

PLATE I. SILK WEAVE, EGYPT, ALEXANDRIA(?) VI-VIII CENTURY.  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY, DUMBARTON OAKS LIBRARY AND COLLECTION,  
GEORGETOWN, WASHINGTON, D. C.

## NOTES ON AN EARLY SILK WEAVE

This patterned silk from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection<sup>1</sup> at Georgetown, Washington, D. C., has for its principal motive the heroic figure of a Graeco-Roman youth wrestling with a lion; a subject that might represent either Samson, David, or Hercules, each of whom is credited with having killed a lion in his early youth (Plate I). It is a rare textile, of which no finer example exists, and it dates from the VI-VIII Century of the Christian Era; a period when beautiful fabrics woven by skilled artisans were highly treasured and favored as gifts by reigning emperors.

Whether this silk, from the Cathedral of Coire in Switzerland, comes from the imperial workshops of Constantinople or from the looms of Alexandria is a point still to be determined. Neither weave nor pattern furnishes a definite clue as either one of these cities might have produced a pattern of Hellenistic type woven in a similar technique.

Alexandria was for centuries an Egyptian center of Graeco-Roman culture, and its merchants carried on an extensive trade with foreign markets from Rome to the Orient. This trade handled the output of the great textile industry of this world metropolis whose designers reproduced foreign patterns to meet the demand of a market that might require for Rome a silk designed in the Hellenistic manner or for the Near East one that depicted the chase. In a similar way the merchants of China dealt in oriental copies of Sassanian silks and, later, in Italian patterned weaves for the western market.<sup>2</sup>

Silk weaving was established at the court of Byzantium in the fourth century shortly after Constantine had chosen this city as his new capital. In the early years of the imperial workshops Constantinople with its Roman heritage might naturally have favored silks designed from classical models; but Justinian art of the sixth century shows a closer affinity with the East. Silks that are credited to this later period show no adherence to Hellenistic inspiration. Byzantine art which exerted a great influence upon Italy, borrowed from the East its love of color and flat patterns, so

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<sup>1</sup> The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection was presented to Harvard University by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss in 1940.

<sup>2</sup> Falke, von: *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, Berlin, 1921, Nos. 75-76.

clearly exemplified in the San Vitale mosaics of Justinian and Theodora at Ravenna. This is again evidenced in the rich habiliments of a mounted emperor portrayed in a Byzantine silk preserved in the Textile Museum of Lyons. This piece was found in 1882 in the sacristy of the Roman Church at Mozac, southern France, where it served to wrap the relics of a saint. In this rare fragment an imperial figure on a richly caparisoned mount is shown clad in a robe patterned with small geometric figures in yellow on a deep red ground. A very similar design is found on a silk tapestry of later date preserved in the cathedral of Bamberg, Germany, that served as a shroud for Bishop Gunther who died in 1064 on his way home from a mission to the court at Byzantium. It is not improbable that this hanging had been acquired by the bishop during his sojourn in the Roman capital.

The subject portrayed in this silk from Dumbarton Oaks, as well as in a silk fragment in Aix-la-Chapelle (Plate II), and in other weaves of the early Christian Era, undoubtedly owes its inspiration to the popularity of the sports of the arena.<sup>1</sup> Fights between gladiators long had been a prominent feature of the games which played so important a part in Roman life. Gladiators were trained for their profession in schools, and bands of these fighters are said to have been owned by the government as well as by private individuals.

A spectacle that gained great renown was the fight between men and animals, and for this men likewise were trained. Another popular diversion that dates back to 186 B.C. were fights arranged between the animals themselves, and for these contests, which were held in the circus or amphitheatre, rarest animals from distant regions were brought to Rome. It is said that in the day of Pompey a fight was arranged for which five hundred lions, eighteen elephants and over four hundred other ferocious animals were imported from Africa.<sup>2</sup>

In the early centuries of the Christian Era this theme of combat appears as the accepted model for votive offerings to Mithras, one of the great gods of the Persian Pantheon. This cult, which in the first century had spread from Asia Minor to Rome, had made great headway among the soldiers of the Roman army. It was one of the strongest religions struggling at that time for supremacy in the Roman Empire, and it was a dangerous competitor of the Christian religion. As a warrior god—the champion of civilization against barbarism, always victorious and conferring immor-

<sup>1</sup> Events that are portrayed in some second century *graffiti* (scratchings on marble) that are still visible on the walls of the Colosseum.

