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SOGDIAN SILK: MYTH OR REALITY?

Sogdia was a cultural and historical region located in the very center of Asia. It played a vital role in the development of global trade along the Silk Road. Silk was the main commodity. It is generally known that the home of this fabric originated in China. However, by the early Middle Ages the secret of silk production became available to many countries. A certain type of silk fabric – samit – appeared in Byzantium by the 6th century. It then became popular in other countries. Opinions differ about whether silk samits were produced on the territory of Sogdia itself. Henning's translation of a customs inscription on a piece of silk from Huy (Belgium) has become an important piece of evidence in favor of Sogdian origins of many silks from various collections. Later, however, this truly significant inscription was re-read by N. Sims-Williams and J. Kahn with the tentative conclusion that the fragment containing the inscription may have been made in the Syro-Egyptian region. Thus, the attestation of these preserved textile artifacts being connected to the Sogdians has been questioned. Specialists in the history of textiles cast doubt that Sogdia had its own silk weaving industry at all. This article provides evidence in support of the hypothesis that Sogdia was actually a place of manufacture for a certain group of samits. These arguments are based primarily on the style of the fabric's decor and specific design motifs.

Key words: *Silk Road, Sogdia, silk, samit, zandanechi.*
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THROUGHOUT the history of textiles many interesting pages, almost nothing can be compared with the bright and, at times, dramatic history of silk. This amazing, living fabric of loose thread has been a fetish of international trade for centuries. It is the namesake for one of its most effective tools – the Silk Road. It easily won not only hearts, but also nations; and was the reason behind the proclamation of wars and the conclusion of political alliances.

As is known, this fabric's origin is China and Chinese silk was the main transport commodity in the early stages of this global trade network's development. Lightweight and, thus, quite convenient during transport, it possessed many unique advantages in the wearing of this fabric. Its magnificent appearance and extreme value provided the Celestial Empire with wealth for centuries. The organization of silk supplies to the "western" countries (from China's perspective) between the 4th to the 8th centuries was predominately facilitated by the Sogdians who lived in the very heart of Asia in their ancient cities and oases. This adventurous people promptly received benefits from their intermediary trade operations and developed trading posts along the entire length of the caravan routes connecting the Far and Near East. They bought raw silk and silk products in China and sent them further to the West.

For centuries, the process of growing silkworms and obtaining silk threads was protected by China as their most important state secret. This has resulted in the most incredible theories as to silk's origins in the ancient Western world. However, silk weaving was known to many countries and peoples. In Iran, silk production began during the reign of Shapur II (309-379 AD). There is evidence of silk reaching Alexandria by the 5th century; and by the 6th century, wandering Nestorian monks, yearning for profit, brought silkworms to Byzantium during the reign of Justinian I who made silk spinning a monopoly of the state. It was in Byzantium that weaving techniques were improved which enabled the creation of polychrome silks with rich decor. It is believed that a new type of silk fabric – *samit* – appeared precisely during the 6th century. Technically, samits are twill fabrics with a pattern formed through combinations of sateen and a satiny texture. "Two systems of warp threads (inner and binding) and several systems of weft threads. The inner base is not involved in the weaving, but is located inside the fabric and does not go beyond either the

face or to the opposite side. The binding base forms the fabric in the 1:2 weft twill system" (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 338).

In the realm of Central Asia, silk weaving's spread remained a matter of dispute for a long time due to a lack of preserved fabrics and reliable information from written sources. Thus, it was generally accepted that silk production in the region began at the end of the 4th century or in the 5th century. With regard to Sogd, the textile historian A. A. Yerusalimskaya, wrote that "the Sogdian silk-weaving center began work later than other major silk-weaving centers of the Middle East and Byzantium. The first information concerning silk dates back only to the 6th century." (*Yerusalimskaya* 1972: 5).

