



FRONTISPIECE
FRAGMENT OF EMBROIDERED WOOL, NOIN ULA FIND.
THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, LENINGRAD.

THE ARCHÆOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN SOVIET RUSSIAN TERRITORY

By

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AS AN organized state, Russia is only a few hundred years old; as a geographical unit of approximately the same extension as the present world power, it has existed since the very dawn of mankind. Even while the city-states of Kiev and Moscow grew slowly into nuclei of European civilization, the continental belt between the Balkans and the Gobi Desert remained a backward district of steppes. Its grassland (tundra) and its low forest (taiga) favored only a nomadic or semi-nomadic form of human life. Its horse-riding inhabitants found no serious obstacle in migrating from the northern boundaries of China to Eastern Europe and the threshold of the Near East.

Compared to the old civilizations at both ends of their living sphere, the Eurasian nomads carried a poor luggage of material culture. Their economic existence necessarily limited any artistic endeavors, thus placing a premium upon foreign goods of great perfection, which were willingly accepted and eagerly coveted if they could possibly be of some use to the living or the dead.

At an early date the steppe people, protected by the natural terrain, became wealthy and powerful enough to use as weapons their trading power and political pressure for such acquisitions. As a result, an increasing flow of foreign art entered the blood stream of this most restless part of the ancient world. When, finally, a process of crystallization transformed this into the vast Russian Empire, foreign imports and local achievements alike took part in shaping its culture.

Aside from food, nothing would be more readily given by the saturated civilizations and more eagerly carried away by the greedy nomads than textiles. Discoveries of old and often recut fabrics of all kinds in Soviet territory make it possible to list the ancestral forces of Russian textile art.

The earliest information is found on the eastern shores of the Black

Sea, where the Scythians were the first borrowers and the Greeks the first lenders. When first they appeared in history, the Scythians wore nothing but felt, the natural clothing material of all wandering cattle-breeders. However, in some of their richest graves, such as that in the group called "Seven Brothers," dating from the fifth century B.C., there were found woolen materials and embroideries from Greece.¹ Such imported woolens continue to appear in the apparel found in nomadic tombs around the Black Sea until the end of the Roman Empire.²

In 1842 an excavation near Kerch pointed, for the first time, in an entirely different direction when a piece of silk was found among its contents. The silk fragment was found buried in an urn, wrapped around human bones.³ Coming from a grave of the first century A.D. (as established by Rostovtzeff⁴) and ornamented with a woven lozenge pattern, this lone fragment was for a long time the only example of the famous silk industry whose world monopoly was held by Han China.

Until the discovery of these pieces, the world had relied solely upon the descriptions furnished by Eastern and Western chroniclers for knowledge of the once celebrated weaves from the looms of China. Of the subsequent excavations of Han silk, those carried out in 1924 and 1925 near Noin Ula, in Northern Mongolia, are by far the most important. Their condition is surprisingly good owing to a fortunate accident which transformed the contents of these graves into glacial deposits. The approximate date of these silks cannot be questioned, as it is established by an object found with them—a Chinese lacquer cup inscribed with a date corresponding to the year 2 B.C.

From the time that Soviet scholars started to publish the results of the Noin Ula expedition, the textile material, now mainly preserved in the Hermitage at Leningrad, has attracted wide attention. Unfortunately, no complete catalog was ever made available, and present world conditions may prevent its appearance for a long time to come.⁵

In this find Chinese fabrics dominate in quantity. This is due to the

⁽¹⁾ Minns, G. H.: *Scythians and Greeks*, Cambridge, 1913, p. 335.

⁽²⁾ Rostovtzeff, M.: *Skythien und der Bosphorus*, Berlin, 1931, p. 187.

⁽³⁾ Toll, N. P.: "Notes sur la Soie Chinoise dans la Russie Méridionale," in *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, Prague, 1927, Vol. I.

