

FIG. 1

PAINTING FROM THE *Andarz Nama* MANUSCRIPT, DATED 1090 A.D., IN THE CINCINNATI MUSEUM, SHOWING FOLIATED STRIPES, AND A SPLIT-ACANTHUS POWDERED PATTERN.

SOME MEDIAEVAL SILKS  
FROM THE CASPIAN PROVINCES OF IRAN

*by*

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**A**T THE EASTERN END of the Caspian Sea lies the Persian province, Gurgan. Civilization dawned there very early indeed, and weaving was already established thousands of years ago. Professor Carleton Coon, of the University of Pennsylvania, excavated, in 1951, a cave a few miles from the southeastern corner of the Caspian shore, where people had lived, made pottery, grown crops, raised goats and sheep, and spun and woven the hair and wool about 6000 B.C. — the date scientifically determined by carbon radiation tests. An ancient Persian tradition tells how Jamshid, one of the great Persian legendary rulers, “settled craftsmen and artificers in the province, assigning land to each one.”<sup>1</sup> And Jamshid is associated with the Achaemenid period: the magnificent ruins of the Achaemenid ritual city near Shiraz which we call “Persepolis,” “Persian City,” are called by Persians even today “Jamshid’s Palace,” “Takht-i-Jamshidi.” But any Achaemenid official (even a legendary one!) establishing arts and crafts in an outpost of empire would have included some of the weavers and dyers who produced the famous fine, soft Achaemenid wools, noted for their beautiful tones of violet and mulberry.<sup>2</sup>

The great period for the province of Gurgan in the history of textiles, however, came with the introduction of silk. How the Chinese, with crafty determination, long concealed the source and nature of this most precious and beautiful of textile fibers has been told and retold, as has the story about the final betrayal of the secret, when a few silkworms were carried out in a hollow staff in the sixth century; and in that same period cocoons were brought into Gurgan, the industry there was soon flourishing, and from there it was carried along the Caspian littoral, first to the adjacent province of Tabaristan (also called Mazanderan), and then to the next coastal province, Gilan, and the mountain area behind that, Dailam. By the early Middle Ages all four of these provinces were famous, not only for their silk production, but also for fine fabrics woven in various towns.

Many stories have been handed down in Persian literature emphasizing the wealth of silk available in this coastal area. Thus a Sasanian Governor of Tabaristan (the title was "Ispahbad," and this title persisted well down into the Middle Ages) sent as an annual tribute to the King a forty-mule caravan of precious things which included 300 bales of silk mats and coverlets, 300 bales of good colored cotton, and 300 bales of gold-worked garments, called, from the towns which specialized in them, "Ruyani" and "Lafuragi"; and when the Caliph al-Mansur (754-775 A.D.) sent the Ispahbad of that period a royal crown and robe of honor, the Ispahbad was so pleased that he agreed to send the Caliph the same tribute that his predecessors had sent to the Sasanian rulers.<sup>3</sup>

Amul, as well as Ruyan, was an important Tabaristan textile center, the two producing various kinds of fabrics of cotton, wool, silk and linen, and making garments and also draperies and handkerchiefs.<sup>4</sup> The abundant supply of silk in Amul is conveyed by a boastful tale about a certain rich citizen named 'Ali ibn Hisham, who, when he gave a banquet, instead of strewing the board with cress to give a fresh appearance (in itself a charming custom), had his servants shred green silk and scatter this over the table<sup>5</sup> (surely not nearly so attractive!).

Textiles from the town of Sari<sup>6</sup> were described as "sumptuous," and the industry had been stimulated there when the Ispahbad Khurshid (733-766 A.D.) built a bazaar in the town and established in it skilled artisans from all parts of Tabaristan.<sup>7</sup>

Ibn Haukal, writing in 928, gives an impressive account of the textile trades in this central coastal province: "In Tabaristan one finds enough silk thread to supply the whole universe — no other country in the Muslim world produces as much. They make there various qualities of silk fabrics, rich woollen garments, and extraordinary *bouracan* (a fabric named for the Central Asian city of Buchara, and apparently a very fine quality of linen or cotton material). Nowhere else can one find materials as valuable as the garments, *bouracan*, and silk robes (*mitraf*) of Tabaristan. When these textiles are worked with gold they cost as much as those made in Fars, or even a little more. They make cotton handkerchiefs in Tabaristan (cotton was then a luxury material), 'foulards' (*shirabaya*), and cushions — both monochrome and gold-woven. The color resembles the cotton which is dyed yellow of Sa'da and Sar'a, and they weave an especially beautiful fabric from it which is highly prized by the Iraqis."<sup>8</sup> In addition, rose-colored stamped stuffs from Tabaristan are listed, along

with other valuable things, at the Court of the fabulous Mahmud of Ghazna.<sup>9</sup>

