

Textiles in Global Trade: Sasanian Textiles and its Distinctive Motifs

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“[They] should not undertake a task with which they are not familiar, and perform well and with concentration those tasks which they know. Ask for fair wages, because if someone does not know a task and performs that task, it is possible for him to ruin it or leave it unfinished, and that man himself is satisfied it would be a sin for him.”¹

Meno-ye Xrad: The spirit of Wisdom

Although a fairly unknown dynasty, the Sasanian dynasty of Iran established itself as a period for creativity and high-art. A contemporary to Christian Rome and the Byzantine Empire, Sasanian Iran managed to influence much in science and art. Of interest is their trade in textile, of which examples are practically non-existent due to unfavorable environment and rapid decay. Bitter enemies of the Romans and immersed in all sorts of rivalries, this dynasty stands fundamentally unique from others, while very little remains of their heritage, as an art historian I have tried to highlight their unique understanding of motifs and designs, as well as how the rest of the ancient world gained access to them.

Coming on the heels of the Hellenistic Parthian dynasty, the Sasanid wished to disassociate themselves from Greek influenced designs and motifs, in essence becoming independent of foreign influence. In 224 AD following Ardashir I's victory over the Parthians, the Sasanid dynasty saw several 'golden' periods of rule, of which Shapur II (309–379) stands out the most. By taking up the Achaemenid legacy and its reputation he was able to bring in an influx of wealth for the country exceeding that of prior rulers of Iran. In contrast to their predecessors whose governance was considered a loose structure, the Sasanian were able to establish a unified central government, with a strong and unilateral king. Their well-trained army and power restored the old borders of the Achaemenid dynasty (530-330 BC), and mirrored the golden period of an all-Persian realm. The Sasanid kings created the idea of a purely Persian artistic style and essential component of their legacy, by promoting their Achaemenid history and their supposed ancestral links. They inherited a potent cultural heritage even as they continued to embrace varied aspects of foreign culture.²

During the pinnacle of this golden era, artisans attained a high level of mastery in various types of artwork and transposed this skill into the textile industry.³ As mentioned above, the Achaemenid dynasty provided a rich repertoire of Persian motifs; one can clearly notice the many similarities between Sasanian cultural identity and that of the Achaemenid. Known as borrowers in the field of the arts, the Achaemenid created a cultural identity through a combination of all of their conquered subjects' art and

¹ Touraj Daryayee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 48.

² Prudence Oliver Harper, introduction to *In Search Of A Cultural Identity: Monuments and Artifacts of the Sasanian Near East, 3rd to 7th Century A.D.* (NY: Biblioteca Persica, 2006), VII.

³ Touraj Daryayee, *Sasanian Persia*, 18-19.



abilities, with Ionian and Sardians used as stone cutters, Medes and Egyptians as goldsmiths and wall adorners, and Babylonians in charge of the brickwork.⁴

In matters of textile it was believed that the Persians already knew the know-how to sericulture by the third century AD, but we lack the information on what utensils they might have used.⁵ Roman historian Ammanius Marcellenus' accounts on the Persian Empire is probably one of the most reoccurring points of referral for historians of Near-Eastern studies. His accounts provide us with a rare glimpse into an ancient northern Iranian sericulture community:

“The Seres themselves live a peaceful life, for ever unacquainted with arms and warfare; and since to gentle and quiet folk ease is pleasurable, they are troublesome to none of their neighbours. Their climate is agreeable and healthful, the sky is clear, the winds gentle and very pleasant. There is an abundance of well-lighted woods, the trees of which produce a substance which they work with frequent sprinkling, like a kind of fleece; then from the wool-like material, mixed with water, they draw out very fine threads, spin the yarn, and make sericum, formerly for the use of the nobility, but nowadays available even to the lowest without any distinction. The Seres themselves are frugal beyond all others, live a quiet life, and avoid intercourse with the rest of mortals. And when strangers, in order to buy threads or anything else, cross the river, their wares are laid out and with no exchange of words their value is estimated by the eye alone; and they are so abstemious, that they hand over their own products without themselves getting any foreign ware in return.”⁶

