



SASANIAN TEXTILES

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AN ICONOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

Classical, Islamic, and Chinese sources celebrate Sasanian textiles as a very precious commodity, but no specific descriptions of them are given. Most studies of Sasanian textile art are originally based on these sources and on examining the reliefs of the larger grotto at Tāq-e Bostān, which, although extremely interesting, present too many external influences and, therefore, cannot be considered typical specimens of Persian court art (Peck, 1969, pp. 121-23; Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2001). Some patterns observed on the garments of the figures at Tāq-e Bostān are definitely reproductions of the decorations that also appear in metalwork and, above all, in stuccoes of the late Sasanian period (Goldman, 1993; idem, 1997; Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2004). However, both the carved decorative patterns and the fashion of the clothes reflect a sort of exotic taste. Moreover, the reliefs of the larger grotto at Tāq-e Bostān are very late Sasanian works, and they have no similar parallels in the entire body of pre-Islamic Persian art (Domyo, 1984, fig. 19). The only textile fragments referable to the Sasanian period (6th-7th century CE), recovered during scientific excavations at Šahr-e Qumes (Semnān province) and Tel-e Malyan (Fārs), do not display particular decorations, and one cannot be totally sure about their production within Persia proper (Kawami, 1991; Idem, 1992; Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2006, pp. 237-40).

A piece of silk “embellished with portraits of Sasanian kings” was found in



1948 at Kalār Dašt (Māzandarān province) together with metalwork objects, but at present it is possibly part of an unknown private collection (Lukonin, p. 110). Although no image of this textile has been published, it could be dated to the early Islamic period as well: in fact, the Arab conquest was slower in Māzandarān than in the rest of Persia, and the Sasanian traditions were preserved there until a later time. It has been argued (Muscarella, p. 204) that the metal objects from Kalār Dašt are modern forgeries, and therefore one cannot exclude that the enigmatic piece of silk found together with them is a fake as well.

In 1993 in the Ḥamzeli village (Zanjān province), workers accidentally found naturally mummified corpses wrapped in fabric, which are now kept in the Archeological Museum of Iran (Muza-ye Irān-e Bāstān) in Tehran. The organic material was in a good state of preservation, and the woolen clothes still present stripes with very bright colors (FIGURE 1). According to the C¹⁴test, the mummies can be dated to 300 CE, that is, to the early Sasanian period (Alai, p. 23). Once again, the decorations are too simple to generate an idea of the Sasanian taste, since these people could not have been of the upper class, and, therefore, there are no certain data about the place where the textiles were woven.

Etsuko Kageyama recently considered a particular group of decorated textile fragments from Turfan to be of a certain Sasanian production (Kageyama, 2006, pp. 322-23). Among the textiles which are supposed to be Sasanian she also mentioned the well-known fragment from the Vatican Museum, displaying a pheasant, and some other silk specimens excavated at Antinoe (Egypt), which are embellished with pearl roundels containing figures of winged horses and rams (Kageyama, 2006, p. 322; Schrenk, pp. 24-25; Bénazeth, 2006, pp. 158-59). However, the excavations at Antinoe in the beginning of the 20th century were not accomplished scientifically, and there is no evidence of any written document recovered with these silk fragments. Therefore, from the iconographic point of view, most of these textiles (especially those embellished with pearl roundels) can be considered as specimens made after the models observed in Sogdian paintings (Compareti, 2006b, pp. 63-64). In fact, they represent an isolated group of textiles strongly influenced by Iranian prototypes, which do not completely correspond to pure Sasanian formulae.

As for the above-mentioned silk fragment from the Vatican Museum, it is extremely difficult to decide for a specific place of its production, although



there are some elements in it that can be observed at Tāq-e Bostān as well (Ricciardi, pp. 391-92). Stylistic and technical analyses tried to establish connections with what could have been the more suitable decorations for Sasanian textiles through the comparison of fragments found at several archeological sites scattered across a very extensive area (Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, Egypt, and the Far East) with the Tāq-e Bostān reliefs (Ackerman, pp. 692-93; Geijer, p. 28; Ricciardi, pp. 386-90; Scerrato, pp. 76-77; Martiniani-Reber and Bénazeth, p. 15; Overlaet; Kajitani, pp. 111-12; McDowel, p. 157). The problem has been approached in a different way by taking into consideration the Sasanian seals which traditionally display many iconographical themes (Bivar). Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to present a repertoire that would be valid for textiles which could be undoubtedly ascribed to the Sasanians, since many well-known specimens have been recently attributed to Byzantine, Coptic, Sogdian, and early Islamic productions, but they are clearly influenced by Persian art in general (Otavsky, pp. 161-214; Verhecken-Lammens, de Moor, and Overaet, pp. 233-34; Compareti, 2005b, pp. 143-60). It has even been suggested that the roundel pattern (with or without pearls) on embellished luxury garments from pre-Islamic Persia points out to Armenian origin (Taverna, 1993, pp. 213, 227; Idem, 2001, pp. 218-19).

The enigmatic pearl roundel pattern still represents one of the great problems of Sasanian art, especially in the field of textile production. In the past, this iconographic formula had been attributed uncritically to Sasanian art because of its presence among the decorative elements at Tāq-e Bostān, at Antinoe, and in some stuccoes that are undoubtedly dated to Sasanian Persia. It is true that some classical sources called the decorations of the Persian textiles *rotae* (Lat. 'wheels,' that is to say, roundels), but a more detailed explanation has not been given (De Francovich, p. 185; Scerrato, p. 77). Moreover, other hypotheses have been expressed based on texts, but, unfortunately, all of the latter date to the Islamic period (Melikian-Chirvani). As observed by Carol Altman Bromberg, one can be sure about the use and production of the pearl roundels pattern in pre-Islamic Persia only for the stuccoes that embellish Sasanian buildings, and not for the textiles (Bromberg, p. 252). On the other hand, the pearl roundel pattern was very appreciated by the Sogdians (Compareti, 2004; Idem, 2006a).