The wealth of silk available in this part of Persia in the twelfth century is suggested by a number of stories. Thus it is said that when the Amir of Hilla took refuge with the Ispahbad 'ala ud-Dawla ibn Shahriyar (1122-1143), the Ispahbad sent the refugee, on the day of his arrival, a welcoming gift which included 300 coats and caps and 100 girdles.<sup>10</sup> Or again, some of the courtiers and friends of another Ispahbad came to visit him one night in Amul and he bestowed on them 500 silken garments.<sup>11</sup>

In the easternmost coastal province, Gurgan, the city of Astarabad was noted, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, for both silk yarn and silk weaving, and in 1054 it was stated that the majority of the city's population were weavers. Among the fabrics of great value made in Astarabad were *harir* (which merely means a silk fabric, probably most often plain cloth), *mubram*, and a fabric called *Kushkashshi* which was finer and softer than the Nishapur *haffi* (a fine soft white fabric used for turbans, probably cotton). Silk scarves made in Gurgan were exported all the way to the Yemen.<sup>12</sup>

These evidences of the importance of the textile crafts in the Caspian provinces, and specifically in Gurgan, are of special interest now in relation to the numerous, varied and detailed representations of textile designs in the miniatures of an already-famous Gurgan manuscript acquired in 1953 by the Cincinnati Museum of Art.

In 1078 (470 H.) Q'ai Qa'us ibn Washmgir, ruler of Gurgan, began to write, for his son Gilanshah (the sixth and last of his line to hold power), an *Andarz Nama*, a Book of Good Counsel, and two and a half years later the King had finished it. This type of Book of Advice (*Andarz Nama*) continued a Sasanian tradition, for essays setting forth both theoretical and practical principles of personal conduct had begun to be popular in the last century of Sasanian rule, and treatises of this character produced in the post-Sasanian era, of which several examples have survived, were commonly attributed to Sasanian notables, including one which claims no less an author than King Khusraw I Anushirvan himself.<sup>13</sup>

The *Andarz Nama* manuscript which Q'ai Qa'us had finished in 1080 was copied by a Master Calligrapher, Shirda ibn Shirdil al Isfabudi al Tabari, who was very probably on the Palace staff, and it was illustrated, almost certainly by the same hand, with about 100 paintings. His great labor was completed in July, 1090 (27th of Jumada al-Ula, 483 H.). One-half the manuscript, including forty-four of the paintings and both



FIG. 2

PAININGS FROM THE *Andarz Nama* MANUSCRIPT, DATED 1090 A.D., IN THE CINCINNATI MUSEUM, SHOWING FOLIATED STRIPES, POWDERED PATTERNS, AND AN ALL-OVER DESIGN OF SCROLLING FOLIATION.

the frontispiece and the colophon, are now in the Cincinnati Museum. These paintings are two centuries older than the earliest Persian book paintings previously known, and are in a style quite novel and unexpected. The manuscript and its paintings have already received world acclaim among students of Muslim culture.<sup>14</sup>

The paintings in the Cincinnati section of the manuscript show over a hundred textile designs, mostly on garments, but also on curtains, cushions, coverlets, mats and saddle-blankets. Since the weavers and users of these fabrics depicted in the paintings were almost all members of the Gurgan Court and silk was so abundant in Gurgan and its neighbor provinces, we can safely assume that in general the materials shown were silks.