However, archaeology provides important arguments in favor of a much earlier development of silk weaving in Central Asia. An ivory eyehole-catcher in the shape of a human hand, discovered in Khalchayan (Surkhandarya, southern Uzbekistan, or historical Bactria) was part of a device for unwinding silkworm cocoons. Used to combine ten to twenty fine cocoon threads into a single weaving thread, this instrument dates to between the 1st century BC – 1st century AD and clearly indicates that the production of these fabrics was known in the region long before the same process became popular in the Middle East (Antiquities ... 1991: 301). Fragments of silk fabrics dated to the 2nd century BC were found in a Termez burial and at the Kampyrtepa ancient settlement. These fabrics are coarse with an uneven yarn thickness and almost untwisted threads which suggests that this weaving concept came from the local production. Bactrian silk can be considered an indirect argument confirming the cultivation of silkworms and the production of fabrics which was also practiced in Sogdia. In turn, numerous finds related to weaving, such as bobs, bone combs for ordering threads, and a spindle have been discovered during excavations of Sogdian settlements which argue for this same conclusion (*Belenitsky* et al. 1973: 97).

O. V. Orfinskaya suggested that the manufacturing technology of the aforementioned samits could have spread along the Silk Road to the east, towards China from Byzantium, and along the way, "settled" in Sogdia, which "was morally ready to adopt a new technology on the basis of previously existing textile traditions, that is, it had a developed textile culture"(*Orfinskaya* 2017: 340). This idea once again gives a basis to the assertion that silk weaving in Central Asia was practiced before local weavers mastered the technology of twill weaving. In general, at least from the 4th to 5th centuries, China was no longer a silk monopoly. Sogdia, which was the most important player on the "silk" stage, obviously became one of the producers of samits.

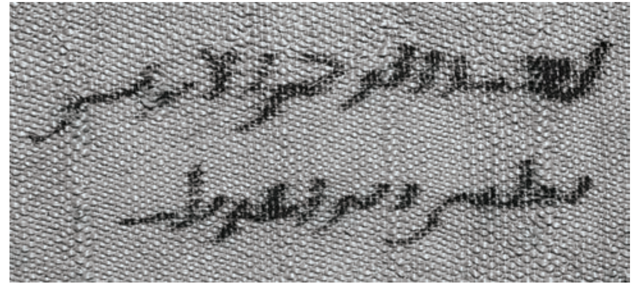

Fig. 1. Inscription on silk cloth from Huy, translated by Walter Bruno Henning. Photos from an open Internet resource

At first glance, the conclusion about the transformation of Sogdia as the main trade intermediary into becoming a silk producer is quite logical, although, it is not obvious. This assertion that Sogdia during the early Middle Ages had its own sericulture and produced silk samits is still questioned.

Following his exploration of East Turkestan for many years in the early 20th century, the British-Hungarian traveler, ethnographer, and archaeologist Sir Mark Aurel Stein discovered silk samits for the first time. He identified Sogdia as the place of their production, but his opinion did not gain widespread acceptance.[1] The next generation of scholars associated their origin exclusively with Sassanian Iran or Byzantium.

A high-profile incident took place in 1959 which supports Stein's conclusion. The textile historian Dorothy Shepherd discovered an ink inscription that was kept in the tabernacle of Notre Dame Cathedral in the Belgian city of Huy. The inscription on the back of this silk piece was, in her opinion, a customs or trade mark. The linguist Walter Bruno Henning worked on deciphering the inscription which read as follows: "... the length is 61 spans of *zandanechi*...". Henning noted that the font of the inscription was similar to the font of documents from Mount Moog (located in today's Tajikistan), which date back to no later than the early 8th century, though perhaps earlier (Fig. 1) (*Shepherd, Henning* 1959: 15).

The term *zandanechi* is key for understanding the meaning of the inscription. This word was already familiar to experts from the famous work of the Bukharan chronicler, Narshakhi (10th century), who mentioned the village of Zandana near Bukhara as a location for the production of wonderful textiles. The translation of Narshakhi's story is as follows:

"Zandana has a large citadel, a crowded bazaar, and a cathedral mosque. Every Friday there are [Friday] namaz

[1] Raby, Julian and Wide, Thomas. "From Nara to Nancy. Seeking the Sogdian Abroad." URL: https://sogdians.si.edu/nara-to-nancy/. Access date: 14.05.2020.

