

Centaur on the Silk Road: Recent Discoveries of Hellenistic Textiles in Western China

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Among historians, the last century and a half has seen increased attention paid to the role of the so-called Silk Road or Silk Roads in world history. Although coined only in 1877, by the 21st century the term has become an all-embracing brand that permeates scholarship, international commerce and the popular imagination. It is recognized that the network of economic and cultural exchange occurring across the Eurasian continent since about 2000 BCE was part of a larger world system which assuredly included Africa. I am in agreement with historian David Christian's assertion that "the Silk Roads played a funda-

Fig. 1 (below). Map showing locations of Sampul and Yingpan. Photo source: NASA Visible Earth Taklimakan.A2002088.0525.500m.jpg.

Fig. 2 (right). The Sampul textile depicting the centaur and warrior. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

mental role in creating and sustaining the unity of Afro-Eurasian history" (Christian 2000, pp. 1-2). Through the study of several specific cul-

tural objects, this paper seeks to provide some clarity with regard to cultural diffusion and economic exchange along the west-to-east corridor which linked the sedentary civilizations of the Mediterranean, Persia, Central Asia and China.

For the last century, ongoing archaeological work in western China has produced some spectacular finds, including the mummies of 3800-year-old Caucasoid peoples, previously unknown written languages, the remains of Buddhist kingdoms abandoned to the desert, and a plethora of early textiles and other artifacts. Climate and other geographical factors have provided for the excellent preservation of organic and cultural material. The Tarim Basin of Xinjiang in western China is one of the driest places on earth, and within the basin's Taklamakan Desert human and animal remains, clothing, food stuffs, and other organic material many thousands of years old have been preserved [Fig. 1].

Among these discoveries have been rare textiles, the motifs on some of which showing unmistakable Hellenistic origins. At the site of Sampul (or Shanshula), near the southwestern Tarim Basin oasis of Luopu, a Saka grave has yielded a piece of woven woolen cloth [Fig. 2] that shows Hellenistic and Persian inspiration in the depictions of a centaur and a lance-





Fig. 3. *The Yingpan man*. After: Waugh 2008a, p. 4.

bearing warrior (Xinjiang weiwu'er 2001). At the site of Yingpan, in Yuli county in the north-eastern part of the Tarim Basin, a tomb revealed the wealthy male occupant wearing a fine woolen robe decorated with Hellenistic motifs that include nude fighting figures, bulls and goats, and pomegranate trees [Fig. 3] (Xinjiang wenwu 1999).

While there is no doubt that the objects discussed in this paper are distinctly Hellenistic in character, the question of Hellenistic artistic influence on local culture in ancient Xinjiang is not the focus of my research. That subject has been belabored over the last century. I make no contention one way or another regarding the possible influence of these objects on the indigenous cultures, and I entertain the great possibility that these are rare objects brought in by merchants or other travelers into the region.¹

Instead, I ask two questions. The first is, how do these finds help determine the chronological range of trade in western textiles between Greek (Seleucid) Bactria or regions farther west and the intermediate Tocharian and Saka kingdoms of the Tarim Basin that lay along the trade routes to China? The second question is, how do the motifs that these objects display compare to those of other works of art in the Hellenistic tradition?

The Chinese silk trade in Eurasia has been the subject of much scholarship, but the study of trade in western textiles along the Silk Road caravan routes has not been so well addressed.² Here I will compare these woven objects with artifacts found in western cultural contexts of the Hellenistic period in order to identify potential derivative, or at least parallel, designs and

motifs, with special attention paid to mosaics.