An immediately striking characteristic of these textile designs is the extensive use of patterned stripes, especially foliated stripes. While many are in the standard vertical stripe arrangement, an exceptional proportion are horizontally striped, and still more unusual is the frequency of diagonal stripes. Recurrent in the patterns are acanthus bracts, usually split, a direct Sasanian inheritance. These are often attached in symmetrical pairs, to a spot motive: a heart or trefoil (Fig. 1, l. and r.), a disk or ring, or a cross (Fig. 2, two figures on r.), and the unit is repeated in juxtaposed succession to create a foliate continuum. In other patterns the half-acanthus leaves are carried on scrolling stems, and these scrolling foliate stems, deeply curving, with broad full foliage, also are employed as all-over patterns (Fig. 2, l.), an antecedent of the arabesque style that reached its culmination on sixteenth century Persian Court carpets.

On other fabrics shown in the *Andarz Nama* paintings, acanthus bracts are developed into motives for powdered patterns. Thus a leaf on a long stem is split, almost to the base of the stem, an arrow is inserted in this split, and the two halves of the leaf are bent to either side to make a formal treelet (Fig. 1, l.); or the two halves of a split leaf are fitted to either side of a conical pedestal (Fig. 1, r.); or for a richer effect, each of a pair of leaves atop a shorter stem is split, and the segments are curled, one up, so that the pair is "vis-à-vis," the other down, making a fourfold semi-palmette (Fig. 2, next to l. end). Of abstract motives, the equilateral cross is exceptionally conspicuous, and that, too, is often foliated (Fig. 2, next to r. end); likewise, the upper edge of an inverted heart may be foliated, or the figure is set in an acanthus bracket.

Especially broad, strong foliation in exceptionally large scale is shown on saddle-blankets (Fig. 3); and two pieces of silk from the royal graves on the site of the mediaeval capital of Rayy,<sup>15</sup> which are unusually heavy—



FIG. 3

PAINTING FROM THE *Andarz Nama* MANUSCRIPT, DATED 1090 A.D., IN THE CINCINNATI MUSEUM, SHOWING A SADDLE-BLANKET DECORATED WITH LARGE-SCALE ACANTHUS FOLIATION, AND ON THE GENTLEMAN'S ROBE A DESIGN OF PAIRED CONFRONTED PEACOCKS WITH OGIVAL PLAQUE TAILS.

as silks for saddle-mats would have to be — have an all-over arrangement of broad strong foliation, closely similar in style to that on saddle-blankets in *Andarz Nama* illustrations. Against this foliation on one of the pieces from the Rayy graves are pairs of confronted peacocks (Fig. 4), the bird's displayed tail stylized as an ogival plaque. But a peacock pattern appears also on the robes of two gentlemen in different miniatures (Fig. 3) in the *Andarz Nama*, with paired birds confronted flanking a small palm, and here, too, the displayed tail is an ogival plaque. The ogival tail-plaque of the peacocks on the silk from the Rayy graves has a narrow border, patterned with a bar alternating with a dot, and this combination — rather unusual despite its simplicity — is found as a stripe-pattern on some of the fabrics depicted in the *Andarz Nama*.

The eyes of horses in the *Andarz Nama* paintings (Fig. 3) — and likewise of many of the human beings — are curiously shaped and often exaggeratedly pointed at one end, with an overemphatic pupil; and the peacocks on the very heavy silk have similar peculiar eyes, as have unusual, fantastic winged deer on the second silk of this type from the Rayy graves.

These two silks are especially notable for the rich and skilful development in the foliation of void patterns which are not representative — save for a bottle-shaped vase at one juncture — so that the background ornament is, in axial areas, dual; i.e., on two levels of attention: the positive, direct composition, and the negative, shadowed pattern, revealed only to skilled exploration. Such depth and subtlety in designing could be expected only in an ancient deep-rooted textile art, and is virtually unknown in either European or Far Eastern ornament.

Another bird pattern on a textile depicted in the *Andarz Nama* (Fig. 5) is of even more immediate and indubitable evidential value in relation to surviving fabrics. On the dark cloak worn by the distinguished personage seated in the foreground are light-toned ring-necked doves standing or walking, slightly spaced in straight bands and columns, alternating with pairs of a trefoil spot, at the levels of the birds' heads and feet.