[prayers] and an open bazaar. It is a place for the origin of the [cotton] fabric called "zandaniji" which means "from the village of Zandana." [It] was good [in quality] and large [in quantity]. This [cotton] fabric is woven in many villages of Bukhara, and it is also called "zandaniji" because it first appeared in this village. That [cotton] fabric is exported to all regions such as Iraq, Fars, Kirman, Hindustan, and others. All nobles and padishahs sew clothes from it [for themselves] and buy [it] at the price of brocade" (*Narshakhi* 2010: 29).

Narshakhi's testimony allowed scholars to conclude that the silk fabric from the Belgian cathedral was made in the Sogdian village of Zandanechi even though the zandanechi fabrics mentioned by the 10th century historian were cotton. Shepherd wrote: "We have no evidence of a similar weaving industry in other regions of Central Asia and we can only conclude, due to the silence of sources, that it did not exist," from which she concluded: "There is every reason to accept the proof of the silk inscription (from Huy) and ascribe it to the Bukharan region, approximately to the 7th century and consider it as an example of zandanechi" (*Shepherd, Henning* 1959: 15).

This position was supported by A. M. Belenitsky and I. B. Bentovich: "Thanks to the translation of the inscription, we learn that in the 7th century AD the name "zandanechi" was used in the Sogdian language which undoubtedly referred to the name of the fabric. If we consider that this name was known from sources only from the 10th century, then its existence already in the 7th century is of great interest. However, the main meaning of the translation is different, namely, that the inscription is made on a specific fabric. There is no doubt that this silk fabric is from the city of Huy, on the reverse side of which there is an inscription "zandanechi" (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 66–67).

Further, Shepherd singled out the groups "zandanechi I" and "zandanechi II," including some silk fabrics from eucharistic tabernacles of European cathedrals which in technique and style are similar to those from Huy. Previously, these were considered to be of eastern Iranian origin (*Shepherd, Henning* 1959: 15). The peculiarities of the fabrics of the "zandanechi I" group led her to the conclusion that the earliest sample should be considered silk from Nancy dated to the 6th century. The rest, including the fabric from Huy, according to the date of the inscriptions established by Henning, extend from the era of the Arab conquest of Central Asia, that is, the turn of the 7th-8th centuries AD (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 70).

The hypothesis advanced by Shepherd was continued by Yerusalimskaya who also supported the idea of the existence of a "school of artistic silk weaving in Sogdia." She pointed out a new group, "zandanechi III," that including silk fabrics from rock burial grounds in the North Caucasus. These finds were stored in the Hermitage and the State Historical Museum. All of them were identified as products from one Central Asian center which functioned in the 7th century in the Bukharan region (*Dode* 2017: 48). Numerous finds of silk in the burials of Astana, Turfan, Dulan, and Tsinkhoi were also recognized as "Sogdian" (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 334). Their chronology was determined as ranging from the second half of the 7th to the first half of the 9th century (*Yerusalimskaya* 1972: 5). Following the lead of Yerusalimskaya, the term "zandanechi" began to designate the list of silks permanently updated by other Russian researchers, as well as foreign specialists, at times "without a convincing basis."[2]

However, these conclusions have not put an end to doubts. As noted by Z. V. Dode, "the beginning of the end of the myth about the silks of zandanechi was the work of B. I. Marshak and his research was completed by N. Sims-Williams and J. Kahn. Marshak was the first to suggest a different reading of the inscription on the silk from Huy. Not sharing the Sogdian origin viewpoint of the zandanechi silks, Marshak and V. I. Raspopova argued that their distinct differences from the Sogdian cultural tradition are based on examples from toreutics (Marshak's argument) and the patterns on fabrics are attributed as being zandanechi silks in comparison with fabrics depicted on the Sogdian frescoes (Raspopova's argument) (*Dode* 2017: 48). Marshak further advocated that the zandanechi fabrics of groups I, II, and III were produced in the second half of the 8th century or the first half of the 9th century in an eastern province of the Abbasid Caliphate and, possibly, in the eastern part of Central Asia (*Marshak* 2006: 49).