⁽⁴⁾ Rostovtzeff: *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁽⁵⁾ The reader will find the most reliable general account in C. Trever's easily accessible book, *Excavations in Northern Mongolia* (Leningrad, 1932). Valuable technical information was collected by A. A. Voskresensky and N. P. Tikhonov and published in Russian. The Needle and Bobbin Club deserves great credit for having printed a translation of this study by E. Tolmachoff under the title, "Technical Study of Textiles from the Burial Mounds of Noin Ula," in the *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, Vol. XX (1936), Nos. 1-2.

fact that the region served as a burial ground for chieftains of the Hiung-nu, called in Europe the Huns. These troublesome neighbors had to be constantly pacified by the Chinese lest the latter find their northern provinces ransacked. For this purpose the Chinese emperors dispatched princesses, delicacies, and silks to appease these war-like peoples. Chinese sources record some of the letters addressed by their proud rulers to the Tan-hu's, as the commanders of the Hiung-nu called themselves. In an epistle of the year 174 B.C., the Son of Heaven lists his services as an outfitter, specifying among materials sent to the steppes: "An embroidered garment, worn by myself, unwadded, lined with silk and woven with flowers; a long tunic, embroidered and unwadded; an unwadded robe, made of silk and woven with multicolored figures; 10 pieces of embroidered silk; 30 pieces of silk, woven with multicolored figures; 40 pieces of heavy red silk; 40 pieces of green silk."⁶ There are many more references of a similar character.

It is evident that the fabrics found at Noin Ula were not made especially for barbarians, but for their own use by the Chinese. Occasionally their ornaments are interspersed with woven Chinese inscriptions expressing good wishes, which sentiments would hardly have been extended to their eventual possessors. One reads: "Spreading of new divine power creates long life for 10,000 years," or "Ten thousand years blessing for children and grandchildren."⁷

Even in their fragmentary condition the silks reveal the Chinese attitude toward woven ornaments. Axial symmetry appears to be an exception. Most patterns follow a rhythmical movement borrowed from the painted cloud bands, so frequently found on Han lacquer. Embroideries adopt the free movement of pictorial decoration almost to the exclusion of symmetrically organized fields. The surface treatment by embroidery is well represented by ten lozenge- or triangle-shaped fragments, all averaging a length of ten inches. Since these fragments were cut out of large pieces without consideration for the applied decoration, it may seem difficult to decide about their positions.

There is, however, one fragment among the ten that gives information about its verticality (Fig. 1). This unique distinction has not been mentioned before, and, strangely enough, the object itself has never been reproduced. At the base of what must be termed the lower border is a motive, of which too much has been cut to permit even a guess as to its

⁽⁶⁾ de Groot, J. J. M.: *Die Hunnen der vorchristlichen Zeit*, Berlin, 1921, p. 78.

⁽⁷⁾ I wish to acknowledge the help of Prof. R. S. Britton, who kindly translated some of the textile inscriptions.

