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Lions, Silks and Silver: The Influence of Sasanian Persia

by

Heleanor Feltham

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Figure 1. C4th CE Sasanian silver gilt plate of the king Shapur II hunting lions.¹

¹ Ryoichi Hayashi, *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in: Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art*, vol. 6 (New York/Tokyo: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1975); Hermitage Museum collection
http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/hm3_5_4a.htm

While the Gandhara style was developing under the Kushan rulers of Central Asia, Christianity was evolving in the divided Roman Empire, and Buddhism was establishing itself in the equally divided empire of China, Persia was once again united under a local dynasty, the Sasanian, becoming the most stable, entrepreneurial, and politically significant power within Eurasia. It was that dynasty's luxury goods and its lion imagery (figure 1), based on earlier Persian models of power, protection, and status, that came to dominate the arts of the Silk Road countries, and would continue to do so long after the last of the dynasty had fled to China.²

The Sasanian Empire (224–637 AD) was founded by Ardashir I, who claimed descent from the old Achaemenid rulers of Persia. With popular support, he spearheaded a movement to restore Iranian rule after several centuries of first Seleucid Greek and then Parthian rule.³ Under Ardashir and his successor, Shapur I, the Sasanian empire re-expanded to include most of Central Asia and areas of North India, countries such as Sogdia and Bactria once again becoming *satrapies*, semi-independent regions that retained local traditions, trade, and often dynasties under the rule of a centrally-appointed satrap (figure 2).

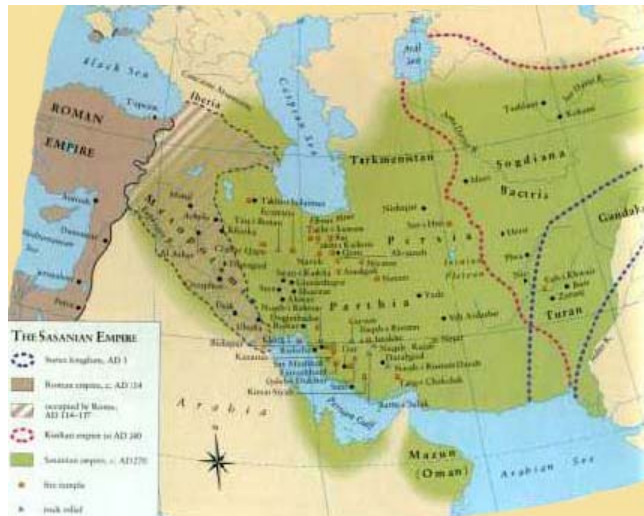


Figure 2. Map of Sasanian Iran.⁴

² Recorded in the *Jiu Tangshu* (Old Book of Tang), compiled in the 940s. Peroz, son of the last Sasanid ruler, eventually became a general in the Tang army.

³ Iransaga, Persian History and Culture, available at: <http://www.art-arena.com/iran.htm> Accessed 5 Sept. 2003

⁴ The Near East in Late Antiquity: The Sasanian Empire, available at: ecai.org/sasanianweb/ Accessed 10 Sept. 2004

The rise of Sasanian Iran coincided with a period of Chinese disunity. The fall of the Han dynasty in 220 AD was followed by political divisions, invasions from the North, mass migrations to the South, and religious and cultural disunity that lasted 350 years until the brief Sui restoration of unity (581–617) was followed by the expansionist Tang dynasty (618–906). The same pattern of disunity and internal conflicts was also largely true of the Roman Empire, until the emergence of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) as a major power under Justinian (ruled 527–565).

In the sixth century the pressure on the Sasanian world of these emerging empires was exacerbated by two major migrations of nomadic Central Asian people, the invasions of North India and the oases cultures of Central Asia by the Hephthalite Huns,⁵ beginning in the late fifth century AD; and the mid-sixth-century invasion of the Central Asian steppes by the first Turkic Khaganate, a move that saw the Sogdians, formerly part of the Persian empire, acting as administrators and ambassadors to the nomads.⁶ While the Persians allied themselves militarily with the Turks to overthrow the Hephthalites, they later mortally insulted them by publicly offending their first silk trading mission, and murdering the second,⁷ initiating an unnecessary and self-defeating state of war, since the Persians were also in conflict with Byzantium in the west, and fighting on both these fronts left them vulnerable to the sudden and unexpected rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula. The Arabs' aggressive policy of expansion and conversion saw Persia incorporated into the new Islamic world in 637. Central Asia became the subject of further Arab invasions in 719 and 739. Arab power was largely consolidated after the decisive battle of the Talas River in 751, when combined Arab and Turkic forces defeated the Tang Chinese army, effectively quashing China's expansionist involvement in the politics of Central Asia.⁸

⁵ The White Huns — the Hephthalites, Silk Road Foundation <http://www.silk-road.com/toc/index.html> Accessed 24 Aug. 2004

⁶ V. Raspopova and G. Shishkina, Central Asia in the Early Middle Ages: Introduction to the History of the Regions; Sogd: Available at: http://www.kroraina.com/ca/h_sogd.html Accessed 30 Aug. 2004

⁷ Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009)

⁸ Ibid.

But for most of the four hundred years of Sasanian rule, the Persians were the dominant culture of the Silk Road. Their style, expressed through key trade items and diplomatic gifts, especially the silks and metalwares produced in the imperial workshops,⁹ became a visual lingua franca, found dispersed from Japan to Europe. The lion, symbol of kingship, power, prestige, and protection of sacred spaces, was a dominant motif on both silverware and silks, either as the dying lion which confers status on its royal hunter (figures 1, 9) or as the guardian lion of the empire.



Figure 3. C8th textile of Sasanian Persian or Sogdian origin combining hunt and animal combat motifs.¹⁰

⁹ Prudence Harper and Pieter Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period. Vol 1. Royal Imagery* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1981)

¹⁰ Roman Ghirshman, *Iran, Parthians and Sasanians* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962)

Of the two forms of production, silk was probably the more influential. Initially raw silk was imported along the Silk Road from China to the near East, mainly to Persia and Byzantine Syria, where it was then dyed and woven into twills and brocades. The value-added textiles were then re-exported back along the trade routes to China and beyond to Japan or shipped westward to Byzantium and the emerging kingdoms of Europe.¹¹ As more and more Central Asian and Western cultures acquired knowledge of sericulture, the designs were widely copied, often using the draw loom developed in Persia.¹² By the eighth century, Sasanian motifs are found as both imported goods and locally produced copies from sources as dispersed as Spain, Byzantium, Japan, Sogdiana, and China (figures 7, 9, 12, 13).¹³

Sericulture originated in China, and rapidly became important as the defining female contribution to the family economy, practiced by all classes from the empress to the peasant. According to legend, around 2700 BC Leizu, wife of the mythical and creative Yellow Emperor Huangdi, sat beneath a mulberry tree sipping her tea, when a fat, white cocoon fell into her cup. As she fished it out she found a loose thread, which she unwound and unwound, until her lap was full of a long, fine, shining heap of unspun silk. Inspired by the beauty of the thread, she gathered cocoons until she had sufficient thread to weave a sumptuous robe for her husband. Over time she learned how to select the finest cocoons, allow their moths to emerge and mate, keep the eggs at an even temperature until they hatched, and care for the worms as they gorged themselves on the leaves of the white mulberry, and how to unwind and reel and spin and dye the glistening threads. And so the art of sericulture was born, and Leizu became a goddess.¹⁴

In reality sericulture developed in China possibly as early as 7000 years ago,¹⁵ as