<sup>2</sup> Guhl and Koner: *The Life of the Greeks and Romans*. London, 1889, p. 562.

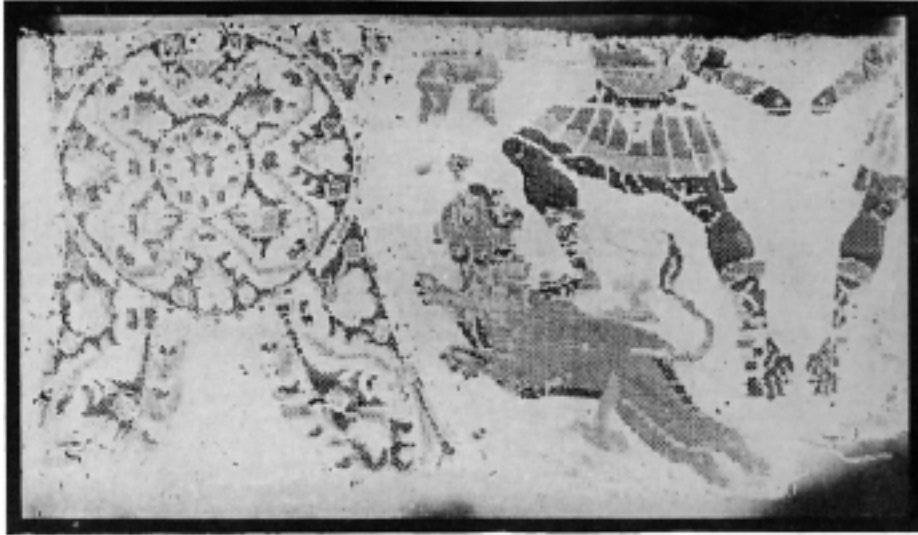


PLATE II. SILK FROM THE CATHEDRAL IN AIX-LA-CHAPELLE.



PLATE III. MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM HEDDERNHEIM.



PLATE IV. STONE SLAB WITH MITHRAIC SACRIFICE, FOUND IN LONDON.



PLATE V. SILVER PLATE WITH FIGURE OF DAVID.  
MORGAN COLLECTION, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

tality upon its initiates—Mithras became the divine patron of soldiers; and this worship was especially strong in the military camps of the Rhine, the Danube and Britain, the important frontiers of the Roman Empire. Sanctuaries were established in Gaul, Italy and Spain, built in the form of small caves where worship was carried on by Mithraic communities. In the ritual of this cult the supreme moment of the ceremony was the killing of the bull by the god, a mystic sacrifice which symbolized the creation of civilized life and the promise of immortality.

The many bas-reliefs of this Mithraic subject which have been discovered in far distant areas occupied by Rome's armies show in each instance a single Graeco-Roman model (Plate III), a model which, with slight variation, appears in this later silk pattern. A few years ago one of these slabs, probably the votive offering of a Roman soldier of the second century A.D., was found in England (Plate IV),<sup>1</sup> and a like representation of the god was discovered in the Mithraeum or shrine, unearthened during the excavations carried on by Yale University, in the important military stronghold of Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. The most important part of this edifice was the naos or cult shrine, where, against the wall, was a bas-relief representing the god at the moment of the killing of the bull with the help of the raven, the snake and the dog, which were the sacred animals of Mithras. It is this part of the shrine that is preserved at Yale, where there are two of these bas-reliefs dedicated severally by two commanders of the Palmyrian archers, one in 160 and the other in 168 A.D.

