

SINO-IRANIAN TEXTILE PATTERNS IN TRANS-HIMALAYAN AREAS

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Between the 7th and 14th centuries, a recognized Central Asian textile iconography spread from the Tarim to the Mediterranean Basin. Mainly developed on complex structures, compositions of roundels (beaded or lobed) enclosing animals were woven in weft-faced compounds [Fig. 1]. A subset of textiles with such motifs and woven in that technique has come to be called *zandaniji*, even though, as we now know, the term is a misnomer.¹ Always referred as a cotton textile, the original *zandaniji* was produced in Zandana near Bukhara, one of the centers where this compound was mainly produced and traded (al-Narshakī 1954, pp. 15-20). Not much information has been gathered to date about the material and structure of this original textile. Nonetheless, given the proximity to China and the well-documented trade in silk as a raw or finished material, it is possible that the cotton structure at some point was replicated wholly or partially in silk. Pictorial evidence of the exchange in fabrics can be seen in the “Hall of the Ambassador” in Afrāsiyāb (present Samarkand) where, on the northern wall in a painting dating to the middle of the 7th century, Chinese people carry bolts of textiles and what may be silk cocoons (or possibly balls) as gifts for the local Sogdian ruler [Fig. 2]. The Sogdians undoubtedly played a key role in the manufacture and distribution of the so-called *zandaniji* textiles and ones closely related to them (Compareti 2003; de la Vaissière 2004, 2005).

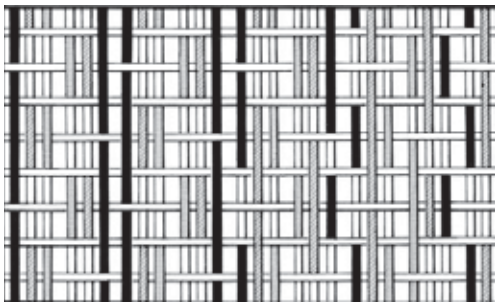
These textiles are generally recorded in Chinese sources under different names that seem to designate textiles distinguished by patterns from the western regions (Zhao and Wang 2013, pp. 369-73). Indeed, textiles similar to the one first identified as *zandaniji* (from a fragment found in Belgium), have been discovered in large quantities in what is now the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. There is good reason to hypothesize that many were manufactured there, where there were local communities of Sogdians (cf. Zhao 1999, p. 99; see also Sheng 1998). The weaving technique of the weft-faced compound, its pattern woven horizontally in the weft direction, originated in the West and came into China only in

Fig. 2. Detail from mural in the Hall of Ambassadors, Afrāsiyāb, Samarqand, Uzbekistan. Reconstruction by Al’baum, after: <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afraziab-ii-wall-paintings-2>>.

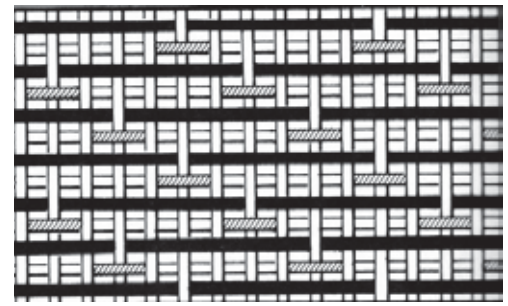


Fig. 1. Silk fragments with roundel designs, from Tang-period burials in the Astana Cemetery in Turfan. The second of the pieces has the “Sasanian duck” design. Collection of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Museum, Urumqi, photographed in the Gansu Provincial Museum by Daniel Waugh.





Figs. 3 and 4. Diagrams of warp- and weft-faced compounds. Reconstruction by author.



the 8th century, where it replaced the indigenous tradition of vertical, warp-faced compound textiles. [Figs. 3, 4]. Within the group of weft-faced textiles, a further distinction between those made within or outside China is whether the warp threads have a left (S) or right (Z) twist, the latter characteristic for the Central Asian weaves. The migration of motifs and techniques over time complicates any effort to specify the provenance of any particular example.

Our aim in this paper, which is part of a larger study, is to determine to what extent the technique and motifs of the so-called *zandaniji* textiles and their close relatives penetrated the Tibetan cultural region and to suggest how they might have arrived there and been transformed. Of particular importance is the evidence of the silks excavated at Dulan in Qinghai Province (northeastern Tibet) and a group of yet unpublished textiles studied by the author in the collection of the China National Silk Museum, which most likely came from the same area. Detailed analysis of the latter group is the larger project for which this article provides some context. The material documents how widespread was the vogue for these textiles, ranging across Asia from the Trans-Himalaya to the Mediterranean, well before the rise of the Mongol Empire in the 13th century.