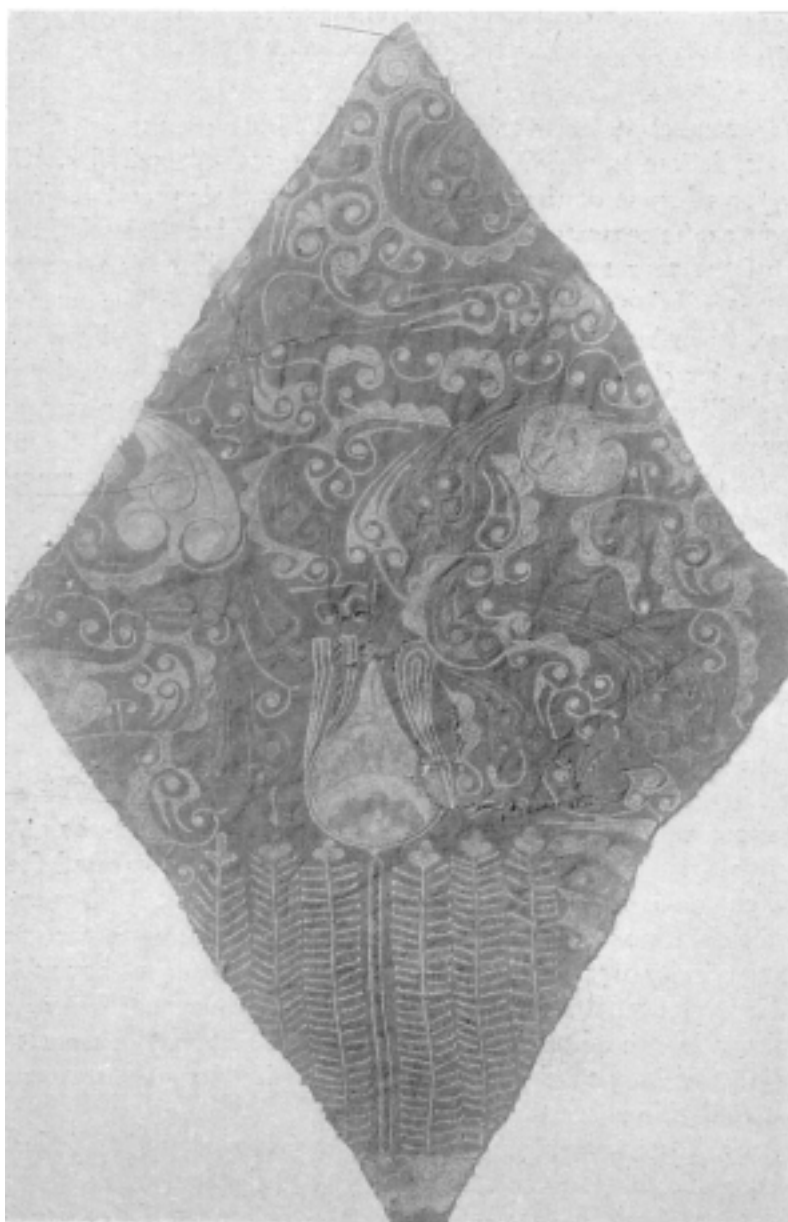


FIG. I
FRAGMENT OF EMBROIDERED SILK, NOIN ULA FIND.
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original outline. Out of it grows a bunch of seven upright grass stalks, all of even length. The geometrical ornaments that framed them right and left here again are lost. From six of the stalks spring leaves in a fish-bone arrangement, each ending in a three-lobed blossom. The central one only carries a large tulip-like flower, asymmetrically surrounded by petals, two thin ones at the left and a thick one at the right.

This fence-like formation, probably repeated at regular intervals, can be understood only to be a base border, possibly repeated along the opposite edge in the opposite direction. The firm and orderly character of this well-anchored band is in contrast to the intricate jungle of loosely connected motives that cover the rest of the lozenge. Here the leading elements are curved, two- or three-pronged feathers combined with two- or three-lobed bodies. They seem to join in pincer movements or to break away from each other. Ornaments of this type must have been in great favor during Han times, since they occur in weaving as well, and are seen in a fragment found at Lou-Lan.⁸

Between the feathers one finds a bewildering variety of spiral combinations. The color scheme of the fragment is rather somber. The background is a brown and red combination of dark tones. Threads of an almost golden yellow dominate the light values of the embroidery. Pale red serves as an intermediary between the two extremes of color.

The other lozenge fragment (also never before published) reverses the color scheme (Fig. 2). Here, ivory-white forms the background upon which reddish-brown embroidery is sparsely used for contrast. Light brown and orange-colored threads act as two intermediaries instead of one as in the previous example. Except for the reversed relation of light and dark, the elements within this composition are the same as those in Figure 1. The fish-bladder ornament in the upper center of Figure 2 appears farther to the right in Figure 1, thus providing the key to the position in which this fragment is reproduced. The forks and spirals are similar to such an extent that the two fragments appear to be the work of the same able hand.