According to religious texts we know that Sasanian society abided by a strict rule of social hierarchy, imposed by Zoroastrian priests, in which artisans occupied the very lowest of places.⁷ The government, limiting its duty to provision of road safety and collecting tolls, did little else –most detrimentally, neglecting to set up a trade market.⁸ Although Ammanius mentions the sale of silk, it is unclear in what kind of setting this ware was sold. There are existing clues on the multiculturalism of artisan workshops, composed of captured artisans amongst which Syrians were notably good weavers.⁹ This industry, as with others, was directly under control of the royal court authorities that supervised these artisans, directing them to introduce motifs specific to Sasanian iconography.¹⁰ Royal workshops thus crafted silver, textile, seals, and glass into high standing objects of opulence highly demanded in foreign lands.¹¹

While the Chinese are best known as the inventors of silk, it is safe to say that the Sassanid are credited for developing motifs that were to become the vogue of the day. Large quantities of Chinese silk were being taken to Sassanid Iran, constituting a sizable share of the Chinese market trade, and then woven into renowned Persian designs.¹² As stated by historian Morris Rossabi, “Sogdian Merchants from Central Asia purveyed these silks across Asia and served as the most important of the intermediaries in this commerce, introducing throughout Asia ‘a new gold in the form of silk.’”¹³ Unfortunately for us, because

⁴ Edith Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran: Pre-Islamic Cultures* (NY: Crown Publishers Inc., 1965), 156.

⁵ Jennifer Harris, ed. *5000 Years of Textile* (London: British Museum Press, 2010), 68.

⁶ John F. Matthews “Ammianus Marcellinus” *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), “bk. 23, chap. 6.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Touraj Daryayee, *Sasanian Persia*, 49.

¹¹ Prudence Oliver Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*. 74, 115.

¹² James C. Y. Watt and Anne E. Wardell, *When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in co-operation with the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1997), 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

of unfavorable climate conditions, textiles decay rapidly in Iran and of all industries textile has seen the most losses, and consequently we are left with only a glimpse of an extremely lavish enterprise.¹⁴

The Sogdians of the Northeastern territories were originally from an ancient Persian community related to the Achaemenid legacy but no longer belonged to the Zoroastrian religion.¹⁵ Exempt from strict social regulations that denied artisans dignified positions in society, Sogdians were well positioned in a region rich for trade in quality goods.¹⁶ There is evidence that as a result of such caste-systems, Christians who avidly opposed the Zoroastrians took control by establishing anti-Zoroastrian stances favorable toward the working-class populace.¹⁷ This political tactic gained traction and might have also helped in the overthrow of Sasanian kings in the 7th century AD by Muslim Arab conquerors.

Influenced by their understanding of their past and heritage, spectacularly bright silk motifs became a Sassanid era specialty, one that we can trace back to the northern territories of Iran, and Persian Christian minorities.¹⁸ According to Prudence Harper, Curator Emeritus at the Metropolitan Museum, “The Sasanian luxury wares are modified so that the final product has a distinctive and unmistakable Sasanian appearance.”¹⁹ Several factors may be responsible for the strong Persian culture that is reflected in ancient textiles: its strategic location in an area ripe for trade with China, India and Rome, and the displacement of men and religion through warfare, created a complex culture with strong syncretistic tendencies.²⁰

With a very limited number of examples and documentation to work off of, it is best start with a general explanation of silk manufacturing along with their distinctive Sasanid motifs. According to a 1229 A.D. text by Yaqt in *Mu'jam al-buldan*, Gilan and Khurasan were already well-established centers of silk cultivation, a several week long, and labor-intensive process of rearing silk worms.²¹ The first stage of cultivation began with placing the eggs in a warm and sunny environment, encouraging them to hatch; once there they were fed white mulberry leafs until they were done spinning their cocoons and made ready to be stirred and boiled in hot water to be finally extracted and drawn off with a wheel, and to be folded when dry.²² This is an account of how things were done during the twentieth century in the Caspian region of Iran, which may possibly have been very similar to techniques used during the Sasanid dynasty.

Most textiles from this era have been analyzed as containing a combination of plain, twill and compound weaves; plain weave is categorized as most common, “produced by passing the weft across the warp twice – once over the odd warps and under the even and again once over the even warp and under the odd”²³. Similar to plain weave, twill has one set of warp and weft threads, but “the binding system, or sequence of interlacing may vary – that is, the weft goes over or under more than one warp,” it can also be distinguished by its diagonally textured movement of pattern.²⁴ On the other hand compound weave is a mixture of both, where one can add multiple wefts and warps.²⁵ Up to the nineteenth century and introduction of chemical dyes, all textiles were dyed using plant, animal or mineral sources; with reds

¹⁴ Prudence Oliver Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*. 115.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 48.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Prudence Oliver Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*. 89-90.