While the early history of Tibet is difficult to reconstruct due to the paucity of sources and the opacity of those which we have (Beckwith 1987), we nonetheless have one striking and tantalizing image that may offer the earliest concretely datable evidence of a Tibetan interest in our group of textiles. As the Tibetan kingdom consolidated and was expanding in the 7th century, it came into contact with its vigorously expanding neighbor to the north, Tang Dynasty China. Military confrontations and diplomatic missions ensued, perhaps the most famous of the latter in 640 or 641 commemorated in a scroll *Emperor Taizong Gives an Audience to the Ambassador of Tibet* (*Buniantu*

步辇图) attributed to the Chinese painter Yan Liben 阎立本 (600-673) (the extant version may be a later Song Dynasty copy) [Fig. 5]. The scroll depicts the audience granted the Tibetan envoy by Tang Emperor Taizong. In the painting, the only character who wears a patterned robe, which clearly distinguishes him from the others, is the Tibetan ambassador. He is dressed in “Turkic style,” with a narrowly cut caftan and boots.



Fig. 5. *Bunian Du* 步辇图 [Emperor Taizong giving audience to an ambassador of Tibet] (detail), attributed to Yan Liben 阎立本 (600-673). After: <<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Emperor-Taizong-gives-an-audience-to-the-ambassador-of-Tibet.jpg>>.

The motif of roundels each framing a standing bird (a duck??) suggests the fabric likely was of Central Asian origin, possibly manufactured in the area that stretched from Sogdiana to the Gansu Province of China and where, in the 7th century, Tibetan and Turkic forces cooperated against China. Among the silk fragments found in Turfan are ones with such imagery.² Of course, we cannot be certain whether he really dressed that way, or whether the depiction was a deliberate effort by the painter either to show him attired in a rich gift from the Emperor or at very least garbed distinctively simply to make a statement about his “foreignness.” Other evidence, examined below, attests to such textiles having been known in Tibet, although whether prior to the establishment of contacts with Tang China is difficult to say.

There is a substantial scholarship on the history of the pearl roudel motif, although finding firmly dated evidence to draw up a careful chronology of its spread across Asia can be difficult (see especially Comparesi 2003). Murals in the Northern Qi 北齐 tomb of Xu Xianxiu 徐显秀 (d. 571 CE) at Taiyuan, Shanxi, depict robes decorated with pearl roundels that contain confronted animals, a vegetal pattern, and in one instance, unusual imagery of a human head [Fig. 6, next page] in a frontal pose. As Kate Lingley (2014, p. 9) has suggested, the source for this latter imagery may well be Buddhist iconography, an example of which is a stucco relief of Bodhisattva head in a pearl roundel found by Aurel Stein at Shorchuk and dating



Fig. 6. Wall painting (detail). Xu Xianxiu 徐显秀 tomb. Northern Qi 北齐 (550–557). Taiyuan, Shanxi, China. After: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Paintings_in_Xu_Xianxiu_Tomb_10.jpg>.

Fig. 7. Stucco relief with Bodhisattva head, from Silk Road site of Shorchuk, Xinjiang, Collection of the British Museum OA MAS 1108. Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh.

to the 6th or 7th century [Fig. 7]. There are, however, no extant textiles with such a design.³ An intriguing alternative hypothesis is the possibility that this and other pearl roundel designs were developed under the inspiration of the ruler images on Western coins (Gasparini 2014, pp. 142-43; Melikian-Chirvani 1991), as suggested in some Islamic sources and about which Chinese travelers remarked because they were so different from the standard Chinese coinage [Fig. 8]. Byzantine coins and bracteates imitating them, with front-facing ruler images, have been found in a good many tombs associated with Sogdians or others in China who clearly had foreign cultural tastes and contacts. Often such rarities were pierced so they could be sewn as decorations on garments. Sasanian silver dirhams, quite common in many of those same tombs, had ruler images, but in profile, the heads surrounded by a pattern of raised dots that would be analogous to the pearl roundel.

Fig. 8. Coins found along the Silk Road: left to right -- 1) gold solidus of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (Constantinople issue, 537–542), found in the tomb of Tian Hong (d. 575), Guyuan, Ningxia, collection of the Guyuan Museum; 2-3) Sasanian silver dirhams, collection of the Gansu Provincial Museum; 4) bronze coin of standard Chinese design, issued in the Gaochang Kingdom (499–640), collection of the British Museum (Stein, *Innermost Asia*, X.d.4). Photographs courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh.