As a result, Sims-Williams and Kahn returned to the inscription read by Henning and drew a new conclusion. The inscription on the silk fragment from Huy is actually Arabic and does not contain the term "zandanechi." It should read as follows: "Belongs to Abd al-Rahman, the chief, (acquired) for thirty-eight dinars without one third." They noted that in terms of style the inscription is most typical for Arabic-language documents of the 9th century. This fits into well into the range of probable dates (780-980 AD), that radiocarbon analysis yielded for this silk. The currency mentioned in the inscription, specifically dinars, indicates that the most likely locations of the fabric's acquisition could have been Egypt, Syria, or possibly Iraq (*Dode* 2017: 50). Thus, the version of the Sogdian samits-zandanechi, created in such a miraculous way thanks to a random find in Belgium, collapsed under the new arguments. Many specialists decided

[2] Raby, Julian and Wide, Thomas. "From Nara to Nancy. Seeking the Sogdian Abroad." URL: https://sogdians.si.edu/nara-to-nancy/. Access date: 14.05.2020.

Fig. 2. Wall paintings of the Afrasiab Palace. One of the few monuments containing silk from that perid with the characteristic zoomorphic pattern (less often, anthropomorphic) depictions often in a circle of pearls. Photo: Samarkand Museum of the History and Culture of Uzbekistan

to reassign all the silk production attributed to Central Asia designated "Sogdian" to the Syro-Egyptian region (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 340).

So, were polychrome samits produced in Sogdia in the 6th through early 8th centuries? Some scholars completely deny this possibility while others deliver cautious arguments in support of this hypothesis. Dode takes a very radical position on this issue. "The statement about the production of silk fabrics in pre-Islamic Sogdia, which is widely propagated and used today as the gospel truth, is not supported by convincing facts," she writes. "Reference to the Persian text of the *History of Bukhara* confirms that the term *karbas* (کرباس) which was used in the original source associated with the Indian name for cotton products *karpasi*, originated from the Sanskrit root *karpasa* meaning, *cotton* (*Dode* 2017: 50).

Orfinskaya is more wary about the Sogdian samits: "The question is whether the so-called "Sogdian" silk being located in Sogdia is still open. A concentrated group of similar samit silk fabrics of the same period from the rock burial grounds of the North Caucasus cannot be included in the fabrics of the Byzantine group. The place of production of these fabrics is unknown. Perhaps it was Sogdia." (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 337). "Zandanechi fabrics had quite distinct technical features that distinguished them from the general mass of medieval silk fabrics. Of course, today it would be strange to attribute them to the fabrics made in the village of Zandanechi, but, perhaps, completely 'expelling' them from Sogdia is also a hasty decision" (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 340).

J. Rabi and T. Waid stand considerably with the same position: "The incorrect identification of textiles from Huy does not exclude the fact that Sogdiana was a place of production of Central Asian textiles that later came to Europe. [Silk] fabrics were definitely produced in a region that could draw on both western Asian technology and design concepts, as well as Chinese tastes and even possibly dyes. It is certainly suitable to perceive Sogdiana as a silk-weaving region. But until further technical and stylistic research

is carried out, the question of the origin of these 'Central Asian' silks remains unanswered."[3]

An attempt will be made to answer this question by arguing in favor of the Sogdian version. Of course, first, one should take into account the structures of the preserved fabrics. It is well known that Iranian and Byzantine silks had a strongly twisted base while Chinese ones were weakly twisted or not twisted at all. However, the author did not have an opportunity to work with these fabrics. Currently, the surviving examples of the "Sogdian" simits are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Art Museum, and the Southern California Textile Museum Association all in the USA. The private collection of I. Hirayama (Japan) and others are regularly exhibited at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions. The collection from the Hermitage contains samits attributed as Sogdian from the abovementioned Moschevaya Balka burial ground (northwestern Caucasus) of the 8th and 9th centuries. Additionally, are the fragments from the fortress on Mount Moog (Tajikistan), which confirm that samits existed in Sogdia at least before the first quarter of the 8th century, the time of the fall of the fortress. Up to the present, these fabrics created several centuries ago by anonymous weavers from Bukhara, Samarkand, and other Sogdian cities excite and delight textile art fans. With no direct access to the fabrics, the main arguments for us remain the archaeological data, written sources, and historical art analysis as the leading methods of attribution.

