IRANIAN DIVINITIES IN THE DECORATION
OF SOME DULAN AND ASTANA SILKS

Among the textiles dated to the Tang period found within the present day borders of China, those embellished with foreign divinities are particularly interesting.

These finds come from the funerary complexes of Dulan (都兰), in the Qinghai (青海) Province, and Astana (阿斯塔那), in the Xinjiang (新疆) Uighur Autonomous Province, areas which though far from the principal Tang centres were nevertheless certainly influenced by Chinese culture. Particularly so was Qinghai, also known as Amdo, which constituted the eastern part of the Tibetan kingdom, at the height of its splendour under the Pugyel (sPu rgyal) dynasty (649-842 A.D.).

The archaeological site of Dulan is composed of one princely tomb belonging to a noble Tibetan and others less richly embellished all dating from the 8th-9th centuries A.D. 1.

A complete publication of the Dulan findings does not yet exist although it is known that a certain number of art objects and documents written in the Sogdian language have been recovered 2.

Three textiles embellished with foreign divinities have already been published: they are of silk, executed according to traditional Chinese weaving techniques known as warp-faced

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compound tabby and warp-faced compound twill. This latter technique still presents obscure points regarding its appearance in the Heavenly Kingdom, in fact it was alien to China proper and was most likely introduced from Sogdiana. The technique would have reached China sometime between the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589) and the Tang domination (618-906). At first they were additions to traditional Chinese techniques, but gradually they replaced them, especially after the introduction of the samit, or weft-faced compound twill, native of Western Asia.

The designs that embellish each of the silks represent the same scene enclosed in circular frames: a nimbed divinity, depicted frontally, wearing a caftan and sitting on a quadriga dragged by winged horses. The divine nature of the central figure is marked by its largeness in relation to the other characters depicted, by the nimbus behind the head and by the association to analogous depictions in the arts of Persia, India and Central Asia, met also in Xinjiang and Dunhuang (敦煌) paintings.

The chronology of the 8th-9th centuries proposed for the Dulan site would not seem to fit these textiles as between 766 and 799 A.D. an imperial Tang edict ordained the inter-

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3 For a specific study on these silks and other specimens: Zhao Feng, 1995 (the article was published in English as well: Zhao Feng, Foreign Dsties in Wei-Tang Woven Silks, China Archaeology and Art Digest, vol. 1, n. 4, October-December 1996, pp. 7-12). The terminology employed here to point out weaving techniques is accorded to: Centre International d'Etudes des Textiles Anciennes, 1964.


diction of "Western" motives especially in textile decoration. However, the Tibetan domination extending in that period to the Qinghai could easily have represented a favourable market or a shelter for those weavers otherwise retained outlawed. It seems probable that this prohibition ordered by the minister Li Mi (李密) (722-789) was aimed primarily at Persians and Sogdians, in particular the latter who held a certain control of the silk trade and most likely silk production both in their home territory – where the beginning of a silk weaving school is traceable since 6th century A.D. — and in their colonies on Chinese soil.

One of the textiles from Dulan displays large circular medallions decorated with running waves, a motif well-known in the Mediterranean area as well as in Hellenistic art (fig. 1).

This textile is distinguished from the other two because of the circular frame enclosing the representation of the nimbed divinity which is opposed to another containing a totally different subject.

The figure of the god in the first medallion occupying the central position wears a "V" shaped open-necked garment and is sat on a big flower. The nimbus behind the head is composed by two concentric circles, one external bigger and one rayed smaller. On each side of the god are two figures carrying long curved objects. Their nether halves are covered by a decoration which may hide animal forms. To protect the figure of the divinity there is a canopy decorated on the top by frills.

All three figures stand on a triangular-shaped chariot with the vertex below while the foreparts of two pairs of winged horses (two white and two black) seem to extende from its sides.

The other circular frame encloses human figures, facing animals and an indistinct object in the centre. Starting from the top it is possible to recognize white elephants with an unclear element above, riding archers shooting a deer, white lions with raised forepaws and open mouths on a pedestal, camels either winged or loaded with goods.

In the external interstices are lions with heads turned back or galloping horses, possibly winged, on a curled vegetal pedestal recalling the decorative wings of Sasanian art. The motif is repeated in the medallion itself, below the couple of lions.