Other evidence from paintings attests to the popularity of the pearl roundel motif. Several of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang even allow for a tentative chronology of how the iconography employing it evolved, the Sui Dynasty (581-617) seeming to mark a transition period in which the depictions of animals within the pearl borders gave way by the subsequent Tang Dynasty to their replacement with floral motifs (in the first instance, lotus blossoms).⁴ The Bodhisattvas in Cave 427 (possibly as early as the 580s) are dressed in a dazzling array of textiles. Phoenixes are shown within pearl-bordered rhomboids, whereas the

pearl roundels contain lotus blossoms. Roughly contemporary (approximately mid-Sui, no precise date known) is Cave 420, where the dhosis of the Bodhisattva statues have what Whitfield has described as “Sasanian-type” pearl roundels, containing, it appears, a mounted hunter spearing a feline. Another of the Sui caves, No. 277, has pearl roundels with confronted winged horses [Figs. 9a, b, next page]. By the early Tang though, both in Cave 57 and in Cave 220 (built in 641 CE), the fabrics with pearl roundels contain blossoms (Whitfield 1995, pp. 57, 78, 179, 241, 242, 296; Dunhuang 1981-1987, Vol. 2, Figs. 62, 63, 120). This did not mean the end of interest in roundels with animal motifs, witness the fabrics depicted on the pillow under the head of the giant Buddha in Parinirvana in Cave No. 158 [Fig. 10] (Whitfield 1995, p. 103, Fig. 125; Dunhuang 1981-1987, Vol. 4, Fig. 63), constructed in 839, near the end of the period of Tibetan rule in Dunhuang. While the roundels now include stylized lotus petals around the pearls, they contain a bird with the ribbon in its beak (the so-called “Sasanian duck”), iconography found in the earlier Cave 60 of the Kizil Grottoes and also in the silks excavated at Astana in Turfan and Dulan in Qinghai (see below) [Fig. 11].



Textile designs in Buddhist caves, clockwise starting upper left: Figs. 9a,b) in the Sui period murals of the Mogao Caves: a) dhoti of Bodhisattva statue, Cave 420; b) west wall above altar niche, Cave 277. After: Dunhuang 1981-1987, Vol. 2, Figs. 63, 120; Fig. 10) Detail of pillow under the head of the Buddha in Parinirvana, Mogao Cave 158. After: Dunhuang 1981-1987, Vol. 4, Fig. 63; Fig. 11) "Sasanian duck" images, mural fragment from Kizil Cave 60, of uncertain date but likely as early as 6th century. Now in the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, MIK III 8419. After: Kizil 1989-1997, Vol. 3, Fig. 188.

In most traditional societies, as Matthew Canepa recently argued (2009, esp. Ch. 9) specifically with reference to Iran and Byzantium, the visual embodiment of royal power and prestige in part was to be found in rulers' attire. Thus it should not surprise us to see in the Buddhist caves divinities garbed in "royal" textiles, themselves possibly modeled on ones which had arrived in China from the West. Even though in the period to which these caves date there were influences from central China at Dunhuang, located as it is at the eastern border of what the Chinese termed the "Western Regions" it was very much open to the artistic tastes coming from Central

Asia. Dunhuang also had important connections with Tibet, culminating in more than six decades of Tibetan rule from 781-847.

While establishing a solid chronology in Central Asia and the West for the emergence of the pearl roundels is also problematic, we can find impressive examples to illustrate their popularity in royal imagery, at least some of which is displayed in religious or ritual contexts. On the rock reliefs in the grottoes at Taq-e Bustan in Iran, dating from the 7th century, the rulers and their attendants are garbed in textiles that have pearl roundel motifs framing not a human figure or face but rather an exotic creature commonly, if questionably, termed a *simurgh* [Fig. 12, next page] (cf. Compareti 2013; 2015, esp. pp. 37-38). The famous murals in the "Hall of the Ambassadors" at Sogdian Afrasiab, dating from ca. 660, include several examples of individuals



Fig. 12 (left). Rock relief (detail), in the large grotto at Taq-i Bustan, Iran, 7th century. Photograph courtesy of Matthew Canepa.

Fig. 13 (right). Detail from procession mural in the “Hall of the Ambassadors,” Afrāsiyāb, Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Photograph courtesy of Matteo Compareti.



in the royal procession dressed in garments with pearl roundel or pearl bordered designs, framing a boar’s head, or a “simurgh”, or a bird with a ribbon in its beak (Compareti 2009b, 2011) [Fig. 13]. Textile designs in Sogdiana also included floral motifs assumed to depict those on Chinese silks. The procession in the Afrasiab painting seems to be related to a Zoroastrian ritual. Analogous pearl roundel imagery with the boar’s head decorates the garment of one of the donor figures normally considered to be Tocharians or Sogdians in a mural from Cave No. 8 in the Kizil grottoes along the Northern Silk Road, presumably built during the Sui or early Tang period (*Along* 1982, p. 168; see Vignato 2006, p. 406, citing Su Bai on the dating) [Fig. 14]. Boar’s head roundels decorated the caves above the now-destroyed Buddha statues

at Bamiyan (e.g., Musée Guimet Inv. MG 17972 and 17973), from the 6th or 7th century. And, importantly, a weft-faced compound-weave textile fragment with Z-twisted warps, buried in the Turfan Astana graveyard in 661 CE, has the boar’s head in a pearl roundel (Zhao 1999, pp. 110-11; Kuhn and Zhao 2012, p. 215, fig. 5.8).