Falke illustrates a decorative painting in the Egbert Codex from Echternach (Fig. 6),<sup>16</sup> datable about 985, transcribing a textile design which he attributed to Persia, in which the patterned stripe scheme, so conspicuous in the *Andarz Nama* designs, is developed beyond precedent, with five different units carrying four strikingly diversified patterns; and one of these is composed of ring-necked doves, standing or walking, slightly spaced in a straight line, alternating with trefoil spots at the levels of the birds' heads and feet. This is virtually identical with the design on the



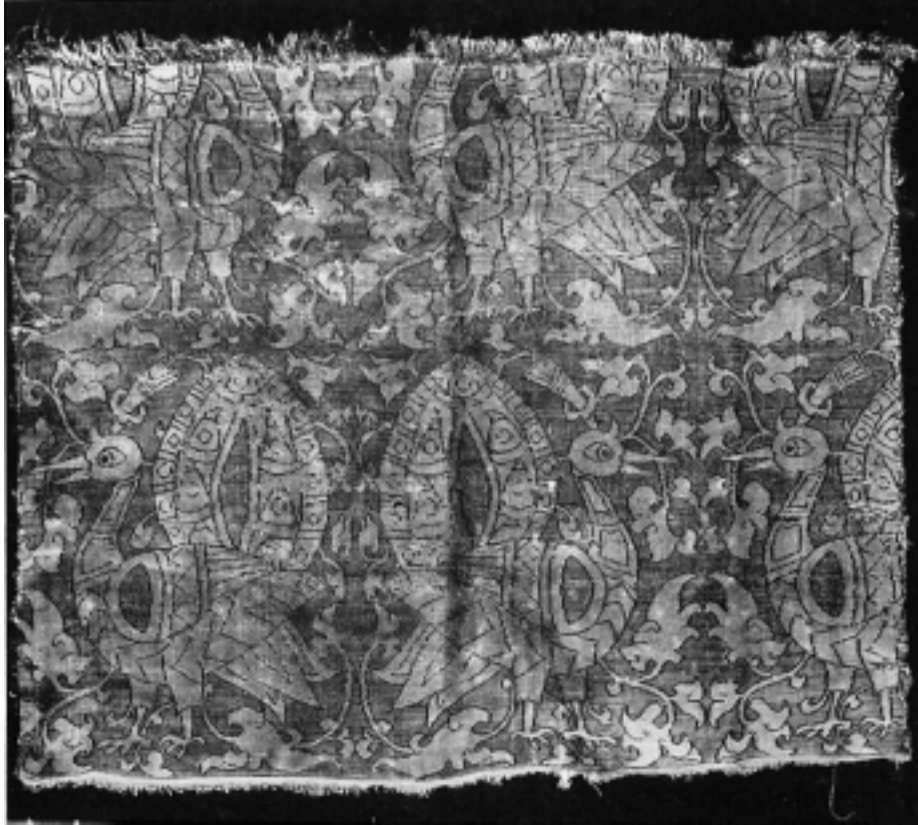


FIG. 4

HEAVY SILK TWILL FROM THE ROYAL GRAVES ON THE SITE OF RAYY, WITH SCROLLING FOLIATION AND PEACOCKS IN NATURAL SILK AND DARK BLUE ON A RED GROUND. HOBART MOORE MEMORIAL COLLECTION, YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY.



FIG. 5

ON THE CLOAK OF THE SEATED GENTLEMAN IS A PATTERN OF RING-NECKED DOVES CLOSELY SPACED IN STRAIGHT BANDS AND COLUMNS, WITH SMALL TREFOILS BETWEEN, AT THE LEVELS OF THE BIRDS' HEADS AND FEET. PAINTING FROM THE *Andarz Nama* MANUSCRIPT, DATED 1090 A.D., CINCINNATI MUSEUM OF ART.



FIG. 6

PAINING IN THE EGBERT CODEX FROM ECHTERNACH, DATABLE *c.* 985, SHOWING RING-NECKED DOVE PATTERN CLOSELY SIMILAR TO THAT IN FIGURE 5, AND OTHER DESIGNS RELATED TO PATTERNS IN THE *Andarz Nama* MANUSCRIPT.