Woolen stuffs rank second in importance among the Noin Ula finds. Up to the present the question of their origin has been decided wholly in favor of Western countries. This Western attribution, however, is not tenable in the case of a large carpet with animal skins,⁹ together with a fragment of the same stuff (Frontispiece). Both were first published by

⁽⁸⁾ *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, loc. cit.*, p. 2 (also Fig. 4 in this text).

⁽⁹⁾ Trever: *op. cit.*, pl. 14.



FIG. 2
FRAGMENT OF EMBROIDERED SILK, NOIN ULA FIND.
THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, LENINGRAD.

G. Borovka.¹⁰ The author noticed that the chain stitch used on these pieces was identical with that on Chinese silk embroideries. He also understood the motive well enough to deny it to artisans of Greek or related tradition. To avoid any conflict with the commonly and persistently repeated statement that, in ancient times, "the Chinese did not use wool for any fabric,"¹¹ Borovka decided finally on Bactria as the country of origin, without, however, having any suitable object for comparison at his disposal. A. Alföldi became conscious of all the negative evidences and tried to connect the two carpets with the nomads of the steppes.¹² His reasons were of a purely mythological nature and are refuted by the "handwriting" of the embroidered decoration.

The main motive represents the hanging skin of a tiger (not of a "horned beast," as Trever suggested¹³). Hides marked by the same vaguely S-shaped stripes occur on all kinds of Han objects.¹⁴ The horn-like treatment of ears comes from late Eastern Chou art. The formation of the mouth, with only the lower jaw furnished with teeth, goes back to the feline heads of Shang times¹⁵ (1765—1122 B.C.). This element of Chinese tradition can also be found on a silk fragment from Lou-Lan.¹⁶

The bushes below the tiger head, composed of four undulating stalks, are typical of the motives found in contemporaneous jade engravings.¹⁷ Every detail of the two woolen embroideries shown in the frontispiece falls in line with Han art. Since the question of early usage of wool in the Far East has been answered differently by different authorities, although mostly in the negative, the specimens just described lend decisive support to the assumption that China knew and used wool before the beginning of our era.

Aside from the embroideries with tiger skins, all other woolens are of

⁽¹⁰⁾ Borovka, G.: *Wanderungen eines archaisch-griechischen Motives über Skythien und Bactrien nach Alt-China*, Fünf-und-zwanzig Jahre Römisch-Germanische Kommission, Berlin, 1930.

⁽¹¹⁾ Laufer, B.: "The Early History of Felt," in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XXXIII (1930), No. 1, p. 2.

⁽¹²⁾ Alföldi, A.: "Die theriomorphe Weltbetrachtung in den Nordasiatischen Kulturen," in *Archaeologischer Anzeiger*, 1921, fasc. 1-2, p. 399.

⁽¹³⁾ Trever: *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁽¹⁴⁾ "Relics of Han and Pre-Han Dynasties, Catalogue of the Exhibition held in May, 1932," Tokyo, pl. L. Imperial Museum.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Salmony, A.: "Note on the Iconography of the Shang Period," in *Revue des Arts Asiatiques*, Vol. XI, No. II.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Stein, A.: *Innermost Asia*, London, 1928, Vol. III, pl. XL.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Salmony, A.: *Carved Jade of Ancient China*, Berkely, 1938, pl. LXV, 2.

Greek inspiration, so that Noin Ula sheds almost as much light on the evolution of Western textile art as it does in respect to China.¹⁸

One question connected with all these textiles has never been adequately answered. It deals with the way the inhabitants of the steppes treated their magnificent acquisitions. A text of the Han period leads the way by stating: "The Hiung-nu ruler liked woven and unwoven silk fairly well." This means that the Hiung-nu could be induced by such gifts to behave. Recorded also is the statement of a vindictive eunuch, fugitive from the Chinese court, who took it upon himself to incite the nomads by arguing against accepting such bribes, because "silk jackets and trousers are torn when one rides through the underwood." He wanted the steppe people to use nothing but their simple products.¹⁹