The relatively numerous painted or sculpted images depicting such textiles are limited for our analysis in that they do not allow us to examine weaving techniques. The textiles themselves, given their fragility, are less evenly distributed. In fact for the period between the 6th and 10th centuries no datable examples have been found so far in the *central* Iranian or Chinese territories. Rather, the excavated examples we have come from the “periphery” along the various branches of the silk roads. The Turfan examples are especially well known and abundant, most from the well-preserved tombs at the Astana Cemetery in the Gaochang Kingdom. Another important location of textile finds is the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, where

Fig. 14. Detail of garments on worshippers, Kizil Cave 8 (Cave of the Sixteen Sword-Bearers), late 6th or 7th century. Collection of Museum of Asian Art, Berlin MIK III 8691. Photograph courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh.

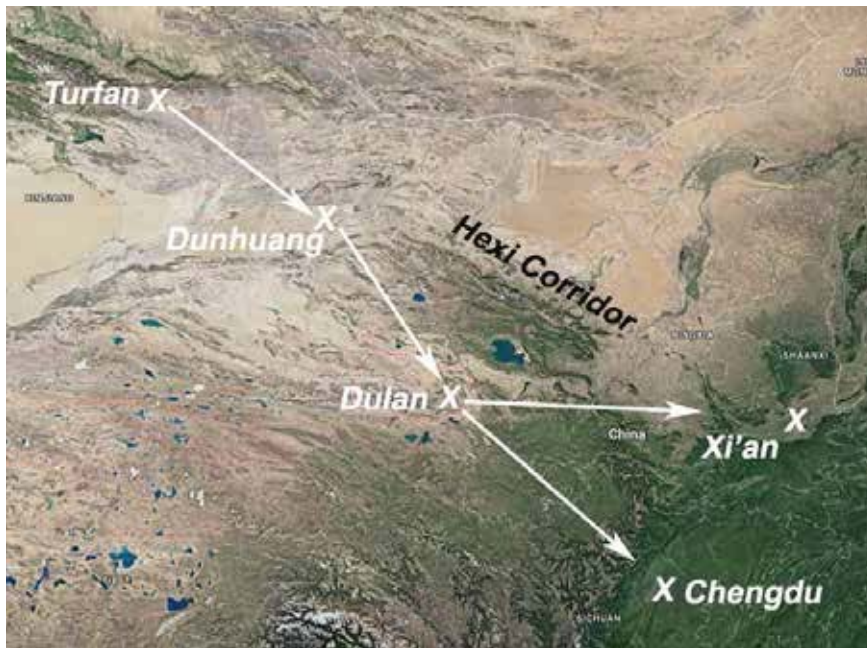


Fig. 15. Map indicating schematically the Qinghai "Silk Route". Satellite photo: Google Earth.

many pieces of banners incorporate the same fabrics which would have been used to make garments. Silk Road studies have paid less attention to some major recent discoveries along the "southern" road, crossing through Qinghai and linking Sichuan and areas of northern Tibet with Xinjiang.

The royal Tibetan tombs at Dulan in the Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, were excavated in 1980s and '90s. This area was first inhabited by a presumably nomadic people the Chinese sources call the Qiang 羌 and then by the Tuyuhun 吐谷浑 (a northern nomadic group), who created a substantial Inner Asian Empire extending into the Tarim Basin. In the 7th century, caught between Tang China and the emerging Tubo 吐蕃 (Tibetan) Kingdom, the Tuyuhun were dispersed or absorbed. Although vanquished as a political force by the Tibetans, the Tuyuhun maintained their social and cultural activities centered in Dulan. The tombs there, probably belonging to the Tuyuhun royalty, are distinguished by accompanying horse burials, confirming the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, and by rich artifacts which document the centrality of the region on an important route of the Silk Road (Xu 2006; "New Discoveries" 2005) [Fig. 15]. The Qinghai route may at least for a time have been more important for East-West exchange than the better known Hexi corridor route to its north. Artifacts in the Dulan tombs include a lot of Sogdian silver, some Sasanian coins, and a wide range of silks, approximately one-sixth of whose 130 categories have been provenanced as originating in Central or Western Asia, while others evidence the influence of the Central and West Asian motifs even if the provenance of manufacture is less

certain (the majority of the Dulan silks are of Chinese origin). The textile finds from Dulan, Turfan and Dunhuang taken together enable one to establish a chronology of change in decorative patterns and weaving techniques for the period roughly from the Sui through to the end of the Tang Dynasty (see esp. Kuhn and Zhao 2012, pp. 213-29).