The discovery of Hellenistic textiles in Inner Asia (comprising Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang) is not unprecedented. The Russian explorer Kozlov recovered such textiles during his expedition to Mongolia between 1923 and 1926. Aurel Stein discovered a number as well at the ancient sites of Loulan in the eastern Tarim in the winter of 1906-07 and at Niya in the south-central Tarim.³

It is reasonable to assume now that at the time of the Han envoy Zhang Qian's journey to Bactria in ca. 139 BCE one or more of these kingdoms in the Tarim was of Saka origin, a people closely related to those whom the Greeks called Scythians. The dating of the material from Sampul suggests that that trade contacts between the Hellenistic kingdoms to the west and the kingdoms of the Tarim Basin already had some history. During the Hellenistic period (from the death of Alexander in 323 BCE until the battle of Actium in 31 BCE) and post-Hellenistic period up to the 7th century CE, trade in textiles by sea and by land was an important economic activity in the West. While silk began to move westward in ever increasingly quantities in the first century BCE, woolen textiles from across the Pamir Mountains had already been moving eastward.⁴

Centaur and warrior from Sampul

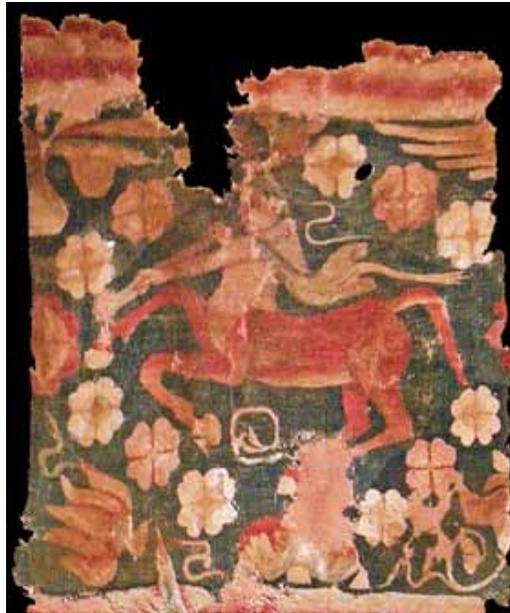
The ancient cemetery of Sampul is just south of the modern oasis town of Luopu and east of the important Silk Road city of Khotan in western Xinjiang. The cemetery was excavated four times between 1983 and 1995 by the Xinjiang Museum and the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology. Three separate grave areas were located and in all 168 graves and two sacrificial

Fig. 4. Detail showing the upper portion of the Sampul textile. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

horse pits were excavated (Xinjiang Weiwu'er 2001, Foreword, pp. 2, 4; text, [second pagination] p. 1). Radiocarbon dates for the cemetery fall between about 900 BCE and 300 CE. Half of the ten samples tested fell between the 3rd and 1st centuries BCE (Xinjiang Weiwu'er 2001, p. 43).

In 1984 one of four group tombs was excavated in the cemetery. In the tomb designated 84LS I M01 were found 133 individual corpses, with adult men and women in the majority. The tomb yielded many ancient textiles, especially articles of clothing. Fifteen pairs of trousers were found. In one tomb was a pair of trousers (or knickerbockers) made of a cut-up woven woolen tapestry. What distinguishes the find is that on the left leg fragment is a woven image of a warrior holding a spear at his side, while on the right leg fragment is the image of a running centaur, cape flying while playing a flute, within a rosette of flowers (Xinjiang Weiwu'er 2001, pp. 37, 38, 188-189; pls. 360, 360-1, 360-4). Both images are clearly western in style and subject matter, and, given the C14 date of the tomb of about 100 BCE, Hellenistic in chronology.

Let us examine the centaur and associated images first [Fig. 4]. The centaur is running to the viewer's left, front legs raised in a gallop, and of the two rear legs, at least one is firmly on the ground. The centaur is holding and blowing a vertical flute, his left arm outstretched to grasp it firmly. A Hellenistic period mosaic from Delos also shows centaurs with similar dramatic poses (Pedley 2002, p. 377; fig. 10.53). However, the Sampul piece seems to have a unique iconography. I am not aware of any other image that shows such a musically-inclined centaur. Centaurs are usually depicted brandishing more threatening objects in Greek art, if they hold anything at all. Usually they



clutch a bow and arrows, or a tree branch or club, as in the depictions of belligerent and drunken centaurs battling the Lapiths on the Parthenon and on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (Padgett 2003, pp. 129-224).⁵ Here we may have a weaver from the eastern provinces who might not have been so familiar with Greek mythology and iconography, and who exchanges the flute of the satyrs (who are sometimes depicted playing the *auloi*, or double flute) for one of the preferred weapons of the wine-loving centaurs

(Padgett 2003, pp. 254-258; exhibits 11, 12).