Apparently this not unselfish advice was not always followed, for the Noin Ula excavations prove that Chinese and Western fabrics alike were employed quite irreverently and with complete disregard for the delicacy of their technique and the splendor of their decoration. Only size could intervene in their favor. The famous silk damask²⁰ and the woolen tapestry of horsemen²¹ covered walls without requiring any addition, and thus were saved. When wall hangings had to be put together, the foundation cloth was applied with fringes of triangular festoons, with the result that patterns were either hidden or obliterated. The same treatment applied to cylindrical flags and cases for tresses, which destroyed the fabrics to such an extent that no ornament remained intact. The Chinese materials used for jackets, trousers, caps, and shoes, all appeared frequently joined in the form of patchwork.

Nothing shows the utter contempt in which the builders of the Noin Ula graves held the embroidered silks and the wools at their disposal better than the random nailing of fragments along the interior masonry. Some large pieces, such as the Chinese wool with tiger skins and a Western example of nearly the same size, were considered only good enough to cover external roofs, hardly protected by a layer of felt from the earth piled up above.

The few examples of ornamented native material, on the other hand, were treated differently. The large felt carpet with appliqué work and

⁽¹⁸⁾ It is generally presumed that workshops in Syria produced these stuffs. A study dealing with the route by which these materials reached the Hiung-nu will be published in the near future. The present writer considers it unnecessary to enlarge upon the analyses and descriptions given in the reports of the Noin Ula finds.

⁽¹⁹⁾ de Groot: *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁽²⁰⁾ Trever: *op. cit.*, pl. 15.

⁽²¹⁾ Trever: *op. cit.*, pl. 6.

another similar fragment are perhaps the most important contribution of the site and have received well-deserved consideration.²² These carpets occupied the most distinguished position by being spread underneath the coffin. But nothing indicates the esteem in which they were held better than the protection given to their fringes by casings of delicate silk. Such preferential treatment confirms Laufer's clear-sighted statement that in the steppes only "felt was associated with religious and ceremonial practices."²³

The textile discoveries in Northern Mongolia are responsible for reconsiderations of previous finds, among which the silk from Kerch is only one example. Others of this class are pieces from the Minnussinsk region in the southern part of Central Siberia. As early as 1905 the site of Oglakty had yielded much valuable material,²⁴ including silk fragments, one of which was rather well preserved (Fig. 3). This latter covered a birch-bark pouch of so small a size that only a part of its woven decoration was visible on the surface. The main features of the design consist, at the left, of a tiger, followed by cloud-bands, a feather pattern of the type described before which points toward the base, and the Chinese character for "long life." Other silk fragments were used at Oglakty for so-called "dolls"—bags tightly filled with grasses to replace missing legs or arms, or as face-covers supporting plaster masks.

To complete the survey of the Siberian textile finds of the Han period, mention must be made of the burial site of Pazirik in the Altai Mountains, discovered by M. P. Griaznov in 1929. A translation of the Russian report has made its unique monuments available for study in this country.²⁵ Pazirik contains the largest collection of native felt products, among which a wall-hanging and ten saddle-covers stand out for their colorful appliqué work.

Four hundred years of disturbed political life follow the downfall of Han (206 B.C.—220 A.D.). During this time the Turks emerged victorious from among the steppe tribes. No grave of this period has been discovered to date. It may, however, be presumed that the new masters of the wide-open spaces carried as many Chinese textiles away as their

⁽²²⁾ *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, loc. cit.*, p. 39 and pl. 10.

⁽²³⁾ Laufer: *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁽²⁴⁾ Sosnovski, G. P.: "L'Inventaire des tombes d'Oglakhtino," in *Problemi GAIMK*, 1933, No. 7-8, p. 36, and Tallgren, A. M.: "The South Siberian Cemetery of Oglakty from the Han Period," in *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua*, Helsinki, Vol. XI, 1937.