FIG. 7

SILK TWILL WITH HAWK AND FLABELLUM DESIGN IN RED AND BLUE, RELATED TO THE DOVE DESIGNS IN FIGURES 5 AND 6. BRUSSELS MUSEUM (NO. 374).

cloak in the *Andarz Nama* miniature; indeed, the two could have been drawn by the same hand. The only difference is that in the Codex transcription, each bird carries in its beak a pomegranate leaf, and wears the straight, “floating” Sasanian ribbons — probably the reason why Falke called the design Persian, though the convention was borrowed at other textile centers, notably Antioch-on-the-Orontes.<sup>17</sup>

In the adjacent stripe the bird, still wearing the ribbons, which indicate that it was a symbolic bird, faces in the opposite direction and the color combination is changed. In the next stripe a circle enclosing a six-pointed star alternates with a split-acanthus tree, vertically overturned on a spot fulcrum; the same treelet appears in a number of patterns shown in the *Andarz Nama*. In the next, a variant of this duplicated overturned treelet alternates with a dotted ring enclosing an equilateral cross trefflé. Equilateral crosses are, as we have already noted, strikingly frequent in *Andarz Nama* patterns. Finally a “griffon” appears in the next stripe — actually a winged hound, oddly three-legged, with eagle talons for feet. The creature is repeated in overturn, flanking a triple group of pyramidal cypresses, the tallest one, in the center, sprouting branches which bear pomegranate leaves.

(The dove was an attribute of the Sasanian Great Goddess, Ardvi Sura Anahit; the “griffon” is one version of her animal avatar, the Senmurv, or — literally — “Dog-bird,” which nested on her cosmic tree, the Golden Haoma or Tree-of-Many-Seeds, often represented as a pomegranate because of its fruit of many seeds. The cypress, on the other hand, is one of the trees that was used to represent the Silver Haoma, which was the dendritic appendage to the God Tishtriya, personation of the “Rain-star” Sirius, who collaborated with Ardvi Sura in providing health, wealth and happiness for humanity. Loyalty to the old, pre-Islamic ideas and figures was characteristic of the Caspian provinces, which did not accept Islam for some two centuries after the rest of Iran had become Muslim, and even then, Sasanian cultural elements, like the Governor’s title, “Ispahbad,” were retained.)

A red and blue silk twill in the Brussels Museum, with red and yellow introduced arbitrarily in spaced bands, also published by Falke, but classed, surprisingly, as “West Islamic,” presents hawks in exactly the same style as the *Andarz Nama* ring-dove pattern, but with the trefoil spots now scattered on the breasts of the birds (Fig. 7).<sup>18</sup> Between these falcons, paired and confronted in symmetrical overturn, is a pair of split-acanthus bracts “*vis-à-vis*,” closely similar to a motive that recurs in