At the point of contact between the first and the second frames are large white flowers, according to a scheme well-known in the textile decoration of the *fu mian* (复面) (funerary masks) discovered at Astana and Qara-khoja. In fact, an identical fabric was recovered in the funerary complex of Astana, in the Turfan Oasis.

This place was a very important point along the Central Asian caravan route (inhabited by nomads and sedentaries as well – in addition to natives, especially Chinese and Sogdians), which culture was unquestionably saturated with Chinese elements, even if the Tang court recognized a barbarization of the Chinese residents in the Turfan region.

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13 Zhao Feng, 1995, fig. 2.

According to the Chinese scholars Mu Shunying, Qi Xiaoshan and Zhang Ping, the textile from Astana is dated to 5th century A.D., while K. Yokohari points it out to be from the period between 500 and 640 A.D. during the Qu (趙) dynasty.  

Although this silk shows strong signs of the stylistic formulae of Chinese art (e.g. the axial reproduction of the hunting scenes and of the animals inside the medallions and in the interstices), the overall design of this silk clearly puts it in the Indo-Iranian sphere.

The Indian Sun god Sūrya displays attributes similar to the ones in the Dulan textile such as the radiated nimbus, the quadriga dragged by winged horses (derived originally from Hellenistic models) and the lotus flower. The same elements characterize the figure of Mithra in Iranian art, both in Iran and Central Asia, even if the lotus flower appears rarely. Just from Central Asia the scholars locate the influences responsible for the clothing characterizing Sūrya, whose iconography would have started to be canonical in India since the 1st-2nd centuries A.D., corresponding to the period of

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15 Mu Shunying, Qi Xiaoshan, Zhang Ping, 1994, fig. 289; Yokohari, 1986, scheme at pp. 117-19.


17 Rowland, 1974, fig. 36; Azarpay, 1982, pl. 1; Tanabe, 1983, p. 109, pl. 1. On the affinities between Mithra and Sūrya: Boyce, Grenet, 1991, pp. 162 (note 44), 485; at least two stoneware flasks considered a Chinese work display figures of Central Asians dancing and playing music. The person in the centre, smaller in size, is dancing on a lotus-shaped pedestal, maybe depicted by the probable Chinese artist to mark the Central Asian or, anyway, the foreign nature of the scene: Sullivan, 1973, pl. 39 and Haussig, 1979, fig. 1 (for H.W. Haussig this is a representation of a feast for the vintage and the object in the shape of a lotus flower is a tub. The scene would be of Christian inspiration: Haussig, 1979, pp. 181-83); Juliano, Lerner, 1997, fig. 2. See also: Talbot Rice, 1965, fig. 165; Catalogue Toronto, 1983, fig. at p. 71 (left) and fig. at p. 73 (right). Something similar is present in a silver plate kept in the Hermitage, where the two nimbed male attendants besides a central figure stand on an unusual pedestal: Mathew, 1971, fig. 29. The reproduction of Gajalakshmi in Indian art presents some analogies: Mukherjee, 1994, figs. 7-8. In fact, the lotus as a pedestal would be an Indian invention: Baltrusaitis, 2000, pp. 220-21.
Kushan domination, an Iranian-culture dynasty settled in North-Western India, come from the steppes of eastern Central Asia. The statues of the Kushan sovereigns discovered in India and Afghanistan (the territory of ancient Bactria) show figures wearing such caftans and boots, with a hand normally holding the hilt of the sword, a solution equally adopted in the iconography of Surya and Mithra. In a specific study on the foreign divinities in textiles recovered in China, the Chinese scholar Zhao Feng identifies the divinity on the chariot just with Surya.

In northern India, particularly in Kashmir, the Sun god was very venerated, a fact due, for the most part, to the immigration of Iranian people probably from Sakastān (Sistān), who worshipped a divinity that the Indian sources call Mihira. A second impulse given to the solar cult dates back to the period of Saka and Kushan invasions. Then, after the defeat of the Sasanian by the Arabs, many Persians would have settled in India and Kashmir. The devotion to the solar cult in this part of India is documented by the ruins of the Sun temple at Mārtānd and by the recovery of statues.