Above and to the right of the rosette is the end of an outstretched wingtip, but the body to which it is attached is missing. It could very well have belonged to an erote, similar to Hellenistic winged figures seen in many works in the



Fig. 5. Erote in mural of Shrine M.III excavated by Stein at Miran. Source: Stein 1921, Vol. 4, pl. xl (Stein inv. no. M.III.viii).

Greco-Roman world. Stein found several similar painted erotes in Miran in the southeastern Tarim (Stein 1933, pp. 118-121; fig. 54) [Fig. 5].

The use of roundels and rosettes is a Persian (Achaemenid, Sassanian and even Sogdian) motif, as seen in many extant textiles and paintings from the first few centuries of the Common

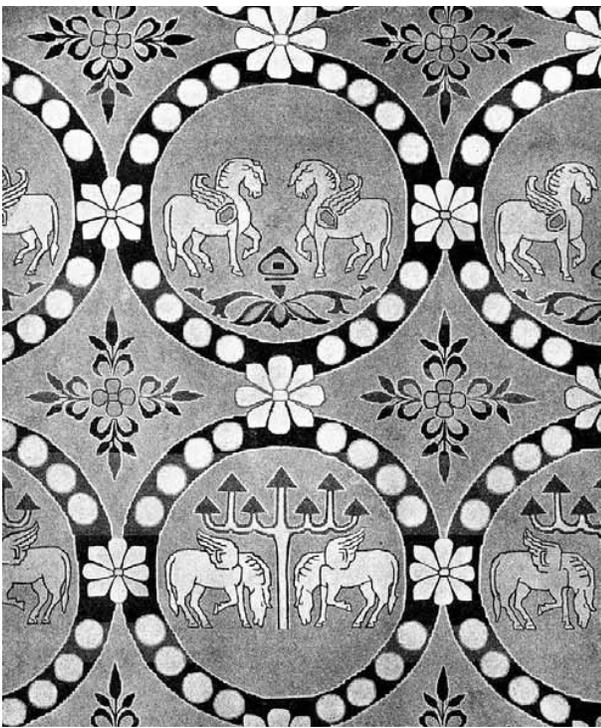
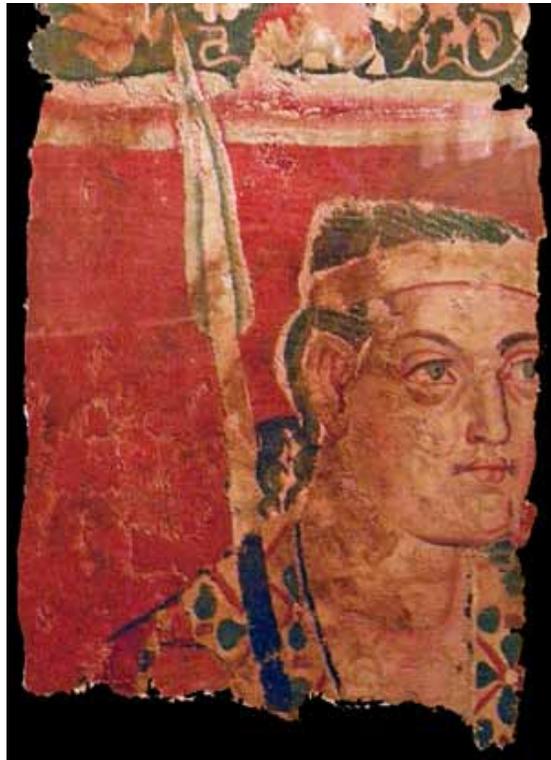


Fig. 6. Drawing of silk textile with roundel pattern, excavated by Stein at Astana. Source: Stein 1928/1981, Vol. 3, pl. lxxx (Stein inv. no. Ast. ix.3.02).

Era, and found commonly enough in China in contexts dating from the Northern Dynasties to the Tang (Pope 1945, pp. 21, 47; pl. 31E; Rice 1965, pp. 111-113; figs. 95-99; Compareti 2003; Luo 2004; Zhao 2004) [Fig. 6].

