

BYZANTINE TEXTILES

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SILKS and spices,—the magic of the East is in the words, for these two products were more sought after than any other goods of the caravan trade.

Silk in all probability originated in China but was known all over Asia long before it was introduced into Europe. We know that it was worn by one of Alexander's generals and there is mention made of it by Aristotle, but the monopoly was held in the Orient until Justinian established the silk weaving industry in Byzantium in the 6th century.

Curiously enough most of the specimens of Byzantine fabrics that have come down to us were originally the shrouds of saints or the wrappings of relics. In the great traffic in the bones of saints and martyrs during the Middle Ages quantities of these shrouds were carried all over Europe. Silk was the most precious of fabrics; just as we find all the skill of the goldsmith lavished on the reliquaries, so the remains themselves were wrapped in the rarest material to be obtained. Later a new value having been imparted to the stuffs by contact with the relics, they were made into altar cloths, vestments, or even introduced into royal robes.

Even stranger is it that these tissues do not contain Christian subjects in their patterns, though being put to a distinctly religious use. Even centuries after we know that many of the silks must have been woven by Greeks, we find the same Oriental character of design continuing. So strong was the impress of the East that it seemed impossible to disassociate the material from the pattern, as we today find it

difficult to imagine a rug of Western design.

The art was Persian of the Sassanian dynasty, 226-641 A. D., not Chinese or Hindu as one might have supposed. Evidently Persia was the market from which Byzantium obtained her silks and Persian designs were reproduced for centuries.

Let us examine first a bit of the Mantle of St. Fridolin from the church at Sackingen (Fig. 1), dating from the 6th or 7th century of our era.¹ Here we note some of the chief Sassanian characteristics. First we have a design within a design. Regarded as merely spots of color the brick red medallions touching each other are excellent. Excellent, too, is the shape of the lozenges patterned in green and yellow and brick formed between the circles. Then the space within the circle is harmoniously filled and every part of the figures has its decorative function to perform. The confronted riders bend back over the saddle and their scarves are blown over their shoulders in such a way as to leave the center free. This forms an area similar to a lozenge, repeating the shape of the lozenge of the main design. Again we observe that this area is brick red and not patterned, whereas the horsemen give an effect of pattern by the detail of their draperies and are in green and yellow and brick. We therefore have a small plain lozenge within the circle and a larger figured lozenge without. An added effect is obtained by a straight band of blue and tan, including not only the smaller ovals but that part of the horsemen in line with them, and only broken by the

¹ Lessing Gewebensammlung, vol. I, plate 9. Dalton, Byzantine Art and Archaeology, p. 590.



Figure 1—Fragment of the Mantle of St. Fridolin from the Church at Sackingen, 6-7th Century.

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plain lozenge shaped area of the larger medallions. It is remarkable that so complicated a pattern in form and color has been carried out so harmoniously.

The subject-matter is also typically Sassanian, the pleasure of the chase and the knowledge of horsemanship of the Medes being reproduced on similar scenes in many silks. One is reminded by the skill with which the riders are discharging their bows with both hands while controlling their horses with the knees only, of the famous education of the Persian boy who was taught "to ride, to shoot and to speak the truth."

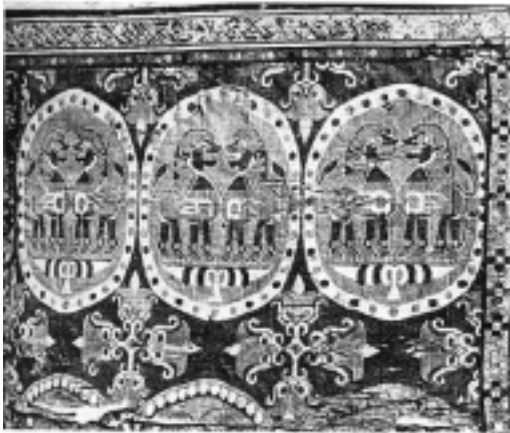


Fig. 2. Silk found in the Sancta Sanctorum, now in the Vatican, 6-7th Century.

In the silk found in the Sancta Sanctorum, now in the Vatican (Fig. 2), we see a typically Persian scheme.¹ The lions are represented in duplicate design face to face and back to back, a device which we find recurring constantly, and even see today in the supporters of the heraldic shield. One questions whether the idea may not have formed a part of the booty of the Crusaders.