20 Zhao Feng, 1995.


depicting Sūrya dressed according to a singular taste definitely extraneous to India.  

However, another possibility is that the Iranian influences in Northern India were due to Sogdian contacts. In fact, the relations between India and Sogdiana should have been intense. Several divinities of the Sogdian pantheon were depicted according to Hindu models, because initially Sogdian art was either aniconic or had a very poor religious iconographical repertory. Apart from Buddhism that left scarce traces at Penjikent, the cult of Śiva – or, better, the local god for whom was adopted the iconography of Śiva – must have had a certain importance in Sogdiana, judging by paintings and statues recovered at Penjikent.

A unique metal rhyton composed by a human head superimposed upon a buffalo head, considered Sogdian or eastern Iranian, displays clear Indian influences. Then, again, the


presence of Iranian figures in the paintings at Ajantā (especially the famous banquet scene in cave I) and Bāgh testify a certain knowledge of Central Asian customs. P. Pal considers the association of the town where the Sun temple of Mārtānd was situated with grape farming (obtained by Kalhana, author of a history of Kashmir – the Rājtarangini – composed in the 12th century), as a link with a definite Persian presence. This could be true, but it is worth noticing that in Chinese sources the Sogdians themselves were considered very fond of wine. The fact that the temples of Avantisvāmi and Avantiśvāra at Avantipura (modern Vantipur, few kilometres southeast of Śrīnagar) display carved pearl roundel decorations on their pillars could be considered the result of direct Sogdian influence. The decoration of the temples – dating back to the reign of Avantivarman Utpala (856-883) – were once regarded as Sasanian. But as the Persian dynasty was extinguished in the 7th century and, even if Sasanian models deeply influenced the art of early Islamic Iran and even if many Persians may have migrated to Kashmir after the Arab invasion, it is strange that such decoration started to be employed two hundred years later after the fall of the Sasanians. In Iran itself however the pearl roundels rarely appear during the Sasanian period (226-642) and even then they are not exactly the same as the ones observed in the decoration of the temples of Avantisvāmi and Avantiśvāra. Most likely the pearl roundels motif arrived in Kashmir via Sogdian textile design which display often this

33 Chavannes, 1903, p. 134; Boulnois, 1966, pp. 153-54; Grenet, 1985, p. 34.
34 Goetz, 1972, p. 447. For a recent publication of the pillars of Avantisvāmi temple: Paul, 1986, pl. LXXII; Goepfer, 1993, figs. 18, 23.
35 Goetz, 1974.a, p. 47 note 91. Apparently, also J. Kröger shared this opinion: Kröger, 1979, p. 446.
36 Comparetti, forthcoming. Kröger has already pointed out that the Sasanian pearl roundels were not the same used in Gupta decoration: Kröger, 1979, p. 447.
ornaments, as evidenced in the arts of proper Sogdiana, especially in the murals at Afrāsiāb, Varakhša and Penjikent 37. The trading activities of this Central Asian people are testified in the Upper Indus region 38, in proper India 39 and their commercial colonies were established even in Sri Lanka 40.

The same Tibetans maintained good relations with Sogdians, as testified by the Lhasa intervention in 729-730 A.D. in Sogdiana together with their Turk allies, in order to contain the advance of Islam 41, and by the marriage of the king Khri lde gtsug brtsan (712-755) with a princess from Samarcand 42. Contacts with Sogdiana are also recorded in Tibetan sources and, as pointed out above, documents in the Sogdian language were recovered at Dulan 43. As regards trade, it is extremely probable that the Sogdians sold luxury goods to the Tibetans, especially metalworks and precious textiles embellished with the typical pearl roundels decoration, as depicted on the garments worn by the Tibetan envoy at the Tang court in a painting executed by Yan Liben (閻立本) 44, and observed among the Dulan textile findings. It is even probable that the Chinese employed such fabrics for diplomatic exchanges and ordered Sogdian weavers resident in Tang territory to weave them 45.

In Sogdian art there are several representations of the god

42 Twitchett, 1979, p. 432.
45 Sheng, 1998; Sheng, 1999, p. 45; Comparetti, forthcoming.
Fig. 2. Reproduction of a Penjikent painting (after Шкода, 1980, fig. 2.6).