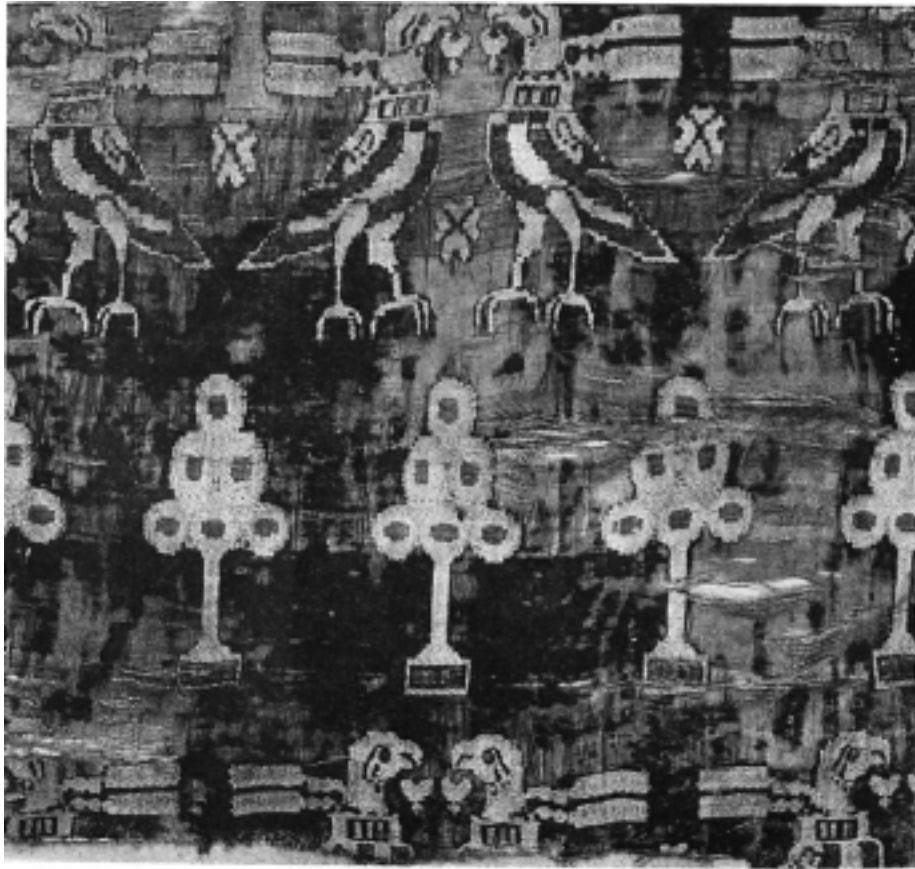


FIG. 8

SILK TWILL IN THE MUSÉE DE CLUNY SHOWING  
HAWKS RELATED TO THE BIRDS IN FIGURES 6 AND 7.

*Andarz Nama* patterns (*cf.* the “semi-palmette” in Fig. 2); and alternating with this group is a disk flabellum, the margin decorated with the small equilateral crosses, so common in the *Andarz Nama* designs, the handle elaborated with a split-acanthus bract of a type repeatedly used in the *Andarz Nama*. The repeats on the Brussels silk are arranged like those on the *Andarz Nama* bird silk, in straight bands and columns, slightly spaced. The falcon is a hunting bird, wearing jesses and, attached to its lower mandible, a bell, which European falconers also have used on short-winged hawks, but attached to the tails.

Falke found a closely similar variant of this design reproduced as a decoration in the Codex Aureus of Echternach, in the Escorial, which is datable prior to 1046.<sup>19</sup> The pattern is arranged in horizontal stripes, so marked a feature of textile designs in the *Andarz Nama*, with a four-stripe repeat, two of the stripes having the falcon, but walking in opposite directions. The bird has the mandible-bell but is not jessed, and has the floating Sasanian ribbons; and alternating with it is a twelve-point star-rosette flabellum on a stand. The next stripe motive is another flabellum on a stand, with the equilateral cross in the center and the upper margin foliated, like the foliation on the upper edge of the inverted heart used as a spot repeat on *Andarz Nama* textiles. A palmette on a festooned stem used in the remaining stripe is so divergent in style, it looks like a substitution introduced by the Codex illuminator.

Almost the same hawk, with floating ribbons and mandible bell, appears on a blue-ground silk twill, in the Musée de Cluny, Paris, hitherto unattributed (Fig. 8). The bird is duplicated in confronted pairs flanking a heart quatrefoil and the group alternates with a heart quatrefoil, while in the alternate band is an artificial tree built of six rings on a slender trunk; the ring is frequently used as point of attachment in paired leaf units in *Andarz Nama* textile patterns.

Finally, a long-puzzling silk, never successfully identified, seems to belong to the same general group. The pattern is known only incompletely from two small circular fragments from a seal-bag in Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 9). Here are the acanthus bracts “*vis-à-vis*,” as the crown of an artificial tree. The segments meet to form a very obvious void-pattern of a bottle-vase, and a void-vase has already been noted on the heavy, peacock-patterned silk. The tree is flanked by a pair of heavily wattled cocks (pheasants ?), apparently feeding, and the alternate and more important motive was a rich triadic palmette tree flanked by a tonsured individual whose long face, long straight neck, long nose, tiny mouth and big ovoid



FIG. 9

FRAGMENTS OF SILK TWILL FROM A SEAL-BAG, IN CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL, SHOWING CONFRONTED ACANTHUS BRACTS SIMILAR TO THOSE IN FIG. 6, AND HEAD OF MAN SIMILAR IN STYLE TO FIGURES IN THE *Andarz Nama*.

eyes with a heavy black pupil floating in the center all have counterparts in equally curious looking personalities in the *Andarz Nama*. This design is not as directly related to the *Andarz Nama* paintings as are the bird patterns, but it seems to come within the same artistic orbit, and the figures in the "Book of Good Counsel" are the first that have been found which resemble this odd-looking sacerdotal personality on the famous Canterbury fragments.