Now let us turn to the other piece [Fig. 7]. The two trouser legs were at one time one piece of cloth, with the longer left leg below the right leg fragment. This lower fragment depicts a standing warrior, spear

Fig. 7. Detail of lower part of woolen textile from Sampul depicting a warrior with a spear. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.



or lance held in his right hand and leaning against his right shoulder. He is seen in three-quarter view, peering out to the viewer's right. His long hair, pulled back behind his ear, is bound with a headband or fillet. His black hair recedes from the forehead in rows. The hair style is reminiscent of that of the sculptured male figure from Halikarnnassus in Asia Minor, whose long hair is also pulled back in rows, Persian fashion (Pedley 2002, p. 303; fig. 9.24).

The warrior is clothed in a red long-sleeved blouse, open in a V at the neck. The front of the blouse is decorated repeatedly with a double quatrefoil, a petal-and-cruciform design of dark blue and red. To the side is a vertical stripe of alternating black (or blue) and white. Greek warriors in Classical and Hellenistic periods were mostly rendered nude or at least with a cape. Here we can presume that despite the Hellenistic rendering of his face, the figure pictured is non-Greek, perhaps Persian or Saka, due to his hair style and the revealing fact that his upper body is clothed, not nude in the Greek style.

The particular double quatrefoil design which decorates his blouse is one which is found in many Hellenistic contexts, in both the West and in the Tarim Basin, and in both earlier and later

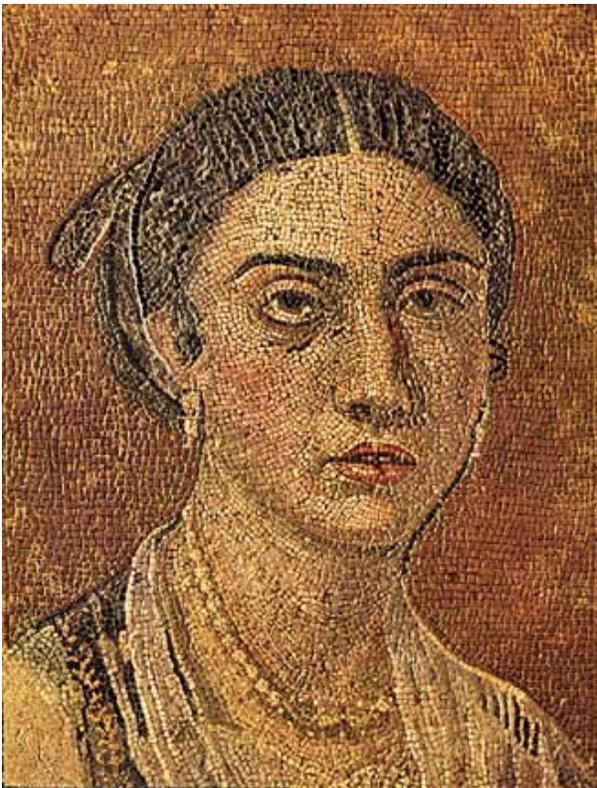
chronological contexts. The oldest knotted carpet extant, of Achaemenian origin and found in frozen Scythian kurgan V at Pazyryk, shows the same motif repeated in one of the borders, and dates from ca. 5th-3rd century BCE (Rice 1965, pp. 34-35; fig. 26). Stein recovered at ancient Niya in the south-central Tarim a piece of wooden furniture with the same motif carved on it, dating from the 3rd to 4th centuries CE (1933/1982, p. 84; fig. 41; Whitfield and Farner 1990, p. 153; fig. 124; Rice 1965, p. 177; fig. 163) [Fig. 8, facing page]. Farther to the west it is found among the mosaic designs from



Fig. 8. Wooden base for an altar or table (detail). Niya, 1st-4th c. CE. Collection of the British Museum OA 1907.11-11.85 (N.vii.4). Photo © 2007 Daniel C. Waugh.

a domestic building at Aphrodisias in western Turkey dating as late as the mid-fifth century CE (Campbell 1991, pp. 20-21, pl. 72). The motif is very likely Persian in origin, and spread both west and east through Hellenistic contacts.