Mithra, though none corresponds exactly to those in the Dulan and Astana textiles. An example of the adaptation of the iconography of Mithra, where the chariot has been substituted by a two horse protome-throne, is an 8th century painting from Penjikent (fig. 2) and an 8th-9th centuries wall painting from Qal'a-ye Kakhkakha at Šahrestān, in Ustrušana (fig. 3), a region of Sogdian culture, that lasted as an independent state until the Samanid conquest of 893-94 A.D. In that epoch, proper Sogdiana was part of Abbasid Caliphate and islamization was proceeding, so it is probable that the art in the colonies — although likely in contact with the motherland and Ustrušana — would have followed an independent course, with a certain Chinese influence (anyway testified in Sogdiana itself, for example in the floral decoration of the paintings at Varakhša). Possibly, there is another representation of Mithra displaying characteristics unquestionably belonging to Sogdian art, among the wooden figures recovered in the palace of Kujuk-tobe (second half of 7th century — first half of 9th century), in the Otrar Oasis (Southern Kazakhstan).


47 Шкода, 1980, fig. 2.6 (but see: Marshak, 1995/96, note 5).

48 Шкода, 1980, fig. 2.3; Grenet apud Sims-Williams, 1991, p. 178; Grenet, 1993, fig. 3 (but see: Marshak, 1995/96, note 5).

49 Marshak, 1971, figs. 10, 20; Marshak, 1987, p. 167, figs. 209-211.

Fig. 3. Reproduction of a Šahbērestān painting (after Шко-да, 1980, fig. 2.3).

In Sogdian Buddhist literature Mithra is portrayed as judge after the dead or as a witness in contractual promises. The figure of Mithra on the chariot at Bāmīan and likewise with the Moon-god Mao at Fondukistan should be regarded under this viewpoint; their representations contextualized in a Buddhist setting. Once accepted the figure of Mithra in Buddhism, it could have been transmitted also to Tibetans without big problems, in consideration of the similar treatment that some Tibetan divinities received in Tantric Buddhism and in consideration of some Zurvanite influences in Tibetan Buddhism connected just to Sogdian Buddhism and to the Sun god.

Other clues support an Iranian origin for the Dulan and Astana textile. The animal subjects enclosed inside the medallion opposed to the one containing the god on the quadriga, could be associated to divinities of the Sogdian pantheon, even if, normally, such divinities accompany their symbolic

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animals. Then, the hunt scene recalls an Iranian theme found widely in Asia because of the hunter turned back in the position of the “Parthian archer” riding a horse at “flying gallop”. In the scene, the quarry represented by the deer displays horns imitating a mushroom or a flower, according to a Sogdian typology often observed in metalworks recovered in China and Japan.

In the silk, in the interstices, the galloping horses (maybe winged) are placed on a pedestal which at first sight seems vegetal, but actually based on a specimen displaying spread wings very used in Sasanian art and transferred to Sogdiana, where it was employed especially in the decoration of the famous zandanijit.

Above the horses there is an emblematic oblong symmetrical object, maybe a tree or another symbol very diffused in textile decoration, as testifies, for example, a fu mian from Astana, with two confronted phoenixes-peacocks enclosed in pearl roundels.

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54 Marshak, Raspopova, 1990, pp. 141-45; Marshak, Raspopova, 1991; Mode, 1991/92; Grenet, 1993, pp. 59-65. The animals could be associated to Persian pantheon as well: Ackerman, 1964.


56 Ghirshman 1982, fig. 229, 231, 232.


58 Riboud, 1977.b, fig. 5. A woollen tapestry fragment recovered at Antinoe (Egypt), but preserved in Florence, displays a decoration with roundels enclosing human figures besides a “palmette”, depicted in a shape very close to the emblematic element of the two silks from Astana and Dukan just considered. The two human figures would wear “Iranian-like garments”, even if the textile is dated to 4th-6th centuries A.D., not corresponding to the period of Sasanian domination in Egypt (about 616-629): Catalogue Firenze, 1998, cat. 220. A very similar decoration recurs on a bronze mirror recovered in a tomb dated about 7th-9th centuries, belonging to the area of the Jety-Asar culture: Левина, 1996, fig. 106. 12. For a similar element on a late Sasanian pitcher: Simpson, 1998, fig. 201.
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Fig. 4. Reproduction of a silk recovered at Dulan (after Zhao Feng, 1995, fig. 6).