First, it is worth clarifying why so few pre-Islamic textiles have survived in the region. Obviously, silk fabrics not only decayed over time, but also were destroyed during the years of the Arab conquests. As is known, the Prophet Muhammed himself forbade men to wear rings and bracelets made of gold, as well as expensive silk. According to the Quran, silk was acceptable only as a reward in the after world (*Kudryavtseva, Rezvan* 2016: 93–94). As a result, the Arabs, followers of egalitarianism and accustomed to simplicity and functionality in all spheres of life, condemned luxury. They prohibited the production and wearing of silk clothing, and the use of dishes made of precious metals. With the fall of Bukhara (709), Samarkand (712) and Panjikent (722), a silk-free period began in Transoxiana and cotton yarn was used even when making zandanechi style (Fig. 2).

However, the craving for luxury goods proved to be stronger than religious prohibitions. Silk weaving revived after the collapse of the Caliphate. Rare polychrome silks from that time reveal support for the local silk weaving tradition. A specific example is a silk horse caparison utilizing the samit technique dating to 961 and now housed in the Louvre. At one time, G. A. Pugachenkova mentioned it as being from the Ghaznavids (*Pugachenkova* 1963: 56). The Louvre itself attributes it as Khorasan (Merv or Nishapur), but a number of scholars confidently attribute this caparison to Bukhara from the Samanid period (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 75). The cloth's pattern, depicting images of elephants and griffins, differs from the Sogdian medallion compositions. But, it vividly resembles scenes of elephant hunting from the painting of the Red Hall in the Varakhshan Palace of the 7th century. This painting displays "a living scene of the struggle of griffins attacking an elephant; while on the cloth the same animals are depicted in a static position. A very small griffin is placed under the belly of the elephant as if only to fill the smooth background. Yet, there is an obvious identity in the interpretation of this fantastical beast in Varakhsha and on the fabric" (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 75). A. I. Naymark, who also believes that this samit is from Bukhara suggested that its creators were possibly guided by the familiar elements of the painting specifically taken from the wall of the palace hall without seeing the entirety of the composition.[4]

The caparison has a dedicatory inscription in Arabic script indicating the name of the owner – a Samanid military leader, Bukhtegin (Naymark suggests reading it as "Bakhttegin"). The name runs along the lower part of the central field and is framed by narrower additional stripes. The text is reversed. This position of the inscription is due to the loss of its initial segment proceeding from the upper section of the border's right corner. When writing a verse of the Quran, the requirement was that it continued in the same direction until its end. This is why the preserved lower part of the circular inscription is upside-down.

In opposition to the Sogdian silk-weaving hypothesis, Dode referred precisely to the fact that the zandanechi fabric mentioned by Narshakhi was cotton: "An artificially created myth about the existence of the production of "zandanechi silk" in early medieval Sogdia is built on tendentious interpretations of historical evidence aimed at a stubborn denial of the original cotton composition of the zandanechi fabrics. ... zandanechi is a type of cotton fabric which was known from the 10th century and produced in the Bukharan region; while "zandanechi silk" is a definition artificially created as a result of erroneous research methods (*Dode* 2017: 50). However, the 10th century silk Bukharian caparison directly indicates

[3] Raby, Julian and Wide, Thomas. "From Nara to Nancy. Seeking the Sogdian Abroad." URL: https://sogdians.si.edu/nara-to-nancy/. Access date: 14.05.2020.

[4] Lecture of Professor Alexander Naymark of the Department of Fine Arts at Hofstra University (New York). Alexander Naymark "Sogdian ossuaries," read for students of the Faculty of History at the National University of Uzbekistan in 2018.

Fig. 3. Deer in a heraldic composition on a reduced tree of life. Fragment of Sogdian fabric from a private collection. Photo by: Ivan Schoenderholm

that the production of silk samits had been preserved in Bukhara. Thus, Narshakhi's mention of cotton zandanechi cannot be regarded as a decisive argument that excludes Sogdia's own silk production.