⁽²⁵⁾ Golomshtok, E. A.: "The Pazirik Burial of Altai," in *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. XXXVIII (1933), No. 1.

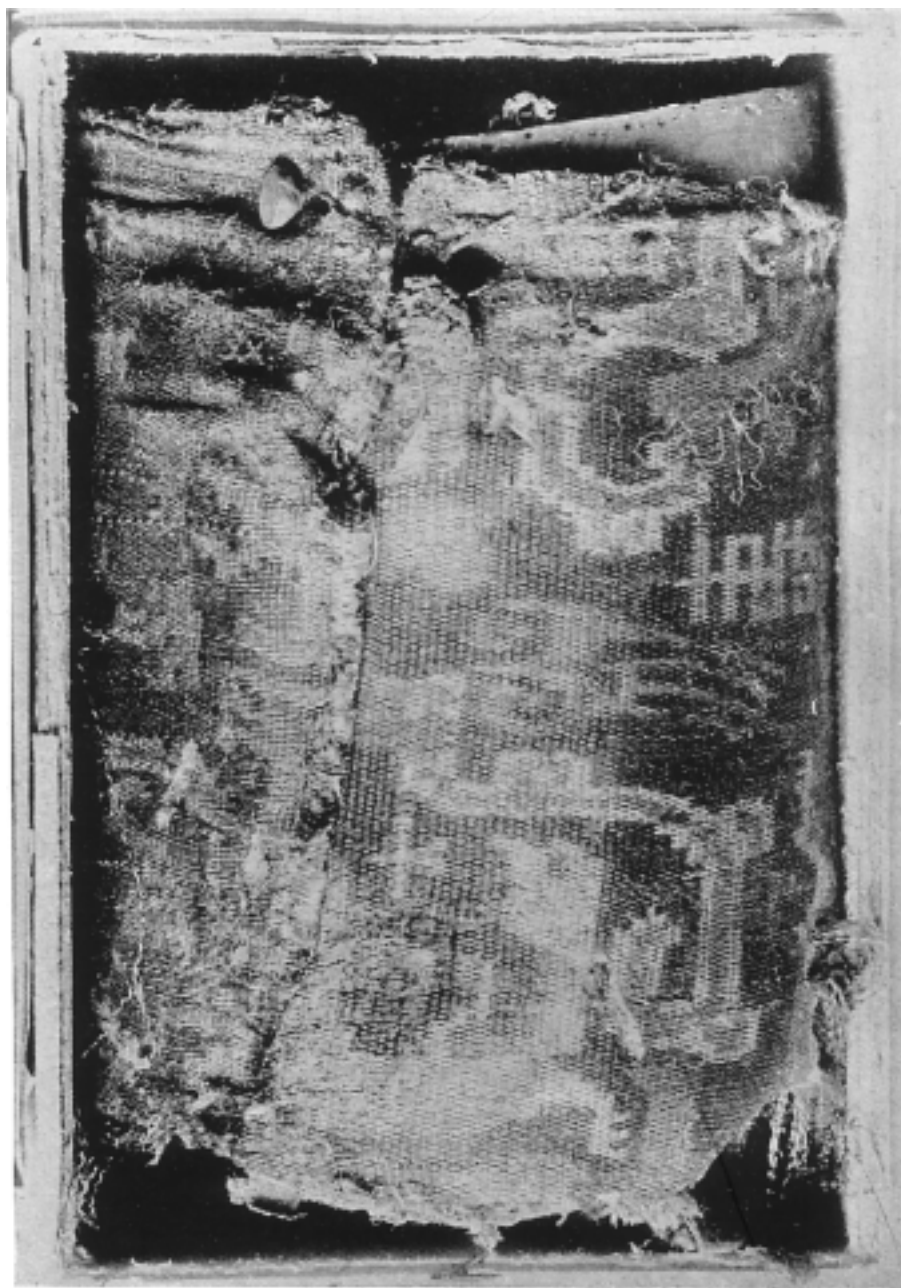


FIG. 3
FRAGMENT OF WOVEN SILK, OGLAKTY FIND. ARCHIVES OF THE ACADEMIA G.A.I.M.K., LENINGRAD.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROFESSOR A. M. TALLGREN.

predecessors, since they could prey with greater ease upon their neighbors.