That Europe obtained silk from the Caspian coast of Iran has already been suggested more than once, on European documentary grounds. Thus mediaeval European records contain numerous references to a *seta stravai*, also written *stravagi*, *stravatina*, and sometimes, by corruption *stranai*. Just what kind of silk (*seta*) this "*stravai*" meant was long a puzzle, but finally "*stravai*" was interpreted as a latinization of "*strabadi*," from "Astarabad."<sup>20</sup> Again, there is a considerable number of rune-stones, in central and southern Sweden, erected chiefly *c.* 1000-1100 A.D., to the memory of men who had died in "Särkland," which at this time was probably, according to Professor T. J. Arne, the southern shore of the Caspian, called "Särkland" because it was the source of silk, "*särk*" being derived from "*sericus*," "silk."<sup>21</sup>

The presence in Europe of these silk fabrics, now attributable to the shore of the Caspian through directly relevant evidence in the *Andarz Nama* paintings, adds support to the thesis of a considerable Caspian-European silk trade, and also shows that woven materials, as well as the silk itself, were carried into European markets.



## FOOTNOTES

1. E. G. Browne, *Ibn Isfandiyar's History of Tabaristan*, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Vol. II, Leyden-London, 1905, p. 15.
2. Herodotos, *Historia*: Vol. II, pp. 20, 22; Vol. IX, pp. 22, 80, 82; Xenophon, *Kyropaedia*, Vol. VIII, Vol. III, pp. 3, 13; Plutarch, *Lives*, Alexander, *passim*.
3. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
4. Ya'kubi, p. 277; Sir Wm. Ouseley, *Ibn Haukal*, p. 179; *Ibn Rusteh*, p. 154; *Mukaddasi*, p. 359; *Yakut*, Vol. I, p. 68; *see* G. Wiet, *L'Exposition Persane de 1931*, Le Caire, 1933, pp. 122, 93, 94. Also *see*: Ackerman, *Textiles of the Islamic Periods*, *in* A. U. Pope (Ed.), *A Survey of Persian Art*, Oxford, 1939, Vol. III, p. 1995.
5. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
6. *Mukaddasi*, p. 359; G. LeStrange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1930, p. 370.
7. H. L. Rabino, *Mazanderan and Astarabad* (E. J. W. Gibb Memorial N.S. VII), London, 1928, p. 52.
8. *Ibn Haukal*, p. 272 (repeatedly cited).
9. Barthold, *Turkestan*, pp. 283 ff. (quoting Gardizi).
10. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
12. Muh. 358; *Vis u Ramun*, by Gurgani, ch. 13, v. 16 (reference kindly supplied by Dr. Richard Ettinghausen); *Istakhri*, p. 161 (W. Heyd, *Histoire du Commerce du Levant*, Leipzig, 1923, Vol. I, p. 46) (also cited Wiet, *op. cit.*, p. 94); *Mukaddasi*, p. 367 (see also LeStrange, *op. cit.*, p. 38) (also cited Wiet, *op. cit.*, p. 101); *Ibn al Fakih*, p. 254; *al-Tha'alabi*, p. 114 (Wiet, p. 101); see also Rabino, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
13. A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1936, p. 52.
14. See Pope, *The Recently Discovered Eleventh Century Andarz Nama*, *Journal of the Institute for Asian Studies* (Hyderabad-Dekkan) Vol. I, p. 1 (1955), pp. 1-14 (two plates).
15. The Writer formerly tentatively suggested a Yazd origin for this silk and the companion piece, since Yazd was especially famous about this time for a heavy type of silk: Pope (Ed.), *A Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. III, p. 2010. It might be relevant that Yazd weavers were getting silk from Astarabad (Heyd, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 693), suggesting other possible relations between the two cities. The second piece is illustrated in Pope (Ed.), *A Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. VI, pl. 986A.
16. O. v. Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, Berlin, 1913, Abb. 137; or *idem*, *Decorative Silks*, New York, 1922, Fig. 102.
17. See D. Wilber, *Sasanian Motives*, *Bulletin of the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology*, Vol. V, p. 1 (June, 1937).
18. Falke, *Seidenweberei*, Abb. 172; or *Decorative Silks*, Fig. 130.
19. Falke, *Seidenweberei*, Abb. 173; or *Decorative Silks*, Fig. 131.
20. Heyd, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 671.
21. Agnes Geijer, *Oriental Textiles in Sweden*, Copenhagen, 1951, p. 16.