Textual evidence is another argument in support of Sogdian samits. Thus, data on sericulture in Central Asia is provided in I. P. Petrushevsky's *Agriculture and Agrarian Relations in Iran in the 13th -14th Centuries* (*Petrushevsky* 1960: 166). Petrushevsky references the medieval historian Tabari (750s) who reported a story of the joint efforts between Central Asian rulers and their allies, specifically, the famous Turgesh Kagan Kursul in his struggle against the Arabs. Kursul gave each warrior's salary in the form of "a piece of silk, with each (piece) costing 25 dirhams" (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 71). Another interesting description concerned Kursul's clothing, which is described by Tabari as follows: "He was wearing *dibaj* pants, decorated with circles, and a cloak (*kaba*) made of satin (*firinda*), sewn with a *dibaj* border..." (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 72). Additionally, it can be surmised that Kursal received his soldiers' salaries from his allies, the Central Asian Sogdian rulers. Considering the tumultuous times of this period, the supply of fabrics could certainly only be provided from local weavers and not via merchant caravans coming from China. After all, Tabari's description cannot be ignored concerning the details of Kursul's external clothing (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 72).

Finally, mention is needed concerning the artistic particulars of the samits in support of their indigenous Sogdian origin. It should be recalled that questions of style played an important role in distinguishing a type of Sogdian silver which at first was attributed as being Sassanian. Analysis of these items' shapes and their design allowed Marshak to prove that many of the items conditionally considered as Sassanian were actually Sogdian and confirmed the existence of a developed school of Sogdian silver (*Marshak* 1971).

It is rather difficult to appeal to the artistic side of the samits as a weighty argument in terms of their origin since the compositions of these fabrics produced in different countries were of the same type due to their enormous popularity and resonance with the demands of the time. The wide distribution of the same compositions was conditioned both by the diffusion of the fabrics themselves, which served as models for weavers from different countries, and the drawn patterns for their designs (*Orfinskaya* 2017: 341). The Sogdians, who were experienced traders, traveled extensively and were very cosmopolitan in their views. They could easily adapt popular textile motifs for their own silk weaving and make changes to them in accordance with their own tastes. Despite this, it is reasonable to believe that the Sogdian samits can still be identified due to their distinctive artistic features. Such features were described by Belenitsky and Bentovich (*Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 75), as well as Marshak (*Marshak* 1971: 83) – until he revised his position.

What were these samits, which became a vivid symbol of the culture of the early Middle Ages? Their most recognizable distinguishing feature is their design – rows of round medallions framed by depicted pearls against which there are individual, or more often, paired images of animals and birds in a heraldic composition on both sides of the Tree of Life. They also contain anthropomorphic characters – hunting horsemen in the same heraldic pair as well as separate images of male and female busts. All these drawings possess "a very ancient and heterogeneous origin" (*Dyakonova* 1969: 94), which require separate study (*Gyul* 2012: 94). Animals and birds; such as horses, deer, ibex, rams, lions, wild boars, elephants, pheasants, etc.; are often decorated with wind-blown ribbons tied around the necks. The ribbons – *ashkharavand* – indicate a connection with images of

Zoroastrianism. The animals and birds themselves, in this regard, can be considered as incarnations or hypostases of Zoroastrian deities. Thus, this significant part of the samits' decoration, in contrast to the technique, can hardly be associated with Christian Byzantium. Its creators were representatives of Zoroastrian culture.

Yet, despite the obvious Zoroastrian context, the samits were in demand in countries with different religions. As N. V. Dyakonova noted, they are found in eucharistic tabernacles both in Catholic cathedrals in Europe as well as Buddhist monasteries (*Dyakonova* 1969: 96). Such a widespread distribution of the samits was clearly due to the fact that their patterns were not perceived by customers as religious. The wide demand for fabrics with religious Zoroastrian images among different peoples to a certain extent reflects the era itself, which was notable for a certain level of tolerance. Regardless of their confessional adherence, fabrics' owners perceived them as a symbol of power and prestige.