While the earliest examples often have a Hellenistic or Central Asian iconography that might be linked to Bactria, the later types combine Irano-Turkic and Chinese elements. The Dulan textiles include imagery of the sun god, adapted from Hellenistic motifs into a

Buddhist context (Zhao 2015, pp. 129-31); there are early examples of textiles with honeysuckle designs which derive from depictions of acanthus leaves common in the West (Kuhn and Zhao 2012, pp. 198-201). Somewhat later examples with Western motifs, dating from perhaps the late 6th century, include a silk depicting drinkers with a large wine jug. An analogous example found at Astana places them in a pearl roundel (Zhao 1999, pp. 106-07). Another of the Dulan textiles dated to about the same time depicts pearl roundels alternating between ones containing confronted peacocks and confronted rams (Ibid., pp. 108-09).

Ideally, we would find explicit evidence from Dulan to support a hypothesis about the involvement of Iranian people who migrated into Xinjiang and Qinghai following the collapse of the Sasanian empire and the subsequent Arab conquest of Sogdiana. The evidence, however, is indirect, if compelling, in its reinforcement of an explicit western connection. One of the Dulan silks, a very early *kesi* tapestry fragment, most likely developed from from the ancient Iranian woolen *gelim*, which can be traced back to the 10th century BCE (Wu 2006, p. 229). The introduction of textiles into which designs were woven with gold threads is credited in a late Sui Dynasty text (the *Sui Shu*, Ch. 68) to the arrival of emissaries from Persia. The Dulan tombs contain the earliest extant example of such a weaving with gold (Kuhn and Zhao 2012, pp. 224-26). A motif known as the "Sasanian duck" is known from murals in Kizil Cave 60, dated between the end of the 6th and the early 8th centuries (Along 1982, p. 82) and, as noted above, is depicted in roundels in Mogao Cave 158 (dated 839). One of the Dulan silks

depicts this same bird with a ribbon in its beak, the textile probably dating to the 9th century, the warp-faced technique employing Z-twisted warps (the technique common to Central Asia weavings) (Zhao 1999, pp. 114-15). Here the roundel no longer has the pearl design but rather is composed of lotus petals, but the ribbon and the platform on which the bird stands have the pearl design.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the Dulan silks is a band, weft-faced with the Z twisted warp threads, on which is a Pahlavi inscription mentioning the Iranian title “The Great King of Kings.” Xu Xinguo, who excavated the Dulan tombs and emphasizes the significance of what he calls the Qinghai Silk Road, argues that this can be linked to the presence in Xinjiang of Narseh, son of the Sasanian king, Peroz III (636-679), who had fled to China and was received by the Tang court in 661 (Xu 2006, pp. 280-81; see also Zhao 1999, pp. 114-15). The weavers from the West were responsible for the fact, that, in Xu’s words, “Sogdian and Persian brocades had become indispensable items of decoration and dress for the Tubo people.” The weaving with the inscription is one of the rare textile examples which have survived that are made in a technique called in French *à retour*, which sees the alternated sequence of colors in the weaving process [Fig. 16]. Another example of this technique is

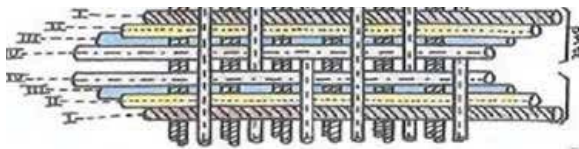


Fig. 16. Diagram of *à retour* weaving sequence alternating colors in the process that counts: 1-2-3-4 / 4-3-2-1 (or less). By author.

in a Byzantine textile depicting a man “taming” two lions (a motif well established in the Middle East and Central Asia) which was deposited in a late 8th century reliquary in the Cathedral of Sens in France (Chartraire 1911; for an image, also Daguin, n.d.). That same cathedral treasury contains what Zhao Feng terms “one of the most representative of Sogdian textiles,” depicting confronted lions, a design also known from examples found in the Mogao Caves (Zhao 1999, pp. 120-21).

Using the technical information from an analysis of the Dulan silks, I have been able to analyze another group held in the China National Silk Museum, which



Fig. 18. Silk caftan (detail). Weft-faced compound with roundel enclosing two facing horses, and external crossed felines. Possibly from Qinghai, 9th-10th century. Collection of the China National Silk Museum. Photo by author.