¹¹ W. Fritz Volbach, *Early Decorative Textiles* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969)

¹² Étienne De la Vaissière (Trans. James Ward), *Sogdian Traders, a History: Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 8: Central Asia, Vol. 10, Sogdian Traders* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005)

¹³ Philippa Scott, *The Book of Silk* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993)

¹⁴ Leizu, available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leizu> Accessed 28 January 2010

¹⁵ History of Silk, Silk Road Foundation, <http://www.silk-road.com/art1/silkhistory.shtml> Accessed 2 Feb. 2004, and History of Sericulture, Cultural Etymology digest 1, <http://www.insects.org/ced1/seric.html> Accessed 2 Feb. 2004

evidenced by fabric fragments and spinning tools from sites along the lower Yangzi River. By the Han dynasty (202 BC–221 AD), reeling and spinning silk were considered household duties for women, and in every silk-producing district a large part of each day was devoted to the feeding and care of silkworms and the unravelling, spinning, weaving, dying, and embroidering of silk.¹⁶

While there are several species of silk-producing moths found in a number of countries, sericulture in China focussed on the slow development of a particular type of moth, *Bombyx mori*. Blind and flightless, it can exist only with human intervention, and it will eat only the white mulberry, which was also unique to China. As well, the process of rearing the delicate worms, which must be kept at a fixed temperature, fed regularly, and moved into new trays as they grow, the need to care for the mulberry trees, the specialised cocoon boxes — all the infrastructure of silk production — required specialised knowledge, technology, and skills.

¹⁶ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997)

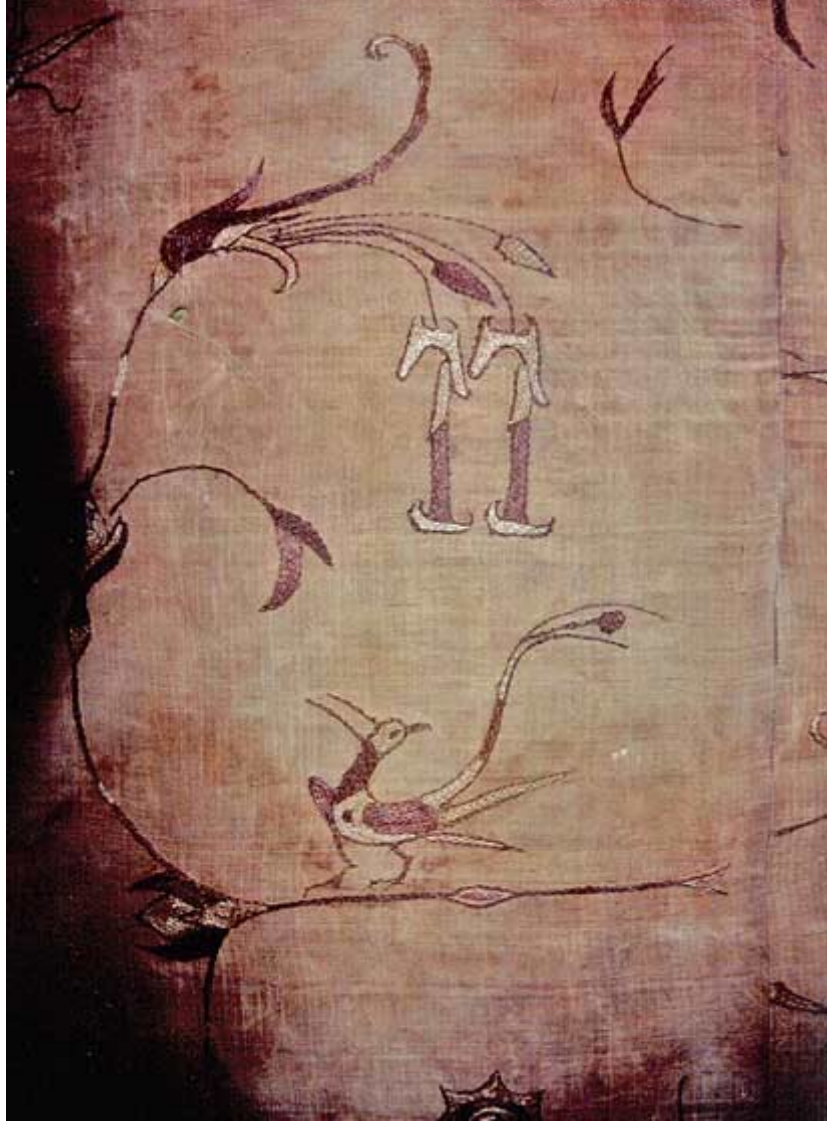


Figure 4. Fragment of Chinese silk found in an ice tomb at Pazyryk in the Altai.
Warring States period 475–221 BC.¹⁷

Sericulture spread throughout China, and silk became a highly valued commodity, functioning much like coinage. Taxes were paid in lengths of woven cloth, representatives of foreign powers were presented with gifts of silk, nomads exchanged horses for it, dowries included it, civil servants and military officers received it as part of their salary, and trade was

¹⁷ S. E. Rudenko, *The World's Oldest Carpets and Textiles from the Altai Mountain Kurgans* (Moscow: Art Publishers, 1968)

stimulated by it (figure 4).¹⁸ Long before the Silk Road was officially 'opened' by the Emperor Wudi in 139 BC, silk was finding its way east and west from China.¹⁹ The oldest known example of silk outside China comes from the hair of a 21st Dynasty (around 1000 BC) female mummy from the workers' cemetery of Dar el Medina,²⁰ though it does not appear to have been used for garments prior to the Ptolemaic period (post 300 BC).

Silk has also been found in the Scythian nomad tombs at Pazyryk in the Altai, dating from the fifth to the third centuries BC (figure 4), and even in Celtic tombs of the La Tène culture,²¹ in sites as far apart as Scotland and Germany, where silk threads were used in embroidering the clothes of the aristocracy. It is also likely that raw silk, reaching Greece by way of the Black Sea and its Scythians, was woven into textiles at Cos,²² though the relatively accurate description of silkworms and cocoons given by Aristotle was long forgotten by the first century AD, and the Romans largely believed that silk grew on trees. All of this indicates the breadth of trade connections from China to the West in the pre-Han period, and the value placed on silk. Much of this trade would have passed through Achaemenid Persia, and while there is no direct archaeological evidence of silk textiles of the period (the earliest is a green silk cord from the Parthian era (247 BCE – 224 CE),²³ there is evidence, again at Pazyryk, of Achaemenid woollen textiles, some with panels of lions, others strongly resembling the robes worn by the guards on the Susa frescoes,²⁴ travelling east.

¹⁸ Étienne De la Vaissière (Trans. James Ward), *Sogdian Traders, a History: Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 8: Central Asia, Vol. 10, Sogdian Traders* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005)

¹⁹ Irene Good, On the Question of Silk in Pre-Han Eurasia, *Antiquity* vol. 69 (1995), pp. 959–968

²⁰ G. Lubec, J. Halaubek, et al., Use of Silk in Ancient Egypt, *Nature*, March 4, 1993

²¹ Archaeology in Edinburgh, Annual Report 2003, available at:
<http://www.arcl.ed.ac.uk/arch/annrept/report2000/research.htm> Accessed 2 Feb. 2004

²² James Yates, Sericum, in William Smith, ed., *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), pp. 1028–1029

²³ Philippa Scott, op. cit.