²⁰ Oleg Grabar, *Sassanian Silver* (MI: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1967), 16-17.

²¹ Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1987) 12.

²² Ibid., 13-14.

²³ Jennifer Harris, *5000 Years of Textile*, 19.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

being taken from certain scaled insects, yellow from saffron and turmeric, blue from woad or indigo and green from a mixture of yellow and blue.²⁶

Although it is possible to distinguish the various techniques used to weave the textiles, one should be familiar with the sociopolitical history of this era to identify them as Sasanid. The Sasanid style of dress and image of kingship becomes apparent on colossal rock reliefs, in which the king's appearance was of utmost importance.²⁷ The king was known to bestow silk robes as tokens of favor to his courtiers, who then wore them in the king's presence.²⁸ In the Naqshi-Rustem (fig. 1) rock relief depicting the investiture of Ardashir I by Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian deity, the king wears a long flowing garment – a thin structured cape over a tunic with long sleeves, hanging in thin folds along the length of his figure.²⁹ Each component of the king's garment was singularly important, and no one was allowed to wear similar robes as the king.³⁰ It leaves us to wonder if his robes were made out of silk, a probable assumption considering textual evidence from a visiting prince at the court of Anushirvan (531-579), which states: “Nushirwan was seated on a gold throne, the four feet of which were rubies, and which was covered by a brocade rug”.³¹ True that it does not mention his royal attire, but again acts as evidence of opulence in the royal court. By Ammianus Marcellinus' account,

“Most of them are so covered with clothes gleaming with many shimmering colours, that although they leave their robes open in front and on the sides, and let them flutter in the wind, yet from their head to their shoes no part of the body is seen uncovered. To the use of golden armlets and neck-chains, gems, and especially pearls, of which they possess a great number...”³²

It must be noted that emblems played a very important role in Sasanid pictorial culture, being considered as symbols of the gods and their close relation to the king, defining his power.³³ Most striking are stylized crowns and leaves depicted on the cavetto cornices at Ardashir I palace at Firuzabad, as well as depictions of wings and birds of prey holding pearls and pomegranate in its beak, and crescent moons – all emblems associated with different deities, respectively those of war, victory and the moon god (fig. 2).³⁴ As for emblematic accoutrement, belts and headgears often jeweled with gold were considered important marks of rank in Sasanian hierarchy – again both circular in form.³⁵

Emblems mentioned above are but small examples in vast artistic repertoires, where the circle stood in the majority central, enclosing depictions of hunters or animals under trees.³⁶ Stucco rosettes from Ctesiphon, the ceremonial capital of the Sasanid, serve as evidence to this point (fig. 3).³⁷ Inspired by geometrical, natural, and mythological forms sprung an interesting range of motifs often shown in mirror image, radial, and revolving, pictorial shapes.³⁸ Making perfectly sense in this belief that the Persian Empire stood in

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁷ Matthew P. Canepa, *The two Eyes of The Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (CA: University of California Press Ltd., 2009), 191.

²⁸ Ibid., 190.

²⁹ Edith Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran: Pre-Islamic Cultures* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1965), 203.

³⁰ Matthew P. Canepa, *The two Eyes of The Earth*, 191.

³¹ Ibid., 110.

³² John F. Matthews “Ammianus Marcellinus” *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), “bk. 23, chap. 6.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Matthew P. Canepa, *The two Eyes of The Earth*, 191.

³⁶ Ibid., 211.

³⁷ Ibid., 211-212.

³⁸ Jennifer Harris, *5000 Years of Textile*, 132.

the center of the universe, with Sasanian rulers reigning at its center.³⁹ According to Matthew Canepa in his book *The Two Eyes of the Earth*:

“ Iranian and Zoroastrian cosmological speculation produced a detailed geographical and cosmological explanation of Iran’s terrestrial centrality. According to Iranian cosmology, the earth was divided into seven continental sections; the central *Kiswar*, was the largest and the only one originally inhabited by humans. *Eranwez*, ‘The land of the Aryans’, was according to Ahura Mazda, “the first and best of places and habitations.” It lay at the center of *Xwanirah*, ... and all other nations and people eventually spread into the other continents constellated around it.”⁴⁰ With very little information on the extent of their astrological knowledge, it is apparent that they sought to justify their claims of centrality by looking at the stars, an ancient practice common in ancient developed civilizations.