When the house of T'ang restored China to the position of a united empire in 618, the bribery and robbery relation between the cultural center of China and the barbaric steppes repeated itself. As a consequence, Turkish graves of T'ang date again contain Chinese silks.

In 1865 Radloff discovered the first fragment of this period in the Katanda district of Southern Altai. It was saved from oblivion by a recent publication.²⁶ Borovka's excavations in Western Mongolia, carried out in 1925, added a similar piece from Naeinte-Sume.²⁷ Both silks illustrate the new spirit which animated the textile art of T'ang. This dynasty carried on an extensive trade with Persia from the time it came into power.

When the Arabs overran and destroyed the Sassanian Empire before the middle of the seventh century, many of the artisans undoubtedly found refuge in the flourishing cities of China. As in all the industrial arts of the period, silks show Sassanian influence. Instead of the free-floating rhythm of Chinese tradition, symmetry rules the field. Discs with beaded borders surround interstitial palmette motives. Even the Chinese dragons find their freedom of action limited within the discs, where they have to obey the order of an axial subdivision.

With so much borrowed from Persia and so little contributed by China, the T'ang textiles hardly propagandize Far Eastern motives in the steppes. Rather they reinforce the Persian influence that penetrates the Russian frontiers from all directions. Sassanian ornamentation dominated the civilized world even after its instigators had vanished from the political scene. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how the native steppe production stood up under this new situation, since there are no felt finds of the T'ang period. However, Chinese sources bear witness to the fact that felt retained its monopoly for ceremonial purposes. Turkish officers, for instance, performed obeisance to their rulers on felt carpets.²⁸

The rulers of the Sung Dynasty (960—1278) brought China back to its artistic independence. Being unable to match their cultural achievements with political power, they became more subservient than ever to the steppes, where Mongolian tribes held sway. To them they sent enormous quantities of silk. Unfortunately, no grave of the Sung period

⁽²⁶⁾ Zakharoff, A.: "Antiquities of Katanda, Altai," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. LV (Jan.-June, 1925), p. 53, fig. 2.

⁽²⁷⁾ *Sewernaiia Mongolia*, Leningrad, 1927, Vol. II, p. 75, fig. 7.

⁽²⁸⁾ Parker, E. H.: *A Thousand Years of the Tartars*, London, 1924, p. 134.

has yielded any textile. In general, the Chinese production of that period is less known by originals than the two preceding ones.

For textile imports of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries into Russia, one has to turn to the West. Beautiful silk brocades from the cemeteries of Wladimir and Suzdal are known and have been recently grouped together in a splendid volume by A. Gushchin.²⁹ When Byzantium learned the secret of silk production at the end of the sixth century, and thus broke the Chinese monopoly, that center became a successful competitor of the Far East. However, the ornaments it spread far and wide were largely of Sassanian origin and remained Persian in spirit.

Geographical proximity, religious interdependence, and political relations made Byzantium the most important contributor to Russia's growing textile art, although China was never entirely eliminated, and its regular exports lasted until the rule of Peter the Great.³⁰

In Siberia, the splendor of foreign textiles never changed the devotion of the steppe people for their native products. Chingiz Khan and his successors were still crowned on a piece of felt.³¹

⁽²⁹⁾ Gushchin, A.: *Monuments de l'art industriel de l'ancienne Russie, X-XIII siècles*, Moscow, 1936, pls. XXII-XXIV.

⁽³⁰⁾ These materials were called *kámka*, a term explained as "satin damask." Zakharoff, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁽³¹⁾ Laufer: *op. cit.*, p. 14, and Parker: *op. cit.*, p. 134.