²⁴ The guards can be seen in the Louvre in Paris;

Much of the silk was transmitted through the various groups of Central Asian pastoral nomads, from the Xiongnu on the borders of China, who received bales of silk for their horses traded at the gates of the Great Wall, through tribal confederations and trading networks to the Sakas in Central Asia and the Scythians in Kazakhstan and around the Black Sea in the Ukraine. Silk became one of the most significant means whereby leaders of large tribal confederacies maintained the support of other clans through gifts of luxury goods.²⁵ The fourth–fifth-century BC Scythian ice tombs at Pazyryk in the Altai mountains contain Chinese embroidered silks, Persian, and even Syrian woven woollen and linen textiles, woollen pile carpets, and nomad inlaid felts (Figure 9), indicating the importance of textiles to Central Asian culture and the breadth of their distribution.²⁶

However, it was not until 119 BC, when Zhang Qian, the redoubtable Chinese ambassador to the Yuexi, returning to the emperor after thirteen years' absence, reported that Chinese goods were for sale in Central Asian markets, that the complex network of trade routes known as the Silk Road came into being — and even then, it would take several years and several military expeditions to ensure that the Chinese government would benefit from both the trade and the taxation.

Parthian Persians seem to have used silk for their battle banners, and it is sometimes claimed that the Romans first encountered silk at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 CE. This may be apocryphal, but a hundred years later the Roman moralist Seneca the Younger was complaining of the indecency of silk dresses, and no amount of edicts from the Senate could stop the wildly expensive craze. Ironically the silk came to Rome via Parthia despite ongoing border warfare.

http://www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/detail_notice_popup.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673238027&CURRENT_LL_V_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673238027&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=9852723696500803&bmLocale=enthe Pazyryk textiles are in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.
<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/fcgi-bin/db2www/browse.mac/category?selLang=English>

²⁵David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998)

²⁶ Rudenko, op. cit.



Figure 5. Sasanian Persian silk with design of senmurvs.²⁷

²⁷The Near East in Late Antiquity: The Sasanian Empire, available at: <http://ecai.org/sasanianweb/index.html>
Accessed 7 July 2005

By the first century AD, four major civilizations were involved in the Silk Road trade: the Romans, the Parthians of Iran, the Kushans of North India, and the Chinese.²⁸ Knowledge of routes, seasons, passes through the various mountain ranges and across deserts and, of course, the camels, horses, oxen, and mules that provided essential transport, was provided by pastoral nomad tribes.

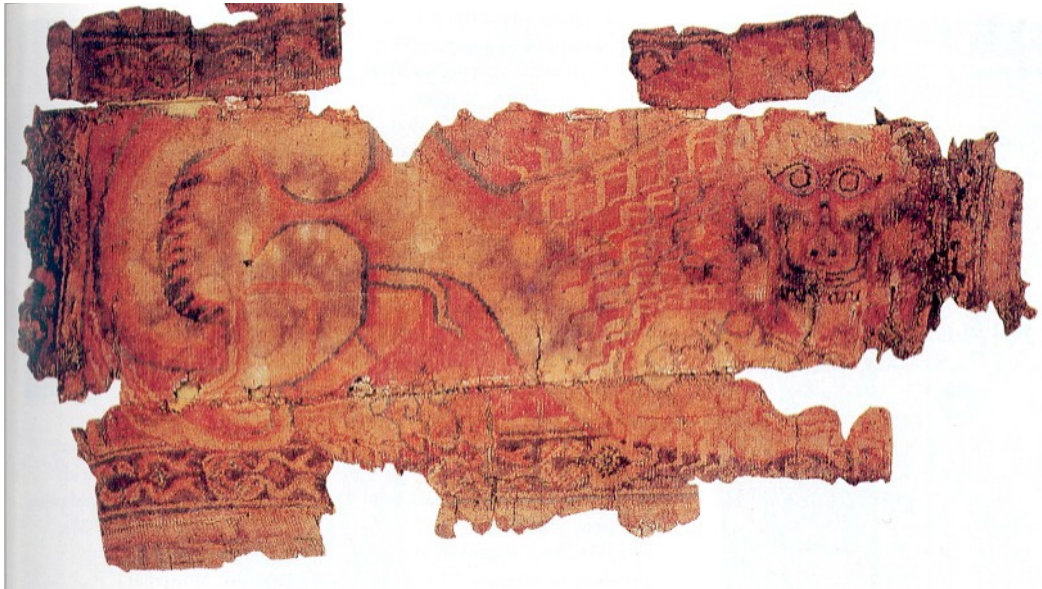


Figure 6. Wool pile lion rug from a Yinpang tomb, Loulan, Xinjiang. Han–Yin period (C3rd BC–C4th AD).²⁹

Trade would have been impossible without the skills, enterprise, and entrepreneurial know-how of the peoples of the Central Asian oases³⁰, the Sogdians, Tocharians, and Bactrians. The Sogdians, who lived mostly in the regions that are now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, had developed a culture based on intensive irrigation agriculture, as had the Bactrians, whose country included areas of Northern Iran and Afghanistan, and the Tocharians, who farmed the smaller and less-well-watered oases around the Taklamakan Desert in modern Xinjiang, where Bactrian-

²⁸ Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

²⁹ Hans König, *Silkroad Art in Shanghai*, *Hali*, no. 120 (January 1999), pp. 86-87

³⁰ De la Vaissière, *op. cit.*

style woollen textiles and Han dynasty silks of rich and complex design have been found in arid desert graves (figure 6).³¹

From a very early period, the Sogdians, Bactrians, and Tocharians had developed literate, tolerant, urban cultures that survived in a usually friendly ecological balance with their nomad neighbours, each group providing different essential elements for both everyday life and trade.³² Archaeological exploration of major cities such as Afrasiab (Samarkand) and Chash (Tashkent) shows houses much like those still found in some Central Asia regions today, houses built of lavishly decorated mud brick with individual living quarters³³ and one or more large reception halls or courtyards. Carved wooden pillars, decorative stucco, and large murals are found in dwellings from Miran in Xinjiang to Varakhsha near Bukhara. The murals especially (figure 12), with their gorgeously dressed men and women, give us an insight not only into the pre-Islamic culture of the region, but also into the use of textiles, not only as costume, but also as caparisons for horses and camels, and as canopies and even sunshades.³⁴

³¹ Etsuko Kageyama, Use and Production of Silks in Sogdiana, *Transoxiana, Journal of Oriental Studies*, available at: <http://www.transoxiana.com.ar/Eran/Articles/kageyama.html> Accessed 16 Feb. 2004

³² de la Vassière, op. cit.

³³ G. L. Semenov, Dwelling Houses of Bukhara in the Early Middle Ages, *Transoxiana, Journal of Oriental Studies*, available at: <http://www.transoxiana.com.ar/Eran/Articles/semenov.html> Accessed 16 Feb 2004

³⁴ For a comprehensive survey of Silk Road city murals, see the illustrations in Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road, Art and History* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003)



Figure 7. 7th AD Sogdian child's silk jacket in the Sasanian style.³⁵

Sogdians and Bactrians were, in theory, subjects of the Iranian empire from the sixth century BC on, and were influenced by both Iranian and Hellenic Greek culture. In reality they gave lip-service acknowledgment to whichever military power, nomad or settled, happened to be dominant at the time, and continued to make a highly successful living as agriculturalists and merchants, marketing their skills as translators and administrators, and creating a wide-spread trading network with settlements from Japan to the Black Sea.³⁶

³⁵ Tucker, op. cit.

³⁶ De la Vassière, op. cit.