The combination of silk robes and diadems that were worn at important royal banquets reflected unspoken hierarchal power emblems, which were otherwise unstated.⁴¹ As a requirement enforced by Sasanian kings, certain elements and motifs in one’s clothing signified social status. Only nobles were permitted to use silk, whereas only high nobility and the king himself could incorporate gold in brocaded robes.⁴²

A prevalent theme in Persian artworks, including ancient decorative objects, is glorification of epic kings and heroes intended to express and endorse a revival of Persian identity in periods following foreign invasions. It should be noted that it would be wrong to analyze Sasanian Iran without referencing Byzantium; also applying the other way round. In trade, vast amounts of Byzantine’s imported silk to its markets was done via Iran, imposing many problems during times of war, of which there were many; eventually thwarting them into procuring a sericulture industry of their own, one that would outlive the Sasanid (fig. 4).⁴³ As of the late third century the Sasanian and Roman courts fashioned their styles in response to one another’s “visual, ritual and discursive language of legitimacy to conceptualize their coexistence”.⁴⁴ Spanning a period of two hundred years in which Sasanian Iran overlapped with the Byzantine Empire, Byzantium witnessed more than ten wars, of which half were fought against one another. The Sogdians maintained the Chinese-Sasanian trade, as well as being pivotal into keeping the flow of communication between Iran and Byzantium; albeit one of rivalry between the two realms.⁴⁵

Having pushed and pulled each other’s cultural elements amidst the many wars throughout the years only served to modify their own indigenous styles into a concept uniquely their own. In hopes of outdoing the other, “the two realms observed, responded to, and even appropriated each other’s competitive statements in an ongoing process of agonistic exchange.”⁴⁶ An artistic language developed in counteraction to one another’s indigenous styles, primarily focused on celebrating their triumphs over one another. An excerpt from Peter the Patrician, a senior East Roman (Byzantine) official, diplomat and historian states that,

“It is clear to all mankind that the Roman and Persian empires are equal like two lights, and it is necessary that, like eyes, one is continuously made more beautiful by the other and not by hostile treatment that seeks for their mutual destruction.”⁴⁷

Again reinforcing the idea behind the similarity in these two realm’s elements of designs.

³⁹Matthew P. Canepa, *The two Eyes of The Earth*, 102

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 190.

⁴² Ibid..

⁴³ Harris, 75.

⁴⁴ Matthew P. Canepa, *The two Eyes of The Earth*, 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 122.

Moving on to post Sasanian periods, Iranian raw silk had already been wildly popular by the time of the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century AD; trade in textile had been a pillar for the Iranian economy since its earliest times.⁴⁸ By looking at Islamic textiles one can notice that their primary structural motifs take directly from the Sasanian dynasty (fig. 5).



Fig.1 The Investiture of Ardashir I Naqsh-i Rostam Jpg,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Naqsh_i_Rostam_Investiture_d'Ardashir_1.jpg: (accessed 5 May, 2012).

⁴⁸ Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart*, 12.



Fig. 2 Wall Panel with Pahlavi Inscription, Iraq- area of Ctesiphon, House of Umm az-Za'atir. 6th-7th
c. Stucco, Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin Jpg,
<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/mik/miksasanian.html>: (accessed 5 May, 2012).



Fig.3 Wall Panel with Paired Ibexes and Grapevine Iran. 6th-7th c. Stucco Jpg,
<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/mik/miksasanian.html>: (accessed 5 May, 2012).



Fig. 4 Quadriga (four-horse chariot) with horseman from the shrine of Charlemagne (Karl der Grosse) at Aachen. Byzantine silk; 8th century. Musée Du Moyen-Age, Paris Jpg, <http://www.lessing-photo.com/disping.asp?i=30011022+&cr=3&cl=1>: (accessed 5 May, 2012)



Fig. 5 Cloth of Gold- Lampas: Winged Lions and Griffins, Central Asia, mid-13th century Jpg,
http://amica.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/AMICO~1~1~37878~101019:Cloth-of-Gold--Winged-Lions-and-Griffins?sort=INITIALSORT_CRN%2CINITIALSORT_CRN%2CINITIALSORT_CRN%2COCS&qvq=w4s:/where/Central%20Asian;q:textile;sort:INITIALSORT_CRN%2CINITIALSORT_CRN%2CINITIALSORT_CRN%2COCS;lc:AMICO~1~1&mi=3&trs=8: (accessed 5 May, 2012)

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