No more interesting bit of Byzantine tissue has come down to us than the fragment of the shroud of Charlemagne (Fig. 3).² Whether it was the original shroud and so dates from his burial in

814 A. D., or whether it was wrapped around the body when the Emperor Otto re-entombed it in 1000 A. D. we do not know. In either case it is sufficiently interesting and truly regal in its plan. The elephants are in dull golden yellow on a purplish ground, their trappings and the conventionalized indications of their anatomy in two shades of blue. Again we note that the design is enclosed in circles, "rotata" as they were called and that its Persian character is emphasized by the Tree of Life in front of which the elephant stands.

Quite as effective are the lions in a specimen of silk at Dusseldorf (Fig. 4).³ It has an inscription with the names of Constantine VIII and Basil II, and so enables us to date it positively between 976 and 1025 A. D. The ground is purple, the lions yellow with blue details; a color scheme similar to that of the elephants just described. The extraordinary skill with which the lions are made to step forward despite the conventional mane, face and tail is as Persian as anything we have remarked in the other fragments. Everywhere the art is full of life and movement and shows great vigor in drawing. Two beasts will often be seen in a death grapple, and will lose nothing of their reality by being depicted as green and covered with small red leaves! This representing an animal with an all-over pattern instead of his hide is again characteristic of Sassanian workmanship.

We do find, however, some textiles that are Byzantine in design. Such is the specimen from Aix-la-Chapelle, now at Cluny (Fig. 5), where a charioteer is seen with his four horses and attend-

¹ Dalton, p. 593, fig. 373.

² Lessing, vol. II plates 3 and 4. See cover picture, Fragment from the Shroud of Charlemagne from Aix-la-Chapelle.

³ Lessing, vol. II, plate 21. Dalton, p. 594, fig. 374.

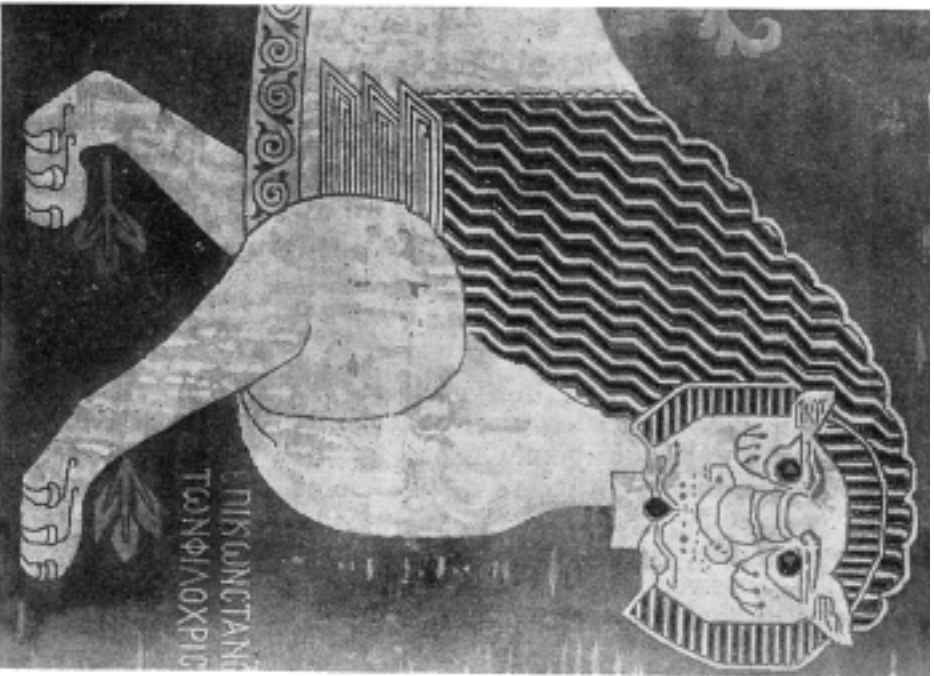


Fig. 4. Fragment of silk at Dusseldorf, 976-1025 A. D.