From the fourth century with the increasing interest in biblical subjects another influence becomes apparent. This is shown in the portrayal of saints and prophets in contemporary manuscripts and wall paintings. In 1902 an excavation near Kyrenia on the northern coast of Syria uncovered a collection of plates and jewelry dating from the sixth or seventh century. The greater part of this collection is in the Morgan Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On these plates, depicted in low relief, is the story of David, and in the piece that displays the figure of the hero wrestling with a lion, the competition, except for a few minor details, follows closely the Mithraic design (Plate V). Here the chief figure takes the identical pose of the god, and the rising form of the serpent in the older pattern is suggested in the slender branch at the side of the plate. In the later silk design this branch becomes an accepted stylistic motive that recurs frequently in contemporary Coptic weaves, and appears again,

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<sup>1</sup> *Archaeologia* (Society of Antiquaries of London), Volume LX, Plate X, 1906.

in a different medium, on a sculptured cross in the collection of the Mistra Museum in Greece.<sup>1</sup>

In the full design of the Dumbarton Oaks silk, which, technically, is a compound weft twill with a red warp and dark blue, green, yellow, red and white wefts, the principal figure groups, faced alternately, are arranged in parallel zones separated by a slightly festooned banding with rose sprays that are interrupted at set intervals by square cabochons. This unusual type of curved border, which reappears in some of the eagle silks of the eleventh century, is a form that may have been evolved from the Hellenistic arcade motive that in earlier Egyptian weaves preceded the fully developed roundel scheme of pattern; or it may have been devised as a means of introducing more figures in a breadth of silk by removing the side borders of a medallion pattern. The figure, like that of Joseph in the Sens textile,<sup>2</sup> is garbed in the loose, sleeveless tunic of Classic Greece. The Syrian tunic, such as appears in medallion silks with mounted archers, has a closely fitted bodice with long sleeves, usually worn over short or full length breeches.

This history of Egypt and Syria records that there was close intercourse between these two countries from earliest days. Berytus on the Syrian coast, which was noted for its wines, its linen manufactories, and its purple dye, traded with the great market at Antioch. It was associated as well with Heliopolis and was an important commercial center before the reign of Justinian. The looms of Berytus, along with those of Tyre, wove silk that was imported from China through Persia, with dye works established at Sarepta, Caesarea, Neapolis, Lydda and Dora. When, however, Justinian in 529 seized control of the silk market and turned over the monopoly to the Imperial Treasury, these cities were deprived of their economic reason for existence, and the situation thus created resulted in the migration of artisans to districts that might better utilize their services. This circumstance could easily account for the Syrian influence that is found in many of the medallion silks of uncertain provenance that formerly were ascribed to Alexandria which, by many, are now considered to be of Syrian origin.

Church treasuries throughout Europe possess in their treasuries many fragments of early silk weaves among which are a few pieces of this pattern. These fabrics reached Europe through various channels: they could have been the gifts of Byzantine emperors to church or monastery,

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce and Tyler: *L'Art Byzantin*. Vol. II, No. 175b. Paris, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Falke, von: *Op. cit.*, No. 26, No. 55, p. 11.

or the treasured possession of some visiting prelate to Constantinople. They might also have been part of the great trade of Venice and its neighboring seaports, or brought by Jewish merchants on the Syrian coast who traded far beyond their native shore and visited the many fairs of Europe and Western Asia in quest of fine materials. Or in some instances they may have been the spoils of war, a possibility that in these chaotic days of world upheaval seems far from remote.

Other examples of this weave are published in the following:

*The Victoria and Albert Museum: Hither Asia or Alexandria, VI-VII Century.*

cf. Kendrick, *Early Mediaeval Woven Fabrics*, Pl. II, 1001.

von Falke: *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, No. 42, Alexandria, VI-VII Century.

Pierce and Tyler: *L'Art Byzantin*: vol. II, 180 a.

Dalton: *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*: p. 591, about the VI Century.

*Musée Historique: Lyons: Byzantine, about the X Century.*

cf. Cox, Pl. 21, also D'Hennesel, p. 25; Pariset: *Les Industries de la Soie*, Fig. 147.

*Musée de Cluny: VI-VIII Century.*

cf. Diehl: *Manuel d'Art byzantin*, vol. I, p. 267.

*Capella Sancta Sanctorum:*

cf. Grisar, p. 182, No. 5; Lauer, Pl. 18.

*Kunstgewerbe Museum: Byzantine, VI-VIII Century.*

cf. Lessing, vol. VII, Pl. 7c (86.673).

*Treasury at Aachen:*

cf. Lessing, Pl. 7a.

There is also a piece in a bookbinding in the *Library at Trentino*.