Figure 8. Khotan, C6th AD painted wooden panel. A court lady points to the headdress of the Chinese princess who has smuggled silkworm eggs out of China as her wedding present to her Khotanese husband. Note that the princess has been given a Buddha-like halo as a mark of honour.³⁷

Not surprisingly, given the extreme importance of silk to trade, the Chinese attempted to control knowledge of sericulture, initially imposing the death penalty on anyone who transmitted such knowledge outside China. While the art had reached Korea at a surprisingly early period, around 200 BC, with waves of Chinese migrants, it would not be until the fourth century AD that sericulture went west, establishing itself in India shortly after 300 AD, where new silk technology and Chinese silkworms, introduced by travelling Buddhist monks, could build on an existing tradition of using wild silk.³⁸ (India was actually exporting such textiles to Alexandria during the Kushan period.)³⁹

At this time Northern China was under the rule of various nomad dynasties such as the Toba, and control of the Silk Road oases had passed out of Chinese hands. Perhaps for this reason it became easier to export sericulture, especially through political marriages such as that between the ruler of Khotan in AD 440 and his Chinese princess, who reportedly smuggled silkworm eggs in her elaborate wedding headdress (figure 8). The Khotanese hung onto the secret themselves, but by the sixth century it was travelling west and reached Byzantium,

³⁷ Tucker, op. cit.

³⁸ Ron Cherry, Sericulture, in Bugbios: Cultural Entomology. Available at: <http://www.insects.org/ced1/seric.html>
Accessed 4 April 2010

³⁹ Philip DeArmond Curtin et al., *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

brought in probably by monks from Central Asia around 550 AD.⁴⁰ By the time of the Arab invasions in the early eighth century, silkworms, mulberry trees, and silk production were common to all of the Central Asian oasis cities.⁴¹

But if sericulture took time to establish, the art of weaving silk began in Iran a great deal earlier. In 224 AD the Persian Empire came under the control of the Sasanian dynasty, who rapidly established dominance of the silk trade, and went into the business of establishing their own government-controlled silk weaving industry, developing distinctive and sophisticated designs (figure 5).⁴²



Figure 9. C6th–7thAD Silk twill textile, woven in Japan, imitating a Sasanian Persian original, from the Shoso-in Depository in Nara (established 754 AD).⁴³

⁴⁰ Procopius, *On the Wars*, Mediaeval Sourcebook, Procopius: the Roman Silk Industry c.550 Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/550byzsilk.html> Accessed 30 June 2006

⁴¹ Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 ff.

⁴² Luce Boulnois, *The Silk Road* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966)

⁴³ Hayashi, *op. cit.*

Sasanian weavers, possibly building on Syrian draw loom technology (figure 10), developed a compound weft silk twill with elaborate repeating motifs such as winged lions, hunting scenes, tree of life patterns, and opposing birds, each motif enclosed within a pearl-like roundel, and each group of roundels separated by scrolling, geometric plant forms (figures 3, 5, 9). Both the heraldic animal and human elements and the interlocking plant motifs would inspire Eastern and Western design for centuries to come.



Figure 10. Syrian silk textiles (cushion) with lions and their keepers on either side of a tree of life. Shoso-in Depository, Nara, Japan, pre-750 CE.⁴⁴

Unfortunately only around two dozen textiles which can be unequivocally traced to Persian sources actually survive,⁴⁵ (silverware is far better represented), many in European cathedrals where silks were the material of choice for wrapping relics. However, literary references both Western and Eastern, and sculptural and silverware images substantiate designs,

⁴⁴ Hayashi, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

while 'copy' textiles from Coptic Egypt, Byzantium, Spain, Central Asia, China and Japan in both silk and wool are well documented.

Initially raw silk was imported along the Silk Road from China to the near East, mainly to Persia and Byzantine Syria, where it was then dyed and woven into twills and brocades. These value-added textiles were then re-exported back along the trade routes to China and beyond to Japan or shipped westward to Byzantium and the emerging kingdoms of Europe.⁴⁶ As more and more Central Asian and Western cultures acquired knowledge of sericulture, the designs were widely copied. The most common form is a silk weft-faced compound twill (*samit*), though tapestry weaves, often of wool or wool and linen, are also found, and gold thread brocades are recorded as a luxury commodity. The most common design consists of a central motif contained in a circular space surrounded by a ring of, usually, pearl-necklace-like forms with division at each of the four directions. Western examples frequently retain the roundel, but tend to complex decorative borders rather than simple circles. The central motif is often of two confronted animals such as lions, griffins, peacocks or stags, a royal hunt, often to each side of a tree of life (One example found at Astana in Xinjiang is woven with camels). Occasionally a single image is reversed in each of two central spaces. Over the field of the textile, the main design alternates with highly decorative floral motifs, similar to those of Islamic tiles, textiles and carpets.

Sogdiana (modern Uzbekistan) was a centre of trade both in raw silk from China and in textiles. Part of the Sasanian Empire until the mid-sixth century, its oasis cultures traded in and copied luxury goods, particularly silks, developing looms and techniques designed to produce the highly desirable international style. In the late sixth century, the Sogdian merchant and weaver, He Tuo, arrived in Nanking, China. His skill in weaving gold thread brocades and his considerable financial acumen helped him amass a considerable fortune, allowing him to launch his younger son on a career in the Chinese bureaucracy. His nephew, He Chou, was sent to Chang An where he obtained a post in the court ateliers, eventually becoming head of the imperial wardrobe due to his ability to teach the imperial weavers to produce *fabrics adorned*

⁴⁶ W. Fritz Volbach, *Early Decorative Textiles* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969)

*with medallions surrounded by pearls which constitute the usual tribute of the Persian empire.*⁴⁷

It is now believed that the majority of Persian-style textiles excavated in the Tarim Basin are of Sogdian rather than Persian origin,⁴⁸ though the spread of actual Persian textile is attested to by a spectacular Syrian cushion cover featuring lions on leashes on either side of a date palm from the Shoso-in depository in Nara, (figure 10) given to the monastery by the Emperor Shomu in 754.⁴⁹

The designs closely resemble the designs of silver-gilt wares (figures 1, 16), both plates and ewers, presuming a Sasanian origin for the lion and other motifs. Like any fashionable luxury item, designs were widely copied, by the Sogdians (figures 7, 11),⁵⁰ the Chinese in Xi'an (especially during the Sui and Tang [618–906 AD] dynasties), the Japanese in Nara (figure 9), and the Byzantines in Syria (figure 10) and Constantinople (figure 13). A recently discovered Tibetan seventh-century silk riding coat with confronted stags, of Sasanian or Sogdian origin, appeared on the U.S. art market in 2007 with an asking price of US\$1.2 million.

⁴⁷De la Vaissière, op. cit., citing He Chou's biography in the *Suishu* (Dynastic history of the Sui Dynasty)

⁴⁸Matteo Comparetti, The Role of the Sogdian Colonies in the Diffusion of the Pearl Roundels Pattern, *Transoxiana, Journal of Oriental Studies*. Available at <http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/comparetti.html>
Accessed 25 June 2010

⁴⁹Hayashi, op. cit.

⁵⁰Kageyama, op. cit.