In order to reveal the Sogdian character of fabric décor, one should turn to the cultural background of the period. In the 3rd century, Sogdia was subordinated to Sassanian Iran; in the 4th-5th centuries, its territory was occupied by the Chionites, Kidarites and Hephthalites; from the 560s the land was subjected by the Turks. By the mid 7th century, the Sogdians recognized the formal protectorate of China. As a result, the art of Sogdia is a synthesis of various trends. Yet, the most noticeable was the influence of the Turks which contributed to the formation of the Turkic-Sogdian symbiosis of cultures. In the art of Sogdia, there is no "late Sassanian ideal of weighty power. Strength without inert mass is the ideal for the Sogdian artists which resembled the images of the art of the Scythian nomads as well as of the later periods. This similarity can be explained by the ancient and strong ties of the Sogdian oases with the population of the surrounding steppes" (*Marshak* 2008: 15). Due to the combination of Sogdian and Turkic origins, the art of the early Middle Ages reflected the traditionally Eastern understanding of the artistic pattern (the development and use of traditional schemes; frontal composition; flatness; the terseness and conventionality of pictures; linearity; lack of attention to facial expressions, and, conversely, an increased attention to gesture; and the locality of color, most fully represented in Sogdian and Tocharistan painting). Also, however, it was distinguished by dynamism and liveliness, a realistic foundation characteristic of steppe art (i.e. Turkic-Sogdian toreutics, a number of Varakhsha subjects, the wall painting and sculpture of Ustrushana). The Turkic-Sogdian symbiosis manifested exactly in this particularity of style due to the coexistence of the Sogdian and Turkic populations in the cities and it determined the characteristic features of the aesthetics of the artistic craft of Central Asia throughout the Middle Ages.

Fig. 4. Sogdian cloth with the image of wild boars associated with the Verethragna. Photo from open Internet resource

The terseness and conventionality of the images in the Sogdian samits are clear in the details. For example, these qualities are present in the image of a tree between heraldically positioned animals, which "is often reduced, making one recall the twin statues of animals in Samarkand, as if they were examining each other. These types of images were mentioned by Ibn Haukal" (*Marshak* 1971: 84). The circle enclosed with pearls is devoid of any embellishment and looks very strict (Fig. 3).

In turn, the Turkic influence is seen in certain animal images. While lions, elephants, and birds were more characteristic of Byzantine and Sassanian silk weaving (*Belenitsky* et al. 1973: 94); Sogdian fabrics possess images of ibex, wild boars, horses, and deer; animals more closely connected to the cultural circle of the nomadic Turks (Fig. 4).

In general, there is reason to believe that the Turkic fabrics with patterns were characterized by a great severity of lines, a kind of classical simplicity (D. Shepherd referred to a "barbarization" cited in: *Belenitsky, Bentovich* 1961: 70) and, yet, containing elements of expressiveness when depicting animals and, thus, were actually created in Sogdia. These features – a combination of terseness and expression – are very characteristic of syncretistic Sogdian art which experienced a distinct Turkic influence.

Finally, one of the most important determinative motifs that allow us to speak of the Sogdian origin of the samits is an equilateral cross with curls of horns at the ends placed between the main medallions. It is not found on all early medieval silks with a medallion

Fig. 5. A fragment of Sogdian fabric with an additional cruciform medallion. Evidence of the Turkic-Sogdian symbiosis of cultures. Photo from open Internet resource

composition. Some of them depict a round rosette, palmette, other floral motifs, or rhombuses, etc. This motif is the sign of Tengri, the main god of the Turkic pantheon. In the later textiles of Central Asia (i.e., carpets) this symbol is known as *kaikalak/kuchkorak*; the most important benevolent symbol for all inhabitants of the Great Steppe (*Gyul, Smagulov* 2018: 145). It was obviously a reflection of the complementary alliance that had developed between the Sogdians and the Turks during the period of the latter's domination in the Sogdian territory. The presence of this cross on these fabrics can be explained both by the order of the Turks, who wanted to see their most important sacred sign on the silk they wore, and by the initiative of the Sogdians themselves who knew how to please their political patrons. Tengri symbolism in combination with Zoroastrian images on Sogdian silks is a vivid example of the Turkic-Sogdian symbiosis that developed in the 6th -7th centuries (Fig. 5).

Medieval Sogdia was an enlightened and authentic civilization with a developed urban culture. They possessed a rich epic heritage with splendid castles and palaces whose walls were decorated with awesomely beautiful paintings and sculptures and with temple ceremonies and royal feasts. Participants ate and drank from silver vessels and were dressed in patterned silks. It was a tolerant culture and open to everything new, actively learning about the world around it. And, of course, silk weaving was an integral part of the Sogdian culture.

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