The face itself seems almost painted, as the superb use of hue and tone in the threads reveals a three-dimensionality usually associated with paintings employing chiaroscuro. The rendering, in the use of shading, highlighting and polychromy, is highly reminiscent of the faces



from the well-known mosaic of actors from the Villa of Cicero at Pompeii, which dates from the late 2nd to early 1st century BCE (Pedley 2002, pp. 377, 379; fig. 10.55; Ling 1998, p. 15; fig. 6), but the portrait of a woman from a Pompeii mosaic shows a closer resemblance in style and expression (Ling 1998, p. 124; fig. 88) [Fig. 9]. The right side of the warrior's face is shaded, as is his neck, and the use of shading elsewhere on his face

contributes to the three-dimensionality. It is much more realistic than the textile fragment with image of Hermes and associated caduceus (herald's staff) found by Stein at Loulan (1928/1981, Vol. 1, p. 241; Vol. 4, pl. xxx), which may possibly have been part of a shroud (Baumer 2000: 134).⁶ [Fig. 10]

Through radiocarbon dating, we are certain of the absolute chronology of the interment of the



Fig. 9 (left). Mosaic portrait, House IV 15.14, Pompeii. Late 1st century BCE. In collection of Museo nazionale di Napoli. Source: <http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2088/2108423733_f7df0ceeda_o.jpg>.

Fig. 10 (above). Woolen textile fragment depicting Hermes, found by Stein in a grave pit at Loulan. Source: Stein 1928/1981, Vol. 3, pl. xxx (Stein inv. no. L.C.iii.010.a).



Fig. 11. Detail of head and shoulders of the Yingpan man. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

Sampul textile, bracketing ca. 100 BCE. Determining how old it was when it was buried in the tomb would require further testing of a sample of the garment itself. I suggest a date of the mid-second century BCE, firmly within the early Hellenistic period in the East.

The Hellenistic robe from Yingpan

Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) sources record a number of small kingdoms which dotted the local trading and communication routes, including those of ancient Kroran (Loulan) and Yingpan. Many lay directly athwart the caravan routes from China to the west and because of their advantageous locations were the recipients of various cultural influences from China, India and the West.

The Yingpan site which lies in the northeastern Tarim Basin [Fig. 1] was visited by Kozlov, Hedin and Stein in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1995 the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology undertook emergency excavations at Yingpan. Thirty-two tombs were excavated and over two hundred relics were recovered. The tombs date roughly from the Han dynasty to the Jin (206 BCE – 420 CE) (Li 2001, p. 149). One

shaft tomb, Number 15, contained plentiful relics including the body of an unusually tall (1.9 meters) male occupant buried in a richly decorated coffin and dressed in splendid attire [Fig. 3]. The corpse is of a young man about 30 years old. He was not buried with the usual collection of funerary items found in other Yingpan tombs. However, what he is buried in seems to make up for the paucity of accompanying funerary objects. The wooden coffin was sumptuously painted and covered with a pile carpet depicting a lion. Placed upon the occupant's face was a painted hemp mask with gold foil [Fig. 11]. The quality and decoration of his coffin and his attire indicate a high social status while he was still alive. He is dressed in several layers

of woolen clothing and he wears a pair of reddish-purple wool pants decorated with chain-stitched embroidered double quatrefoil floral designs inside lozenges made up of circles and flowers (Li 2001, p. 155) [Fig. 12].



Fig. 12. Detail of the legs and feet of the Yingpan man. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

The design of the silk-lined caftan is composed of six different sets of nude figures and animals (goats and cattle), with pomegranate trees standing between them [Fig. 13, p. 29]. The character and poses of the nude puttis are clearly Western in style. Each of the six sets is composed of a balanced pair of confronting figures, with spear or sword, either leaning away from or toward each other. Capes swirl from their shoulders. The pomegranate tree is perhaps a Persian motif, while the motif of confronting pairs of animals, in this instance goats



Fig. 13. Detail of the caftan of the Yingpan man. Photo © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

and oxen, is reminiscent of the animal art of Central Asia.