Figure 11 C8th Tibetan silk riding coat of Sasanian or Sogdian origin

Silks were almost as desirable in the fourth to tenth centuries. Sumptuary laws in many areas, including Byzantium and China, governed who could own or wear elaborate designs, mostly restricting them to the upper nobility and major religious figures. In the West, where silks from Byzantium were a major article of diplomatic policy,⁵¹ they became associated with Christian sanctity and were part of the burial ritual of saints and the coverings for their relics. In those areas of the Silk Road where Buddhism flourished, one of the major early Mahavastu texts stated “he who has placed a festoon of fine silk on a monument of the saviour of the world prospers in all his aims, both among the gods and among men, avoids base families and is not

⁵¹ Anna Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving AD 400 to AD 1200* (Vienna: Verlag Fassbaender, 1997)

reborn among them; he becomes wealthy and affluent, a sovereign in this world"⁵² — a major encouragement to Silk Road merchants and to the abbots of monasteries.



Figure 12. Fresco of the Ambassadors, Samarkand (Afrasiab) C7th. Note the Sasanian style silk robes.⁵³

⁵² Cited in Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion: an Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People* (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1996)

⁵³ Aleksandr Belenitsky (trans. James Hogarth), *Central Asia, Archaeologia Mundi* (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1968)

Not only have many silks found their way into Christian and Buddhist cathedrals, temples and monasteries, but they have also been excavated in Central Asian graves from the second to the tenth centuries, and are also to be seen on the frescos of endless ruined cities, Sogdian Pianjikent and Afrasiab (Samarkand), Uighur Bezeklik, Astana and Khotan, and the Silk Road — linking city of Dunhuang on the border of China, as well as embellishing the robes of Buddhist bodhisattvas from Central Asia to China to Japan.⁵⁴ Merchants were not, it appears, subject to the sumptuary laws of China. Wealthy Sogdians wore kaftans woven with rondel designs featuring Persian *senmurvs*, boars' heads and occasionally camels. Samarkand frescos showcase well-dressed ambassadors (figure 12) while an eighth-century Sogdian child's jacket featuring ducks in rondels (in the Cleveland Museum of Art) (figure 7), and Tang ceramic images of bedecked camels indicate widespread use of these lovely and expensive textiles.



Figure 13. Byzantine silk textile with Sasanian-style *senmurvs*.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Susan Whitfield, ed., *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (Hong Kong: Serindia Publications, 2004)

⁵⁵ Musée Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Bruxelles, available at <http://www.kmkg-mrah.be/newfr/index.asp>. Accessed 20 April 2006

Whether woven in Byzantium, Spain, Syria, Persia, Sogdiana, Xinjiang, China, or even Japan, the styles and motifs show remarkable similarities. The Sasanian lion hunt is particularly popular, as on the eighth-century Japanese-woven example from the Shoso-in, part of the decorative arts collection given to the Nara Buddhist temple by the Emperor Shomu in 754,⁵⁶ while one ambassador from Samarkand (figure 12) wears a robe woven with Persian *senmurvs* (figure 5). Fascinatingly, wherever the textiles are produced, including those known to have been woven in China and Japan, those showing the king hunting on horseback almost invariably include the elaborate Persian royal crown, which differs from king to king, allowing a comparison with Persian coins and giving a specific identity to the hunter.

Despite the constant warfare between the Persian Empire and Byzantium, trade between the Far East and the West continued to flourish, pepper was still imported from Southeast Asia via India, along with cool cottons, and silks still travelled the Silk Roads. Sometimes trade goods destined for Western markets travelled through Iran, doubling in price as they did; sometimes they moved around the steppes region, via such middlemen as the Turkic Khazars and the Bulgars, reaching Byzantium via the Black Sea. The Byzantine government exerted a tight and complex control over the silk trade, both as imported goods and, after the sixth century, locally woven products.⁵⁷ From Byzantium, and later from Islamic Spain, silks, often as diplomatic gifts, travelled to the emerging cultures of Eastern and Western Europe.

The same designs would be woven up from imported Chinese silk thread, or from locally produced silk from Nara to Samarkand, from Alexandria to Constantinople, from Baghdad to Andalusia, and would be prized both as decorative elements in the costumes of the wealthy and powerful and as wraps for religious treasures and relics.

The advent of Islam and its conquest of the Persian Empire in the seventh century did little to disrupt the silk and silver trade, or radically alter the designs. Even the iconoclastic strictures of Islam at its most austere failed to transform the design of luxury goods or the

⁵⁶ Hayashi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Nicolas Oikonomides, *Silk Trade and Production in Byzantium from the Sixth to the Ninth Century: The Seals of Kommerkiarioi*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 40 (1986), pp. 35-53, available at: <http://www.jstor.org> Accessed 5 July 2006.

enthusiasm of the growing Western markets, though they did provide an opportunity for the weavers of Zandan near Bukhara (figure 19) to briefly dominate the market⁵⁸. Moreover the spread of sericulture and commercial silk-weaving technology to Byzantium in the sixth century, and the integration of silk textiles, often replicating or reprising Persian designs, into the Byzantine diplomatic culture,⁵⁹ ensured that the same imagery that had already travelled eastward as far as Japan, now spread equally far westward

⁵⁸ Liu Xinru, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

⁵⁹ Anna Muthesius, *Silken Diplomacy*, in *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving* (London: the Pindar Press, 1995)

Sasanian Silver



Figure 14. Sasanian cup of Chosroes (531–579), gold, carved crystal, glass, originally from the French cathedral of Saint Denis, where it was treasured as ‘Solomon’s Cup.’⁶⁰

Almost equally as widely spread, traded and copied, and very similar in design to the textiles, are the silver dishes, bowls and jugs produced in Sasanian Persia from the fourth to the seventh centuries. These also featured strongly heraldic designs, often contained within a roundel, the most popular being the royal hunt of the lion (figure 1), though boar, gazelle and other deer feature both as animal images and hunt quarry.⁶¹ As with other forms of Sasanian art, the lion is

⁶⁰ Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coupe_de_Chosro%C3%A8s.JPG Accessed 28 Jan. 2010

⁶¹ Ghirshman, op. cit.

found depicted as both a dangerous wild animal whose death confers kingship, and as the protector and guardian of gods and men.



Figure 15. Heracles, wearing his lion skin, returns to Eurystheus with the Erymanthean boar. Sasanian C5th–7th AD.⁶²

Persian metalsmiths and textile workers translated lion imagery into trade goods, and their silver-gilt plates and water jugs were widely exported following the same routes as the silks. As well as the more obviously Iranian themes, silverware also included some images inherited from the Seleucid period that are often very similar to late Roman and early Byzantine pieces. These include the ever-popular Heracles (figure 15), who was equated with both the Persian king and the Iranian war god Verethragna, who is also represented as a winged horse.

⁶² Metropolitan Museum of Art, available at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp> Accessed 1 Sept. 2004



Figure 16. Parcel-gilt silver Sasanian ewer from Perm, C7th–8th, with senmurv in a cartouche.⁶³

The Sasanian rulers also controlled the supply of silver in their empire, for the production not only of coinage, but also of platters, bowls, and ewers, which could be used in the court, or given as marks of royal favour, especially to the ambassadors of distant satrapies.⁶⁴ This in part explains the predominance of imperial hunting scenes in the pieces found outside Iran (most of

⁶³ Iraj Bashiri, *The Art of Sasanian Iran* (1998), available at:
<http://www.iles.umn.edu/faculty/bashiri/Sasanian/Sassan.html> Accessed 6 April 2005.