Finally, the circular frame, although well known in Chinese art and employed since the Western Han period 59, possesses a foreign element due to the flower-like tangents and the sequence of running waves along the hem, which are also known from the arts of Persia 60 as well as Bactria 61, Margiana 62, Sogdiana 63, but observed also in some Xinjiang textiles 64.

A second silk fragment recovered at Dulan, of a divinity sitting on the quadriga, displays substantial differences than the other just considered (fig. 4).

Above all, the figure of the god sitting on a flower-like pedestal does not have a rayed nimbus, but rather one marked by a string of pearls along the hem and he wears without doubt a “V” open caftan and a trilobated crown.

The crossed legs and the arms on his lap, maybe disposed to hold a cup (?), recall the Indian position alluding to meditation (ānūnamudrā). It is probable, in fact, that the author of the representation appropriated themes belonging to Buddhist iconography, marked just by the position of the god, by the crown and by the pearled nimbus 65. Besides the divine

59 Maenchen-Helfen, 1943, fig. 5.
60 Ghirshman 1982, fig. 240.
63 Belenitskii, Marshak, 1971, fig. 24; Azarpay, 1981, pl. 29 (on the garment of the central figure); Grenet, 1996, fig. 12.
64 Mu Shunying, Qi Xiaoshan, Zhang Ping, 1994, figs. 265, 271.
65 For a similar pearled nimbus behind the head of Avalokiteśvara in a painting on material from Murtug, dated 9th-10th centuries: Härte, Yaldiz, 1987, cat. 57. The nimbus of Buddha in Gandharan art sometimes is rendered as a solar halo: Fisher, 1990, fig. 2. In Gandhara the same Buddha can even be substituted by the solar disk: Quaglotti, 1992; Verardi, 1997, pp. 493-97, fig. 661.
figure there are two characters smaller in size, holding long hooked sticks and unpressuming headgear. At the same height of the nimbus of the god there seem to be two more human forms. A canopy with frills covers the divine figure, an element often found in Buddhist art 66 and already observed in a Kushano-Sasanian coin, possibly depicting Mithra 67.

The chariot is identical to the one just observed but the winged horses are six in number 68.

The circular frames display an external row of running waves combined with a string of pearls. The horizontal tangent points are marked by monstrous masks with big mouth but lacking jaws, which is close in concept to a very diffused Chinese motif (tou-tie) (♦♦♦) 69, while on the vertical it is possible to observe large flowers, partially preserved above the head of the divinity.

To emphasize the syncretic nature of the decoration of this textile, there are the auspicious Chinese characters ji (吉) (fortune), combined in the interstices with vegetal and animal figures. This last peculiarity proves that the fabric has been produced in a cultural context strongly influenced by China, even if the auspicious characters could have been reproduced mechanically without understanding their significance. On the other hand, the persons buried in the cemeteries of Dulan and Astana should have been able to understand this script as Tibet and the Turfan Oasis were deeply influenced by Tang culture 70.

The last textile embellished with the representation of the Sun god recovered at Dulan displays the same scene, but the

66 Soper, 1969, figs. 6, 8-13; Wu Hung, Ning Qiang, 1988, fig. 11 (all the Buddhas depicted are sitting on a lotus); Diserens, 1997/98, p. 336. A painting from Dunhuang recently exposed presents a Buddha in a very similar attire: Catalogue Paris, 1995, cat. 200.
69 Frazes, 1997; Combaz, 1939-1945, pp. 37-51, 72-95. The mask is described also as a "buskou"; Zhao Peng, 1996 p. 11 (English translation).
frames lack of the points of contact with the others contiguous and lack of the tangent elements. In the interstices it is possible to recognize partial vegetal decorations (fig. 5).

Amongst the designs of the three textiles this is for sure the simplest, both for the frame and for the internal subject. In fact, the only person shown is the god sitting crosslegged and with his arms on his lap, wearing a caftan and a trilobated crown on his head. From the shoulders flow ribbons while the nimbus is totally absent.