The only textile decoration adopted by Persian aristocrats that can be considered official Sasanian is the three-dot element scattered on the whole garments: it can be observed on several Sasanian objects and at Tāq-e Bostān as well (Domyo, 1981, pl. 3.78; Goldman, 1993, p. 218). This decoration was



never attested outside the territory of Persia, and this fact enforces the hypothesis of its pure Sasanian creation. An enigmatic group of figurative textiles that is said to come from Egypt—although it was acquired on the antiquary market—is extremely interesting for the study of pre-Islamic Persian textiles. The fragments cannot be considered Coptic, as they display several Iranian elements which do not completely correspond to Sasanian artistic canons. The scholars who studied this group (especially from the iconographical point of view) suggested that the Coptic and the Iranian elements are often not easily discernible, unless it is possible to observe very strong Sasanian decorations (Trilling, pp. 38-44; Bénazeth, 1991, p. 26; Idem, 2006, pp. 158-59; Compareti, 2005a, p. 290). Although in a bad state of preservation, in many cases the narrative organization of the depicted figures in the scenes would suggest the reproduction of myths, or of literary subjects, or even of real events from the life of a prominent person.

The most well-known sample of this group of textiles is a fragment of a pair of trousers from Antinoe, which is now preserved in the Louvre and in the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyon (Bénazeth, 1991). The fragment shows a battle scene and contains the depiction of a person sitting in the attitude typical for the Sasanian kings (FIGURE 2, Figure 2a). In fact, it could be considered a local production strongly influenced by Sasanian prototypes which possibly arrived in Egypt by way of importing Persian textiles. Yet several elements were misunderstood by the weaver, who was not too much familiar with the Sasanian royal iconography. A fragment of another trousers, also preserved in the Lyon museum, shows subjects of “Sasanian inspiration” and was possibly produced locally (Bénazeth, 2006, p. 159). The main decoration here depicts rows of two confronting horses whose heads are turned back as if they are looking at the eight-pointed star suspended above the hind quarters of each neighboring pair of horses (FIGURE 3).

Another fragmentary textile, which is said to come from Egypt and is now part of the Benaki Museum in Athens, could also be related to the same group (Compareti, 2005a). This fragment is embellished with an embroidered hunting scene depicting a rider, who is shown larger than the attendants around him, but whose head, unfortunately, has not been preserved. The garments of this central character include a decoration very similar to the one worn by the king at Tāq-e Bostān, and for this reason its identification with a Mazdean divinity does not seem to be justified (Apostolaki, pp. 129-38). Behind him, on the back of the horse, a pole surmounted by an insignia constitutes the



most important item of the whole composition (FIGURE 4). The insignia contains a sixteen-pointed flower or star which could have been intended to represent the astral descent of the Sasanians according to Mazdeism. If so, it could be a kind of emblem of that royal family (Compareti, 2007). The astral nature of decoration on some fragmentary textiles found in the Caucasus had already been proposed with the emphasis to its connection with Mazdean concepts of the Sasanians (Jeroussalimskaja, p. 115). Moreover, according to Ebn Kaldun (, who, however, was writing in the 14th century), the legendary royal standard of the Sasanians (*Derafš-e Kāviān*) contained astral symbols connected with astrological motifs, which rendered it into a powerful talisman (Christensen, p. 504). Besides that, Tā'ālebi (10th-11th century) mentioned astronomical symbols (zodiac) on the draperies of the throne of Kōsrow II (r. 590-628). Furthermore, the same author explicitly described hunting scenes on that throne, although it is not clear whether they were on embroideries or if they were engraved (Christensen, p. 467). Not only its astronomical-astrological character is worth mentioning, but so is the particular shape of its pedestal that shows a pair of spread wings typical for late Sasanian art, which are very often represented in stuccoes and on royal crowns. The faces of the attendants to the central figure call to mind some of the depictions of important people available among the paintings at Ḥājiābād (Fārs province), especially for the reproductions of their eyes (Azarnoush, pl. 35). Besides, the unnatural stiffness of the main figure seems to be another peculiarity that the Sasanian art adopted to celebrate the divine nature of the hunting sovereign, as can be observed on many metalwork objects (De Francovich, pp. 170-71). All these details would suggest that the fragment from the Benaki Museum could be a real product of pre-Islamic Persia, but very late, since, as already noted, the decoration on the clothes of the larger figure is very similar to those of the statues and capitals at Tāq-e Bostān.

Another problem to consider is that of the provenance of the fragments. The Benaki Museum fragment (FIGURE 4) could have been a real Sasanian product, maybe a piece of a narrative tapestry, later imported to Egypt, while the one with the battle scene (FIGURE 2), together with many others, could have been made in Egypt but under a strong Sasanian influence—a fact that would suggest a dating closer to the period of the occupation of Egypt by the Persians in 619-28 CE.

Further observations on the subject appear to be problematic due to the scarcity of information on official Sasanian iconography which, however, had



left certain traces in the culture of the upper classes of the neighboring countries, especially in the Byzantine empire (Bénazeth, 2006, p. 157).

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