⁶⁴ Sharpur II (309-379), a man of great ability, increased the authority of the monarchy and central government, curtailing rights of both nobility and clergy and establishing corporations of workers and artisans under the control of a central court worker, whose duties included the direction of the royal artisans and the inspection of workshops throughout Iran. Harper and Myers, op. cit.

the collection in St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum comes from Perm in the Urals), including those given to Byzantine emperors. Imperial animals such as deer, lions, senmurvs (Figure 16) and boar were also popular, as were images of winged horses, Persian kings and lion thrones (figure 14). Generally the designs mirrored those of the textiles.

Sasanian silver travelled the Silk Road, and good examples can be found in Japan's Shoso-in, predating 754. It was also popular in the Central Asian cities. Among the seventh-century paintings found in Piandjikent (some 60 km east of Samarkand) is a large and complex mural showing the birth, death, and rebirth of the Sogdian hero, Syavush, whose conflicts with Iran feature large in the *Shahnama*. Among the scenes of Turkic and Sogdian nobles feasting, details of silk costumes are evident, as is the use of Sasanian-style ewers and bowls. These were usually of local manufacture. One of the finest found in the Afrasiab region is a spectacular ewer featuring not a winged horse, but a winged camel. Others simply replace the image of the Persian king with a recognizable steppe warrior — still enthusiastically hunting the lions that could only be found in local game parks, or in royal fantasies (figure 17).⁶⁵



Figure 17. C7th Silver lion-hunt dish from Sogdia.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Tan Wee-Cheng, *Sogdiana and Sogdian Art*, available at <http://www.weecheng.com/silk/tajik/sogdian.htm> Accessed 24 Aug. 2004.

⁶⁶ Central Asian Images, available at: www.georgetown.edu/centralasiainages.htm Accessed 6 April 2005.

So prevalent were these images that one leading Sogdian merchant resident in Xi'an in China, An Qie, in 579 had himself pictured on his funerary couch hunting wild boar and lions, as did the Turkic former ambassador to Persia and leading merchant Yu Hong (riding a camel) in 593. The same imagery occurs on an eighth-century Byzantine silk (figure 18) and on the French ivory Troyes casket (figure 24).

Silks and Reliquaries



Figure 18. Medallion with the emperor hunting lions, Byzantine silk early C8th. Donated to the church of St Calmin in Mozac, France, by King Pippin the Short in 761.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ W. Fritz Volbach, *Early Decorative Textile* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969)

The advent of Islam and its conquest of the Persian Empire in the seventh century did little to disrupt the silk and silver trade, or radically alter the designs. Even the iconoclastic strictures of Islam at its most austere failed to transform the design of luxury goods or the enthusiasm of the growing Western markets (figure 19). However for a time the strictures on using human and animal images, and the development of woven silk borders featuring quotations from the Koran (*tiraz*), allowed regional variants such as the rather stiff Zandanijan textiles (figure 19) and the Hispano-Moresque productions to flourish. There was also a vogue for *tiraz* fabrics, which often appear in Mediaeval religious paintings.

Moreover, the spread of sericulture and commercial silk-weaving technology to Byzantium in the sixth century, and the integration of silk textiles, often replicating or reprising Persian designs, into the Byzantine diplomatic culture,⁶⁸ ensured that the same imagery that had already travelled eastward as far as Japan, now spread equally far westward. (figures 18, 23)

⁶⁸ Anna Muthesius, *Silken Diplomacy*, in *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving* (London: the Pindar Press, 1995)



Figure 19. The Shroud of Saint Columba, St. Sens Cathedral, France. C8th silk textile from Zandan near Bukhara.⁶⁹

By 640 the initially tribal Arabs had not only amalgamated and adopted Islam, but had incorporated two great centres of civilization, the formerly Byzantine Near East and Sasanian Iran, into their rapidly expanding empire. Syria and Iraq were conquered in 633 and Alexandrian Egypt in 640. By the 670s the last Sasanian shah had fled to Central Asia, to be murdered by his Sogdian allies, his son had reached Tang China, and Islam was established throughout Iran. In the early eighth century North Africa, Spain, and the Indus Valley followed, giving Islamic artists a major source of ivory and gemstones. Control of the Silk Road would not be complete until the defeat of the Chinese armies in Central Asia in 751, after which Islam spread principally along the trade routes, including the sea routes to the spice islands of Indonesia.

⁶⁹ Volbach, *op. cit.*



Figure 20. Iranian silk fragment with winged lions to each side of a 'tree of life',
C8th. Note the particularly elaborate roundel surrounding the central motif.⁷⁰

Near Eastern Christians were generally respected by Mohammedans as People of the Book, and therefore they did not unduly object to Arab dominance, especially since their Byzantine overlords had often regarded them as schismatic, and they were subject both to persecutions and to involvement in the endless Byzantine–Persian wars. Under the Umayyads, Islamic armies swept across the Mediterranean to Spain in 711. Defeated in 732 by Charles Martel, and effectively stopped from further advances into Europe, the Umayyads established a remarkable intellectual and courtly culture, centred on Cordoba, where the last Caliph of the Umayyads died in 1031.

Imported silks continued to be the most desirable, despite the introduction of sericulture into the West in the sixth century, when, according to Procopius, enterprising monks, possibly Nestorians whose diocese was centred on Samarkand, perhaps anxious to repair their heretic status with the Byzantine church, brought the secret to Constantinople. The emperors of Byzantium established workshops there to produce their own silks (figures 13, 18), usually

⁷⁰ Scott, *op. cit.*

copying the coveted trade items.⁷¹ The style of the textiles and other luxury goods, whether produced in the Islamic world, in Byzantium, or from the eighth century in Hispano-Moresque Spain (El Andaluz) almost always followed that of the Sasanian Persians: cocks, bulls, paired lions, winged horses, griffons, the 'tree of life', scenes of human and animal combat, kingly lion hunts — each scene arranged with heraldic neatness and contained within a jewel-like roundel of pearls and four squares, the whole design endlessly repeated over a woven field with roundels interspersed with floral motifs.



Figure 21. The Coronation of Richard II of England, Wilton diptych panel, unknown French artist, 1395.⁷²

⁷¹ Cyril Mango, ed., *The Oxford History of Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

⁷² National Gallery of London, available at <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/english-or-french-the-wilton->

Even as late as the fourteenth century, Western textiles continued to be imported, often from China, and continued to incorporate elements of Sasanian design. The Wilton diptych panel showing the coronation of Richard II (figure 21), has the king kneeling accompanied by saints, one of whom wears a silk robe with confronted Chinese phoenix. The king himself wears a robe with roundels containing kneeling deer, his own heraldic motif, but one also originating in the Near East and spread through Persian textiles and silverware (compare with figure 11).



Figure 22. The Lion of St. Mark from the Gospels of Saint Willibrood (also known as the Echternach Gospel) c. 690 AD. Note the inscription *Imago Leonis* over its back to reinforce recognition of an exotic beast.⁷³

The same designs were woven up from imported Chinese silks from Nara to Samarkand, from Alexandria to Constantinople, and they were prized both as decorative elements in the

[diptych](#) Accessed 21 Jan. 2010

⁷³ Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting: Book Illumination in the British Isles 600–800* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1977)

costumes of the wealthy and powerful and as wraps for religious treasures and relics. From Byzantium the textiles travelled to the courts and cathedrals of Dark Age Europe, were found in Charlemagne's court at Aachen where they inspired illuminated manuscript designs, or, like the cup of Chosroes (figure 14), were found in the treasuries of newly built cathedrals (figure 22).⁷⁴

Lions, and to a lesser extent their fantasy offspring such as senmurvs, griffons and leogryphs, were culturally significant elements in many of the Near Eastern religions that predated the arrival of the Persians in the early first millennium BC. Associated initially with the great goddess, the *Mistress of Animals*, they were at first shown principally as pairs to either side of the goddess or, symbolically, to either side of a water source, a tree of life, a tomb entrance, or a temple door. Later, especially in Assyrian and Persian iconography, lions were shown being hunted and killed either by a semi-divine hero, or by the current king, their qualities of courage, endurance, majesty and so on passing, through the magic of contagion, to the hunter.