Approximately, at the height of the elbow, the caftan displays a kind of fringe which has been observed in other silks with human figures decorations. In particular, such wear appears in two fabrics probably manufactured in the same weaving centre 71, in which figures ride winged horses enclosed in pearl roundels.

The first textile was recovered from Astana in a very damaged state: it is just possible to recognise a person turning back, with the arms held tightly to the animal’s neck 72. Possibly, the figure was repeated in the missing part because the circular frame has a diameter which is big enough to allow the specular repetition of the scene.

The second textile in which a human figure wear fringed clothes is in the famous Emperor Shōmu Banner kept in the Shōsō-in repository, inside the Tōdai-ji at Nara, Japan (8th century A.D.) 73. Enclosed inside pearl roundels of the same kind as the textile considered above, an archer riding a pegasus turns back to shoot a leaping lion. The scene is repeated four times inside the same frame and has as the axis

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71 Comparetti, forthcoming.
72 Xinjiang Uighurs’ Autonomous Province Museum, 1972, pl. 51 (recently published in: Yokohari, 1997, pl. IX-7). The silk was recovered at Astana TAM 77 and is dated to 7th century A.D.
73 Meister, 1970, figs. 1, 2.
of the entire composition a tree with large leaves, bunches of fruit and birds among the foliage (fig. 6). It is worth noticing that on the visible rear leg of the Pegasus appear alternatively the auspicious Chinese characters じい (št) (fortune) and sidebar (Mr) (mountain).

The reproduction of such a robe hints to a certain kind of Chinese armour, met also in the paintings at Penjikent\textsuperscript{74}, in a painted wooden panel from Dandan Oilik (Khotan)\textsuperscript{75} and especially at Bezeklik grottoes, a site dated back to the period of the Uighur domination in the region of Turfan (9\textsuperscript{th}–13\textsuperscript{th} centuries A.D.)\textsuperscript{76}. Most likely, some figures depicted in these paintings could be of Sogdian origin. In fact, Sogdians held important roles in Uighur society, widely documented in the sources\textsuperscript{77}. The same kind of armour and the winged or bird-

\textsuperscript{74} Such armours adapted from Chinese models seem mostly destined to divinities and not to common soldiers: \textit{Belenitsky, Maršak}, 1971, fig. 5.a, 5.b, 11-12; \textit{Belenitsky}, 1980, pp. 109, 198, 201; \textit{Grenet}, 1985, fig. at p. 39 (the figure is identified just with Mithra); \textit{Maršak}, 1990, pp. 306-307.

\textsuperscript{75} The divine being represented in the wooden panel is described as the "Iranian Bodhisattva" or as the Sericulture god: \textit{Bussagli}, 1979, fig. at p. 57.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Azarpay}, 1981, fig. 63; \textit{Hártel, Yaldiz}, 1987, cat. 51; Institute for the Safeguard of Archaeological Relics of the Turfan Region, 1990, figs. at pp. 36-41, 46, 48, 70, 84.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Mackerras}, 1972, pp. 10-13, 36-38, 45-48, 88-91, 128, 151-52 note
like headgear characterize the representations of guardian figures (lokapāla) often encountered in tombs or in Buddhist monuments from Central Asia to Japan, through China and Korea. In this textile from Dulan, the quadriga is not drawn so well as in the other two fabrics and the horses as well are just four, coming out from the sides of the god. Also the canopy is absent in this fabric, but besides the trilobed crown there are two monsters with the forepart resembling a camel, marked by the humps just sketched, while the rear part is definitely ofidic. Such monsters are closely akin to those in Sogdian art; similar figures appear often in scenes where the artist wanted to emphasize the importance of one or more persons, because the camel — usually winged, with the rear part of the body ofidic or plumed — was a symbolic representation of glory or kingship (khvarenah), or Wāsān’s patronage.

In the two textiles already observed above it is possible to recognize similar confronted monsters. In fact, on the top of the canopies covering the nimbed divinities there are apparently abstract or vegetal decorations that, probably, hide representations of fantastic animals. Their abstract shapes could be due to Chinese influence, which art had favoured transformations of animal embellishments into vegetal ones since ancient times.