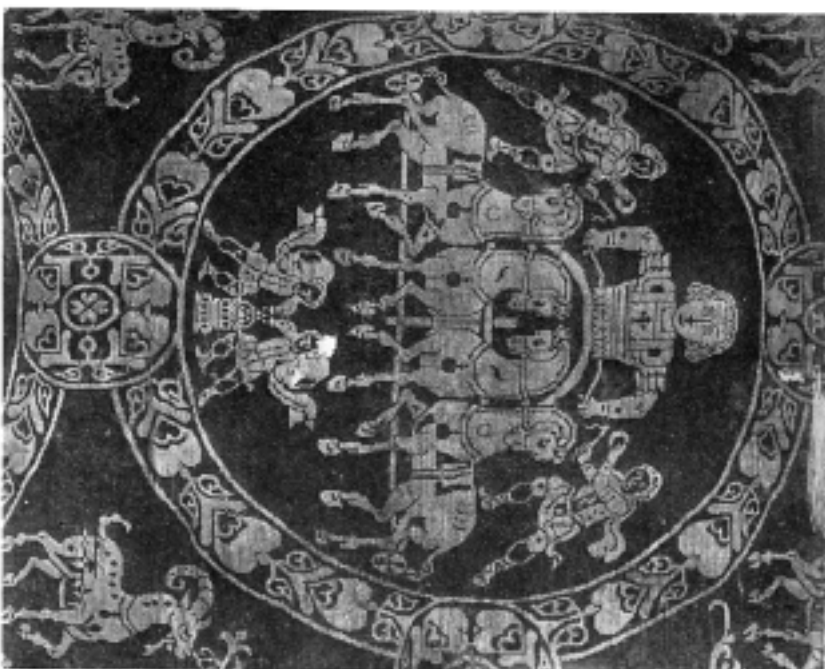


Fig. 5. Specimen of silk from Aix-la-Chapelle, now in Cluny Museum, Paris.

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ants.¹ This is a true Byzantine subject for the whole of the life of the city centered about the chariot races of the circus. The population even was divided into rival factions,—the blues and the greens, according to which color the individual backed in the amphitheatre. Here again the design is yellow, this time on a background of purplish blue. The conception is extremely realistic and courageously carried out, yet the Sassanian tradition has caused the design to be admirably planned to fit the encircling border and the horses are arranged in such a way that their prancings cause them to present themselves face to face and back to back. It is a consummate piece of skill, hardly surpassed in the field of design.

Western Mediaeval art learned much from the Orient in architecture, ivory and mosaic, but surely nowhere was the effect deeper nor more lasting than in the art of silk weaving. The long monopoly of the Eastern workmen to which we have already referred was only partly broken by Justinian's industry. The Greeks learned their trade from the Eastern craftsmen and reproduced their patterns. When in turn other centers of industry were founded, first in Sicily, then in Italy and France they drew their inspiration from Byzantium, Greek workmen were imported and the Eastern tradition was handed on. One phase of this tradition was the all over pattern which continued not only in silks but in other woven fabrics, and even in tooled leather. If we remember that the Greeks and Romans ornamented their garments and hangings with borders only we shall see what an innovation this was.

Another phase was the repetition of

the design. We are reminded that it is to the Arabs that we owe our numerals and the science of algebra, and so need not be surprised that a mathematical turn was given to art as well. The original Persian design enclosed in medallions or lozenges continued for a long time, but when European originality broke through the frame, the idea of repetition remained. Even today in our silks and velvets, our cottons and wall-papers we see the design, however free constantly repeating itself. All unconsciously we are using Sassanian principles of design.

But it was not only through the establishment of silk manufacture that the Eastern forms spread. Silk is light and easily carried and the stuffs themselves were transported into every corner of Europe. Our illustrations show how widely scattered these textiles were and later as the trade increased they were for sale in every Western port and fair. The center of all this Eastern export was naturally Byzantium, to which in the gloom of the Dark Ages all Europe turned for light and learning. Rome was in eclipse and the splendor of the capital on the Bosphorus captivated the imagination of all. It lay too upon the route of the pilgrim to the Holy Land and long before the Crusades was held high in religious veneration. Repeatedly when its power seemed broken, a new vigor would animate the Eastern Empire, again and again the lost provinces of the Western Mediterranean came under its sway and a new era of art and letters was born. To Byzantium all eyes were turned. When it fell and the trade with the Orient was cut off, our own continent was found in the eternal quest for silks and spices.

Providence, R. I.

¹ Migeon, *Tissus de Soie Decors Sassanides et Byzantins*, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Series 3, vol. 40, p. 483-485. Lessing, vol. I, plate 22.