⁷⁴ Anna Muthesius, Imperial Lion Silks, in *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving* (London: the Pindar Press, 1995)

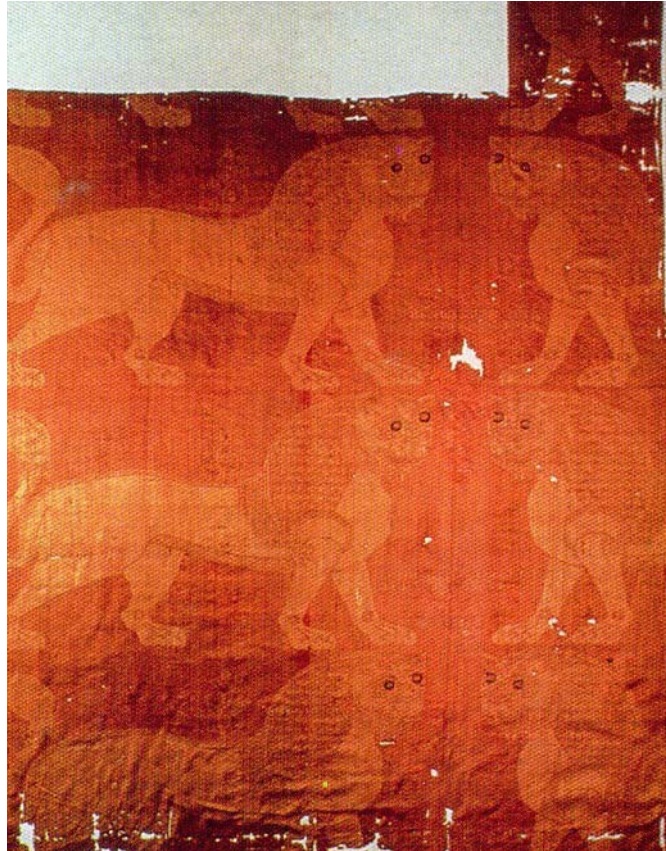


Figure 23. Fragment of Byzantine imperial lion silk from Cologne Cathedral C12th.⁷⁵

Despite considerable differences in theology and belief, the symbolism of the lion remained fairly constant from culture to culture, so that the themes of kingship, wisdom, sacrifice, guardian figure, and, above all, the seasonal summer zodiac sign, with associations of courage and leadership, were readily incorporated into the Western symbolic and aesthetic vocabulary (figure 22).

Byzantine Imperial Lion textiles (figure 23), produced in the workshops of Constantinople and often stored for long periods of time before being included with gold, silver and other precious objects on ambassadorial missions, were among the most prized diplomatic gifts, and several fragments are still to be found in European collections.⁷⁶ Most commonly they

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Muthesius, op. cit.

have either wrapped precious reliquaries in cathedrals or have been part of the funerary panoply of secular and ecclesiastical rulers.



Figure 24. Spain El Andalus C11th silk serge senmurv.⁷⁷

In the late eighth century Christianity and Islam were both expanding rapidly and developing complex intellectual and aesthetic cultures. The Irish Book of Kells, the Carolingian court at Aachen with its mosaics and manuscripts, lion-silks and sculptures, the Great Mosques

⁷⁷ Volbach, op. cit. Musei Bazonale del Bargello, Florence

of Cordoba and Damascus with their mosaics, libraries and court cultures, all belong to the same period. Of the three Western centres, Cordoba was undoubtedly the most sophisticated, with libraries, artists, superb architects, and a passion for music and poetry that would inspire the troubadours of Provence and the artisans of the Holy Roman Empire. Irish, Carolingian and Hispano-Moresque cultures all made extensive use of lion symbolism: the Irish largely as a decorative element in their illuminated manuscripts, particularly the very popular lion of the evangelist, Mark; the Carolingians in imported textiles, architectural details, reliquaries and manuscripts; Islamic Spain mainly with luxury items such as ivories, metalwork and textiles.

Of the three groups of lions, the Celtic seem the most fantastic, like the curious lion of the Book of Durrow, which appears to be covered in red and green scales, or the fantastic winged and enamelled beast from the Book of Kells. However, even in the remoteness of Lindisfarne and Iona, where Celtic and Norse design predominated, Persian influences can still be traced, and the leaping golden lion of the Echternach Gospels (figure 22) appears to derive from a Near Eastern original, perhaps in the possession of a visiting pilgrim, transformed into an elegant symbol of the power of the evangelist.⁷⁸



Figure 25. Troyes, France, C10th tinted ivory casket with lion hunt.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Picture Gallery: Early Christian and Byzantine, available at:

The Carolingian court founded by Charlemagne at Aachen c. 790 was profoundly influenced by Byzantium, and it attempted to incorporate something of the beauty and grandeur of a capital where most barbarian emissaries could easily be overawed. Constantine Porphyrogenitos describes the reception of tenth-century Kievan Princess Olga. "She entered the throne room of the Magnaura Palace over costly Persian carpets and by the light of golden candelabra, saw an animated throne, complete with gilt bronze flapping, singing birds and roaring lions, which slowly rose almost to ceiling height".⁸⁰

Aachen lacked the technology for this level of sophistication, but it did produce ivory thrones, reliquaries wrapped in imported silks and a suitably Byzantine-style cathedral, together with an ecclesiastic manuscript style. The manuscripts began as imitation Romano-Byzantine texts, but rapidly developed their own distinctive, sometimes almost frivolous style. The early ninth-century Gospel of Saint Médard of Soissons, for instance, uses the Byzantine device of a looped-back curtain to disclose St Mark in his study. But above the curtain rod, within an arch of heaven decorated with a classical cameo, an enthusiastic and fairly life-like lion (except for wings and halo) leans down out of heaven dictating from an open book held in his claws.

http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/martha_hollander/GalleryPictures/EarlyChristian,Byzantine.html Accessed 6 April 2005

⁸⁰ <http://www.stlukeorthodox.com/html/saints/july/11th.cfm> Accessed 28 Jan. 2010



Figure 26. Mosaic lions from the Palatine Chapel of Palermo, 1131.⁸¹

Byzantium would continue to influence Western Europe for several centuries. The Troyes casket (figure 24), for instance, shows a strongly Byzantine influence in its design of mounted warriors clad in Roman armour hunting lions (without benefit of the now wide-spread stirrups). However, it was increasingly seen as a decadent and alien world. Liutprand, the tenth-century Bishop of Cremona, was decidedly unimpressed with Constantinople and with its Emperor Nicephorus, whom he describes as wearing a robe that, though rich, was faded and smelly.⁸² Nearby Muslim Spain with its gorgeous architecture, libraries, distinctive and romantic music played on stringed instruments such as the *al ud* (lute), military culture, and comprehensive scholarship was a closer and less alienating influence (figure 24).