After all, a probable hypothesis concerning the origins of such silks is based on the presence in that period, in one or more Sogdian colonies inside Tang empire, of a flourishing textile industry that employed decorations obtained by Iranian religious subjects combined with stylistic resolutions proper of Chinese art.


The presence of Sogdians in China is documented not only in the written sources, but also by numerous archaeological finds linked to the culture of this people, especially in funerary context and in the sumptuous arts recovered in China proper or in parts of Xinjiang deeply influenced by China 81.

Then, the *Sui Shu* (隋書) (History of Sui Dynasty) reports informations on the task of a Sogdian called He Chou (何稠) in 605 A.D. to run the silk production in the state of Shu (蜀) (Sichuan), in order to get textiles produced in western style. This production was wanted by the emperor Yangdi (炀帝) (604-618) 82.

Furthermore, it is not possible to deny that silk production could exist in weaving centres of the Xinjiang Sogdian colonies, for example in the same Turfan Oasis, whose numerous archaeological sites (as the funerary complexes of Astana and Qara-khoja (哈喇和卓)) have brought to light a large amount of textiles embellished with Iranian themes. The city of Kocho (or Gao Chang) (高昌), not far from the modern city of Turfan and incidentally the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Kingdom, is recorded in Chinese sources as a centre of silk production in ancient times 83.

Evident traces about the presence of Sogdians in Xinjiang and of their links with textile production are fully attested by recent archaeological recoveries. Some fabrics found at Astana, Qara-khoja and Dulan display decorations with human figures: very interesting are the ones with drinkers 84. The persons are normally two, beside an amphora or a central figure with a goblet or a rhyton rised in one hand, wearing


84 Haussig, 1992, fig. 398; Zhao Feng, 1996, p. 16; Silkroadology, 2000, fig. 21, p. 156. Banquet scenes with figures of drinkers appear often in Sogdian art but not contained inside pearl roundels: Belenizky, 1980, fig. 55. A bronze circular pearled medallion recovered in the Ferghana region (dated cautiously to 8th century) with a nimbed figure holding a rhyton, could be associated to the presence of Sogdians: Melikian-Chirvani, 1996, fig. 15.
Fig. 7. Reproduction of a silk recovered at Qara-khoja (after Bo Xiaoying, 1990, fig. 4).

A caftan and boots. It is worth noticing that in Chinese sources the Sogdians are reported as exceptional traders fond of music and wine. So, these silks could be a Sogdian work displaying scenes of daily life or festivities, or a Chinese work with exotic representation.

A textile recovered at Qara-khoja (published in a very bad picture and in a partial reproduction) leads once more to a Sogdian cultural context (fig. 7).

It is of a scene enclosed in a circular frame itself composed of a string of pearls combined with the running waves motif. Inside the medallion there is a person sitting cross-legged or kneeling on a rug, wearing a caftan and a high winged crown. Beside him stands a musician smaller in size, but it is probable that considering the dimensions of the medallion (and the confrontation with similar images) there was originally another one on the other side of the main figure. Anyway in the reproduction this musician is not reported as the possible tangent motifs along the frame or decorations in the intertices.

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85 See note 33 of the present article.
86 Xinjiang Museum Archaeological Team, 1978, fig. 30; Bo Xiaoying, 1990, fig. 4, reproduction 13. There is some confusion about the publication of this specimen, mostly due to the very bad picture published. When first published in 1978, the textile had a code: 75 TKM 71: 23; where TKM points out that it was recovered at Qara-khoja a cemetery not far from Astana. In the same article, the specimen is called “Fu mian brocade with pearl roundels enclosing a couple of men with a jar”, but in the description of the silk the men become three, one central wearing a yellow garment and a winged crown, sitting cross-legged with a jar held with both hands. Besides the central figure stand two attendants wearing a hat and holding a jar as well: Xinjiang Museum Archaeological Team: 1978, p. 8. In the study by Bo Xiaoying, in the scheme 1, the specimen no 16 is described as a brocade with pearl roundels enclosing attendants playing music for a “barbarian king” and its code is reported as 75 TAM 71:20, but, most probably, it should be read 75 TKM 71:20 because TAM is the code for archaeological findings recovered at Astana: Bo Xiaoying, 1990, scheme 1, pp. 312-15. Then, in the partial reproduction, it is possible to discern a central figure with a winged crown and another man at his left side, smaller in size and playing an instrument: Bo Xiaoying, 1990, fig. 4, reproduction 13.
This scene has probably a religious value linked to the funerary customs of the Sogdians. In fact, such representations appear on some terracotta ossuaries found in proper Sogdiana though with a few stylistic differences: the central figure — most like a divinity — is sitting on a rug, flanked by musicians and attendants, wearing a caftan and a winged crown (fig. 8). Grenet associates the figure to Ardwhašt, one of the Ameša Spentas of the Zoroastrian pantheon.