Fig. 17. Floating threads on the recto of a weft-faced compound fragment, possibly from Qinghai. Collection of the China National Silk Museum. Photo by author.

was acquired through the Chinese art market, and, I believe, comes from Qinghai. Most of these Central Asian compounds have identical repeated patterns but of different dimensions, although the number of the threads used for each single graphic unit is the same. This “mistake” is most likely due to the lack of a reed in the loom; a sort of comb that equally divides the threads. If this is missing, the threads are loose. Furthermore, due to the thickness of the warp, they show a sort of “pixel-effect” outline that is much more evident in Central Asian than in Western or Eastern Asian compounds. On those from Qinghai, we can also find floating threads on the back twisted in the Z direction, a technique that appears at the very end of the Tang dynasty [Fig. 17].

The collection in the China National Silk Museum includes very rare and refined Central Asian Sino-Iranian patterns. Among the most interesting pieces are:

- a robe with a repetition of facing horses in a lotus roundel combined with crossed felines, similar to what can be seen on what is possibly a Sasanian silver dish in the National Library of France [Fig. 18];
- a triangular fragment with unique standing *senmuro* [Fig. 19], the zoomorphic Iranian creature that most probably, like other Central Asian animals on textiles, was originally in a pair on a winged pedestal;
- a fragment with Sasanian ducks [Fig. 20], combined with another

type of bird, which is only partially visible on the surface (possibly the most popular Turfanese-style pheasant or peacock);

•and a large and thick fragment with partially visible beaded roundels of different sizes enclosing animals and galloping horses. Graphically reconstructed [Fig. 21], this composition appeared to be too large for clothing. It was made with four panels, each 90 cm wide, intended, I believe, for the interior of a tomb in order to recreate a tent for the afterlife, similar to ones still in use today.

Other areas of Tibetan cultural traditions contain evidence of the kind



Fig. 19. Silk fragment with standing *senmurv*, possibly from Qinghai. Collection of the China National Silk Museum. Photo by author.

Fig. 20. Silk fragment with images of "Sasanian ducks," possibly from Qinghai. Collection of the China National Silk Museum. Photo by author.

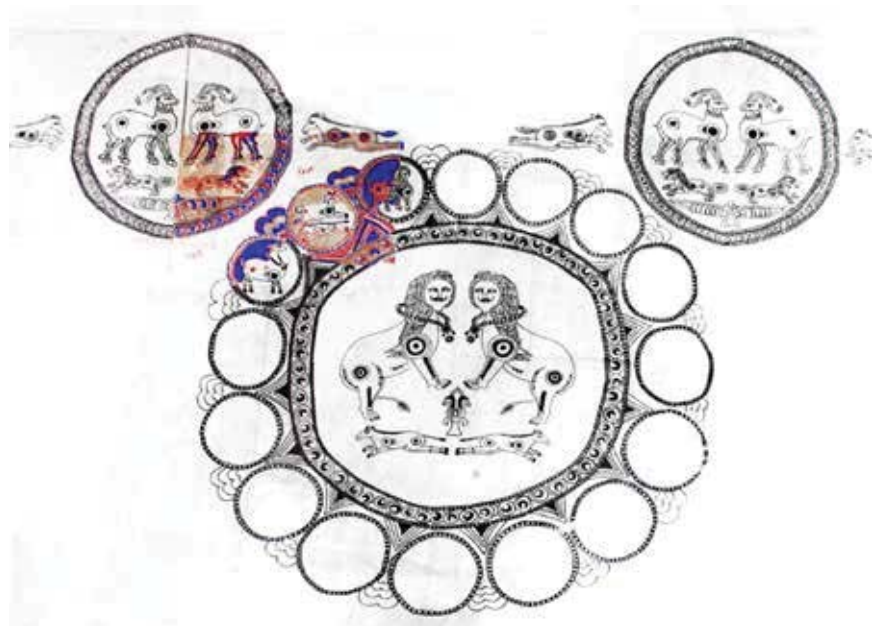


Fig. 22. Façade of Sumtsek Temple, Alchi, Ladakh region, India. Photo by Baldin: <<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Alchi01Sumtsek.jpg>>.

of common Turco-Iranian Central Asian heritage evidenced in the textiles found in Qinghai. In the Western Himalayas, in Ladakh in what is now northern India, a group of Kashmiri painters recorded a unique iconography that preserves evidence of the popularity of the Central Asian textiles. The most famous of the early Buddhist monastic complexes established in the region is Alchi on the Indus River, at an altitude of 3,750 meters [Fig. 22]. Even though the building is still under threat due to the deterioration of its structure, fortunately the three-storey Sumtsek temple, erected in the early 13th century and containing a most impressive array of murals, has been carefully documented and photographed (Groeppe and Poncar 1996).⁵ The portal is in Kashmiri style, but the interior reveals a much more complex combination of styles and patterns from the surrounding areas. Apart from the imposing clay statues of four Bodhisattvas, the interior's dazzling murals include narrative scenes combining religious and secular iconography, mandalas, and abundant depictions of textiles either on the figures or as decoration on ceilings and backgrounds. The paintings still invite study for the important information they contain regarding the multi-ethnic society of the time.