Islamic influences also entered Europe through the court of Sicily. A Byzantine outpost

⁸¹ Norman World, available at http://www.norman-world.com/angleterre/Patrimoine_architectural/Italie/sicile/1130_1154/17/n.htm Accessed 2 Nov. 2005

⁸² Liutprand of Cremona, Report of the Mission to Constantinople, Mediaeval Sourcebook, available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/liudprand1.html> Accessed 12 Jan. 2010

from the sixth century, Sicily was invaded from North Africa in 827, becoming an Islamic emirate in 903. Like Cordoba in Spain, Palermo in Sicily became a major cultural centre with a flourishing population utilising irrigation agriculture.⁸³ Invaded by the Normans in the late eleventh century, the new kingdom founded by Roger II in 1130 continued the liberal artistic and intellectual traditions of the Saracens. Roger, despite his professed Christianity (one of his first acts was the building of the splendid Palatine Chapel in Palermo in 1131), was profoundly influenced by Arab culture, surrounding himself with scholars such as the geographer Al Idrisi and designing a chapel that fused Byzantine and Islamic elements such as the many carved stone and mosaic lions, usually to be found to either side of a tree of life (figure 26), sometimes abstract, sometimes recognizable as date palms, which decorate its walls and floors, showing the same affinity to the old Sasanian textile designs as the lions of the Carolingians.



Figure 27. British coat of arms with confronted lion and unicorn. Late C19th
GPO Sydney.⁸⁴

⁸³ Best of Sicily: Early and Mediaeval History, available at <http://www.bestofsicily.com/history2.htm> Accessed 3 Nov. 2005

⁸⁴ Photograph by the author

By the twelfth century a new form of image, echoing the earlier Sasanian designs, had emerged in Europe, that of heraldry. The Crusades, which lasted until the late thirteenth century, brought Western knights into a more direct contact with Islam and its riches, including vastly improved metalworking techniques reflected in the development of new forms of arms and armour, notably the closed helmet and plate mail. One result was the emergence of heraldry in Europe in the twelfth century, in part as a means of identifying armed warriors in their new face-concealing helmets.⁸⁵ Within a generation, from fanciful designs on seals and shields, a complex system of symbols had evolved; studied and controlled by a specialist group, the heralds, and based on family, 'personal bests' and existential highlights, the location of estates and, occasionally, bad puns and plays on names. 'Rolls of arms', illuminated lists of all those entitled to identifying status, were centrally kept, and designs were issued only by national authorities such as the Scottish Court of the Lord Lyon or the English College of Heralds founded in 1484.



Figure 28. Tabriz 1542 Hunting carpet of Pope Pius IX.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Peter Krenn and Walter J. Karcheski, Jr., *Imperial Austria: Treasures of Art, Arms and Armor from the State of Styria* (Melbourne: Art Exhibitions Australia Ltd., 1992)

⁸⁶ Available at <http://www.hali-publications.com/News.aspx?Action=-617781463&ID=4afb6827-a7a2-4969-b020->

Lions Underfoot

The Persians, who established their first empire in the sixth century BC, incorporated lion imagery into a wide range of highly valued items of material culture: architectural ornament, textile designs, coinage, weapons, lamp-stands, official weights, rhytons and jewellery. The richness, diversity and luxury of these luxurious and widely copied goods reinforced the equation of lion and status, and the imagery continued to be produced, reinterpreted, aligned with other religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christianity, and incorporated into both high and popular culture from one end of the Silk Road to the other across the ensuing centuries.

In the Ilkhan (1251–1335) and Timurid (1387–1502) periods, miniaturist court painters frequently made use of lion hunt themes in their illustrations to these epics, though large-scale human and animal images were still considered contrary to Islamic principles. The popularity of the illuminations with the courts led to the development of a range of narrative rugs illustrating the same stories, usually designed to be hung on walls rather than covering floors. While very few existing rugs of any type predate the Safavid period (1502–1737), hunting carpets are among the oldest, including the Tabriz-manufactured carpet of 1542 owned by Pope Pius XI (figure 28), with its scenes of the hero, probably Baram Gur or Khosro. Still a popular theme, hunting carpets vary from powerful evocations of kingship to the excruciatingly kitsch. Generally these rugs were the product of urban workshops rather than village or tribal culture. The highly skilled weavers who created them usually did so from large-scale painted patterns, using predetermined and coordinated colours including the unusual shades necessary for human faces and hands. Initially they were almost exclusively a court art, but gradually they became available to a wider social range, though they were always the prerogative of courts, wealthy merchants and tribal and village leaders. In general the more illustrative rugs were not a significant export item, at odds with the European tapestry and oil painting traditions, though hunting carpets were often appreciated.

At the opposite extreme from the hunting lions and lion-hunting kings, are the delightful lions found in pairs on either side of the 'tree of life'. Like the other lion motifs, this is an image

of great antiquity and is equally widely distributed. Unlike hunting carpet images, the tree of life can be executed in a complex, professionally designed format, often with a wide range of birds and animals, including lions, distributed among the branching and flowering elements of the tree, or as a relatively simple tribal rug, often with a strongly delineated central tree and either a range of small animals, more imaginative than realistic, scattered through the central field, or simply with paired lions at the foot of the tree.



Figure 29. Bidjar lion and tree of life rug, north Iran c.1900.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Available at <http://www.spongobongo.com/em/em9994.htm> Accessed 28 Jan. 2010

The lions tend to be cheerful, rather heraldic, and distributed in pairs (figure 29). The 'tree of life' is central to the Shamanic beliefs of all of the early nomadic people, representing both the fertile and nourishing earth, and the pole that unites earth with heaven — in the yurt, this can be represented by the column of smoke rising from the hearth to the central air vent of the roof.⁸⁸ Without its animals, it was one of the few pre-Islamic images to survive the aniconic centuries, and in various forms it appears on textiles, in architectural ornament, and on rugs. Like the lion hunt, it was a key theme of Sasanian textiles and spread equally widely.

⁸⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton/Bollingen, 1974)



Figure 30. Shirvan tribal lion rug, late C19th.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ James Opie, *Tribal Rugs: A Complete Guide to Nomadic and Village Carpets* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1998)

Perhaps the most distinctive of all the lion-motif rugs are the tribal rugs from south-eastern Iran, the last home of the Persian lions, which could still be found in the more inhospitable regions as late as the 1940s. More than any other, these often strange but always dignified beasts (figure 30) embody the notion of the lion as guardian of thresholds — they are woven by nomad women and designed to enhance tribal tents, as well as the city houses of tribal leaders. They also reflect the traditional image of the ideal tribal male, a reflection of the Lion of God, Imam Ali — powerful, magnificent and protective. According to the Iranian scholar and artist Parviz Tanovil, "Bravery, patience, generosity, manliness, nobility and purity are all qualities Iranians have associated with the lion".

Lions and lion hunts are still motifs of the arts of Iran and Central Asia, and both feature predominantly in the design of carpets such as the Iranian Fars rugs and the animal rugs of Khotan (figure 30), a Xinjiang city not far from Loulan, where the oldest lion rug (figure 6) was found. They guard households, they protect thresholds, and they add to the status of their owners wherever they are found.



Figure 31. Khotan, Xinjiang, 1920s wool pile lion rug.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Author's personal collection

Sasanian silks utilised traditional Persian symbols and images dating to at least the fifth century BCE, using principally imported silks and creating a commodity which was greatly valued across the Eurasian world from Germany to Japan. Widely copied, the designs became part of an international repertoire and came to influence other arts and designs including Western heraldry, Middle Eastern carpets and Chinese sculptural motifs. Traded along the Silk Road, they encouraged the spread of complex weaving techniques along with their distinctive styles and, especially in the form of rugs and heraldic imagery, they continue to influence contemporary design.

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