But, in the ossuary Ardwhašt holds a shovel and a little fire altar in hands and, normally, two lions stand below his figure. Similar representation can be observed in two Sogdian metalworks kept in the Hermitage Museum (fig. 9).

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87 Grenet, 1993, a, figs. 6, 7.
88 Because of the lack of incontestable datas, the same author is obliged to propose a possible identification also with Ādur and Khwarezmian: Grenet, 1993, p. 64; Marshak, 1995/96, pp. 303-304.
89 In the Sivas ossuary there are two rams, but Grenet suggests that they are part of another symbolic representation located below, related to a particular Zoroastrian sacrifice and extraneous to the scene with the divinity: Grenet, 1993, a, p. 62.
In the case that the interpretation proposed in this study are right, it could be spontaneous to demand why such textile decorations were part of the outfits in the tombs of peoples extraneous not just to Sogdian culture, but to the Zoroastrian art diffused in Sogdiana. Is it possible that in the Turfan Oasis and in Qinghai the users of these silks interpreted the religious scenes according to proper beliefs, or were they just fascinated by the exoticism of the representations? The first hypothesis seems more convincing considering also the presence of Manichean believers in the region of
Fig. 10. The main archaeological sites mentioned in the text.
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Turfan, converted by Sogdian missionaries or native Sogdians.91

In the metalworks considered Sogdian realizations recovered in China till now, scenes like those observed above do not exist92, while in other known works the religious value of the representations is associated with Sogdian residents on Chinese soil93.

In conclusion, it seems correct to consider that in the Turfan region in the 7th century and at Dulan during the 8th-9th centuries, there existed local people who were able to appreciate textiles (and maybe other forms of art) embellished with religious scenes belonging to Sogdiana itself and which were most probably linked to the beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of Turfan (still presenting many obscure points) and of the Tibetans, since employed in the funerary outfits of these two peoples.

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92 See note 55 of the present article. For some parallels of decorations in Chinese and Central Asian art: Gyllenréd, 1957, fig. 73. B. Maršak excludes that the Dulan textiles with the representation of the God on the quadriga are Sogdian. In his opinion they are Chinese and represent a parallel to many 6th century decorations recently discovered in Northern China taken from Sogdian imagery; personal communication dated 27 September 2000. Anyway, it is worth noting that Sui-Tang sources clearly speak of the role of the Sogdians in silk production in China proper: see note 82 of the present article.

93 Gyllenréd, 1957, fig. 73.c; Scaglia, 1958; Marshak, 1994, p. 12; Juliano, Lerner, 1997.

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CHINESE CHARACTERS

Asitana (Astana)  | 阿斯塔那
Dulan           | 都兰
Dunhuang        | 敦煌
fu mian         | 复面
Gao Chang       | 高昌
Halbezhuo (Qara-Khoja) | 哈喇和卓
He Chou         | 何绰
Ji              | 吉
Li Mi           | 李密
Qinghai         | 青海
Qu              | 酴
shan            | 山
Shu             | 蜀
Sui Shu         | 隋书
Su Te           | 糜特
tao tie         | 饕餮
Xinjiang        | 新疆
Yan Liben       | 闾立本
Yang Di         | 炀帝
ABSTRACT
This study is an attempt at explaining the iconography and the presence itself of particular silks recovered during excavations led in nowadays Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province) and Qinghai Province (known also as Amdo or Eastern Tibet). The textiles examined display the figure of a nimbed divinity, sitting on a chariot dragged by winged horses. In this author’s opinion the textiles are a Sogdian production, possibly executed in China, and the divinity is Mithra, whose links with Buddhism are not yet completely determined.

KEY WORDS