Fig. 21. Graphic reconstruction of a large silk fragment with roundels of different sizes enclosing animals and with galloping horses. Collection of the China National Silk Museum. Photo by author.



Fig. 23. Female deity riding a horse (detail), mural on east entrance wall, Sumtsek temple, Alchi. Early 13th century. Photo by author.

Fig. 24 a,b. Libation scene (detail), mural, Dukhang Temple, Alchi. Photo (a) by author; (b) by Jaroslav Poncar, after: <https://whav.aussereurop.univie.ac.at/display/2008/05/20/ead1e1ac549e49a39f3aea-c30acc7ba_display_image.jpg>.

For example, to the right below the central image of the demonic protector *Mahākāla* on the east entrance wall is a female deity riding a horse or mule accompanied on wild animal mounts by four smaller attendants, one of whom holds a parasol over her head (Ibid., p. 35) [Fig. 23]. While most who comment on this image seem to emphasize her wonderful peacock-feather cape, our gaze is drawn to her robe decorated with large roundels, in each of which are crossed lions identical with those on the caftan in the China National Silk Museum. The pose of the deity's mount is reminiscent of that of the confronted horses enclosed in lotus roundels on that same caftan. Another interesting example is in a miniature depicting



the royal palace, painted on the dhoti of the colossal statue of Avalokiteshvara. The king wears a jacket decorated with roundels containing some kind of animal, where “we can still recognize motifs of textile ornamentation ... which point to Iranian or Central Asian connections” (Ibid., p. 51 [caption]).

As we can see from the paintings in Alchi, deities and royals are depicted with identical or very similar clothing. But who are these people? The royal couple depicted on the dhoti at Alchi, who have “Indian” features, may well be the ruler of Kashmir and his consort, but the ethnic realities in the region would seem to have been complex in the period when the paintings were executed. Not much is known about the region before the 9th century. According to Indian sources, its original rulers were Indian, to be replaced by the Tibetans only around the 10th century. Nevertheless, characters depicted in the Alchi temples have both Indo-Iranian and Turko-Mongol features. In the libation scene in the Dukhang (the main building of the monastic complex) [Fig. 24],

while the central male figure, identified as the king, is dressed in Turkic fashion and is holding an ax, the woman who offers him a cup has a lighter skin tone, long hair with a central circular jewel on the forehead. The halo and the almost equal seating posture suggest she should be seen as the king's wife. Her hairstyle and the red painted hand – traditional in Buddhist iconography – suggest she is one of the indigenous population. According to Marjo Alafouzo, who conducted extensive research on the painting, while there is little evidence of cup rites and female cupbearers in Tibetan sources, Islamic-Turkic written sources instead refer to such rites in the pre-Islamic Turkic period in Central Asia, in particular among descendants of the Toquz Oghuz tribes (Alafouzo 2008, 2014; Compareti 2009a; Flood 1991).

It can be no coincidence that the king (of possible Turco-Iranian origin) depicted on the Dukhang's wall is dressed in a costume whose textiles display roundels enclosing a feline and a *ṭirāz* band on his arms; a

fashion in vogue between the 10th and 13th centuries among Muslims. The check-patterned fabric that he is wearing as belt, appears depicted among Mongol Islamic miniatures. The term *ṭirāz* which is a loan Persian term meaning “embroidery,” today mainly refers to a type of cloth in cotton or linen decorated with a simple religious Arabic inscription which could be woven, embroidered, painted, or printed. The inscription could also name workshops that produced the textile itself, where production and distribution were closely regulated by sumptuary laws. Armbands with such inscriptions came to be restricted to lavish, royal and noble clothes called *khil’a*, such as the type depicted in Alchi (Stillman et al 2012).

In the same hall of the Dukhang, adjoining the libation scene is one depicting the king frontally, with two attendants at his sides. Below in a damaged and faded mural is a scene showing a tent with people dressed in various fashions [Fig. 25]. The image of the



Fig. 25. Mural detail, Dukhang temple, Alchi, showing tent and attendants. Photo by Jaroslav Poncar, after: <https://whav.aussereurop.univie.ac.at/display/2008/05/20/4e7c1e-71de674225925744a8d84dd4d7_display_image.jpg>.

king and the attendants recalls depictions on earlier Central Asian silverware. A silver dish, now in the Hermitage Museum, shows a central figure (possibly a king) wearing a double-lapel robe and a Sasanian crown, and two attendants wearing a boat-like hat, like those widely depicted in Alchi (and similar to the type in used today). A number of Central Asian visual sources (for example, the painting in the Hall of the Ambassador in Samarkand) suggest that the double-lapel was the type of robe preferred among different people of mostly Turkic, rather than Iranian origin. Undoubtedly, as an important crossroads, Central Asia created its own style, combining elements from neighboring cultures. Even if its silk with floral medallions can be easily traced to China, both early and later medieval textiles in Central Asia had stronger Iranian and Turko-Mongol features, ones which then were transmitted to Trans-Himalayan areas (Singh 2006, p. 15).

