles seems to be Sogdiana after Islamization. In my opinion, the best fit is the Samanid emirates during the 9th–10th centuries.

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Notes

1. After a preliminary observation of those textiles that I found on the Internet completely by chance (on the web page: <<http://www.asianart.com/carlocristi/d10961.html>>, I was able to contact the dealer who put them online. Carlo Cristi (a member of Asian Art in Brussels) is an Italian dealer who kindly supplied me with additional information about those textiles that he considers to be 8th-10th-century Sogdian. A third fragment of a silk textile embellished with two similar flying creature confronting each other inside pearl roundels is at present kept in the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou. My colleague and friend Mariachiara Gasparini recently presented this fragment together with many other from that museum collection on the occasion of a mini-symposium held at the University of California, Berkeley on 4 December 2015. Cf. Spuhler 2014, Cat. 2.8.

2. Compareti 2010; Compareti 2014. The same pedestal embellishes a unique Sasanian tapestry fragment bought in Egypt and at present kept in the Benaki Museum (Athens) (Compareti 2005, pp. 155-57; Compareti 2009a).

3. For the problem of Sasanian textiles in general, see Compareti 2009a; Bier 2012. For the problem of the attribution of textiles embellished with the pearl roundels pattern to Sasanian or Sogdian manufactures, see Compareti 2004.

4. Kamilla Vasil'evna Trever (1892-1974) was a Russian orientalist who wrote extensively on many subjects about ancient Caucasus, Iran and Central Asia. She published a study on the identification of the *simurgh* in 1938 and continued to propose her conclusions on many other occasions. Her ideas have been widely accepted, although scholars such as Alessandro Bausani and Boris Maršak were never convinced and openly criticized her (Compareti 2006a). The original study in Russian (*Senmurv-Paskudzh, sobaka-ptitsa*, Leningrad, 1938) has recently been presented in English as well (Trever 2005).

5. Compareti 2013, pp. 25-27. I presented these new ideas about the "real" *simurgh* in the paintings of the so-called "Blue Room" at Panjikent (Room 41, Sector VI) on the occasion of the conference in honor of B. I. Maršak and V. G.

Shkoda: "Pre-Islamic Past of Middle Asia and Eastern Iran", St. Petersburg (Russia), October 23rd-25th 2013. The article is going to be published in the proceedings of that conference as: "Simurgh or Farr? On the Representation of Fantastic Creatures in the Sogdian 'Rustam Cycle' at Panjikent," *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology*, forthcoming volume 8.

6. The small horn and the dangling tongue present a clear parallel with the figure of another fantastic creature, the *mušhuššu* that in much earlier Mesopotamian art usually accompanies the main Babylonian god Marduk (Black and Green 1992, pp. 166, 177-78).

7. Compareti 2006a; Cristoforetti and Scarcia 2013, pp. 339-43; Shenkar 2014, pp. 131-33. The concept of *farr* was very important in ancient Iranian cultures and especially under the late Sasanians, because without his "glory" or "charisma" a king could not reign. Similar concepts are attested in many ancient cultures. It is very probable that the Iranian idea of *farr* had some connections with the concept of Sumerian *melam* (Akkadian *melammu*) that was expressed as a kind of halo around the gods. In some Assyrian sealings, the goddess Ishtar is represented as a crowned woman standing on a lion and surrounded by stars (Watanabe 1992). See also Shenkar 2014, Fig. 165. In ancient Mesopotamian art, no fantastic creature used as a symbol to represent the *melammu* is attested, although, as already observed in note 6 of this study, some characteristics of the pseudo-*simurgh* can possibly be considered borrowings of the monster-hypostasis of Marduk, the *mušhuššu*.

8. Trever 2005. The problem is now discussed in Compareti 2006a. Once more from eastern Iran, and specifically from Bactria, there comes a unique iconographical personification of the concept of *farr*, in Bactrian *pharro*. It is reproduced on inscribed Kushan gold coins as a male god sometimes resembling Hermes or a haloed man wearing a caftan with a spear in one hand and fire (or an undistinguished object) in the other (Gnoli 1996).

9. The *ketos* (sometimes even repeated two times) represents one of the most favored motifs to be found on Etruscan and later Roman sarcophagi (Shepard 1940, pp. 79-84).

10. Boardman 1987; Uehlinger 1999. Among the early 10th-century exterior reliefs of the Armenian church of Aght'amar (today in eastern Turkey) where many Biblical scenes can be observed, in the place of the *leviathan* there is a winged composite creature resembling both the *ketos* and the pseudo-*simurgh* (Compareti 1997-1999, p. 91; Compareti 2014, pp. 17-19). The Armenians just reproduced an iconography that was already attested in early Christian art for that specific sea monster.

11. Even if not expressly associated with the idea of *farr*, these motifs have already been collected in Azarpay 1975.

12. Shepherd and Henning 1959; Compareti 2006b. For recent ¹⁴C analysis on textiles of this type, see Verhecken-Lammens et al. 2006.

13. A third specimen very similar to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Moshchevaia Balka textiles is the so-called "Saint Helen shroud," at present kept in the Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris (Inv. 16364). According to a recent study, it should be dated to the 9th-century "Eastern Mediterranean or Iran (?)" (Demange 2006).

Plate II

[Compareti, Ancient Iranian," pp. 36, 41]



1 (above).. Silk textile.

2 (right). Cotton shirt with silk lining.

3 (below). Decoration of a silk caftan from Moshchevaia Balka, Russia. State Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. Kz 658



Photos courtesy of Carlo Cristi



Photo © Matteo Compareti