As al-Maqdisi, the 10th-century Arab geographer declared, “The Tibetans had the flat noses of the Türks and the brown skin of the Indians, and wore garments of Chinese style.” He described “Tubbat” (Tibet) as a territory belonging to the land of Türks (Akasoy et al. 2011, pp. 22-23). Although the identity of the people in the libation scenes cannot be fully discerned, my analysis of the costumes and the textiles from Qinghai would indicate that at least in the period of the 12th and 13th centuries (the likely date of the paintings), the Ladakhi ruler (and the men of his entourage), most likely were of Turkic origins, integrated in a local Trans-Himalayan context that had absorbed an ancient Central Asian artistic heritage.

The preservation of a common Central Asian textile imagery along and beyond Trans-Himalayan routes is evidence not only of a constant form of trade and gift exchange, which changed little over the centuries, but also of a provincialized form of power in “peripheral areas” by indigenous groups who sometimes identified themselves with the Turco-Iranian or the earlier Sino-Sogdian elite. Zoomorphic patterns were generally preferred to flowers, which instead appear among Chinese textiles, especially during the Tang period. Each geographical area seems to have had preferred decorative patterns and somewhat differentiated weaving production. However, these regional differences were also readjusted multiple times, losing their original meaning and acquiring a new identity that was often combined with a new color palette. The unpublished textile collection in the China National Silk Museum is an important discovery for the analysis of Central Asian textile imagery, and confirms that there was a specific Sino-Iranian production with strong Turco-Mongol elements in Qinghai Province. Preserved over the centuries in these “peripheral areas,” Central Asian textile imagery had a great impact on various Eurasian populations that adapted it to their own customs and made it as an indigenous product.

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NOTES

1. Walter Henning and Dorothy Shepherd (1959; Shepherd 1980) analyzed an inscription on a textile with beaded roundels enclosing confronted deer, discovered in the Church of Notre-Dame in Huy, Belgium. They read the inscription as Sogdian, the reference being to a village of Zandana near Bukhara. A re-examination of the inscription by Nicholas Sims-Williams and Geoffrey Khan (2008 [2012]), determined that it is in Arabic and refers to the monetary value of the textile. As they indicated (p. 209), ¹⁴C analysis

has confirmed a date of probably no earlier than the late 8th century for the piece. For a recent survey of the group of textiles with the indicated decorative motifs that generally are assumed to have come from Central or Western Asia into what is now China or at least been influenced by styles from those regions, see Zhao 1999, pp. 95-99; Kuhn and Zhao 2012, pp. 213-20. The so-called *zandaniji* group is a weft-faced compound twill distinguished by a wide spectrum of particularly bright colors and certain confronted animal images.

2. A silk fragment whose design may bear the closest resemblance to that on the robe in the painting (something that is a bit difficult to determine from the pictures of the latter) is in Li Jian 2003, Cat. No. 38, p. 104, identified there as coming from the Gaochang Kingdom in the early 7th century, excavated in the Astana Cemetery. That same fragment is reproduced in Kuhn and Zhao 2012, p. 218, fig. 5.15, but with the (erroneous?) indication it is from the Dulan Cemetery in Qinghai. If in fact from the latter, the correlation with the ambassador's robe is all the more interesting.

3. Surviving examples of human or human-like motifs on textiles include a couple of possibly Sasanian fragments with human faces and foliage from Egypt and a later Byzantine fragment depicting roundels enclosing a human figure, possibly the Emperor (in the Musée des Tissus in Lyon, and in the Treasury of the Cathedral of Sens).

4. Arguably, as I will explain further in my forthcoming book, the very first example of a pearl roundel on textile is on the Pazyryk carpet, the oldest carpet in the world, which might be an Achaemenid gift to semi-nomad peoples of the Altai in the last half of the first millennium BCE. The stags on the carpet are depicted with internal organs, some of which are identical to those reproduced on the bodies of the animals on "zandaniji" weaves. At some point these organs, mostly carrying cosmologic meanings (moon, sun etc.) were transformed in small rosettes (of the Byzantine types) and lost their original meaning.

5. Apart from the superb publication by Groepper and Poncar, for photographs from Alchi one should use the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna <<https://whav.aussereurop.univie.ac.at/>>, which includes not only images from Sumtsek but also, importantly from the Dukhang temple. Much of the photography is Poncar's. The website shows decently sized but nonetheless reduced images; the archive itself contains large tiffs, which require a password to access.