The stance and composition of the figures are not without precedent. A mosaic from the Villa of Good Fortune at Olynthos (4th century BCE) shows a similar, though female, pairing with weapons (Pedley 2002, p. 299; fig. 9.17). A floor mosaic (325 – 300 BCE) from Pella, the Macedonian capital, also shows two dramatic scenes of two nude youths, capes flying and weapons in hand, about to slay a lion in one instance, and a stag in the other (Pedley 2002, pp. 324, 333; figs. 9.58, 9.68; Ling 1998, p. 22; fig. 12) [Fig. 14].

That the robe was valued by the wearer in life there is little doubt, as he was buried in it. However, whether it was a newly woven item or an heirloom piece is impossible to determine at this time. It can be tentatively concluded that the cloth was the work of a weaver familiar with both Greek and Eastern motifs, perhaps in an eastern Hellenistic kingdom. Whether the robe was tailored especially for entombment is unknown, though it may well have been, as the pieces that are sewn together are somewhat mismatched (Waugh 2008b). According to the excavation report, the deceased possibly may have been a “rich merchant from the West.”

The report also suggests a late Eastern Han dynasty date (25 – 220 CE), which falls comfortably within the post-Hellenistic period (Xinjiang Wenwu 1999, p. 16).

Intriguing connections and conclusions

From even before the time of the establishment of the earliest urban centers in Eurasia, the weaving arts provided textiles for functional purposes and to adorn the human body. Records indicate that textiles were bartered and sold along the trade routes throughout

the ancient world. Discoveries of ancient textiles in arid western China have given us a window into the manufacture and especially trade in textiles along the trans-Eurasian trade routes. A relationship between the Hellenistic art of the Greco-Roman world and the textiles found in western China is seen clearly in the shared



Fig. 14. Floor mosaic from Pella (325-300 BCE) depicting two youths about to slay a lion. Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Lion_hunt_mosaic_from_Pella.jpg>.

motifs and subject matter. Motifs derived from Persian art are not so foreign to Hellenistic art, as seen in the sculpture of great architectural monuments of the period such as the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos in Caria. The art of the Greek mosaic itself derives from Phrygia in Asia Minor, where Eastern, including Persian, influences were strong (Pedley 2002, p. 323).

Of exceptional interest to the writer is the nature of the relationship between the textile arts

and mosaics. It is accepted that a great mosaic like the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii (ca. 100 BCE) was a more durable version of a monumental wall painting by Philoxenos of Eretria, painted around 310 BCE. Indeed, Pedley addresses their relationship, albeit briefly, when he discusses the importance of the textiles of the time: “[I]t may be that the more striking of the woven textiles were influential and also provided a stimulus to the creation of mosaics, particularly border designs” (2002, pp. 322, 326). There is an admission that scholars are ill-informed about these perishable objects, but it may be just as reasonable to suppose that mosaics (and paintings as well) provided as much stimulus and inspiration for the creation of textile motifs as the other way around.

Ling acknowledges the possibility of the connection between the two media, especially with regard to motifs seen in the Olynthian mosaics (Ling 1998, pp. 20-21) [Fig. 15], while Dunbabin is convinced that mosaics share more than a passing resemblance to similarly two-dimensional carpets. She says, “Some of the common ornamental motifs [in mosaics] are among those found in textile decoration or [are] suitable for weaving; and it has been argued that the (apparent) sudden appearance of such floors should be seen as a translation into permanent forms of the luxurious textiles from the Near East fashionable in the later fifth century” (Dunbabin 1999, pp. 9-10).

It is not possible at this time to determine where the two woven items that I have described in this paper (and others) were originally manufactured. There is much disagreement over the origins of the textiles. Despite the likelihood that many textiles with Persian motifs — particularly pearl roundels — found in Xinjiang were woven by Chinese weavers (Compareti 2003),

it is reasonable to assume that these two objects were not local products and are manufactures of Hellenistic-era weavers who lived and worked in one of the eastern kingdoms (Zhao 2004, p. 71). Baumer, to the contrary, suggests the Yingpan robe was not imported but “made by artists in the eastern Tarim Basin familiar with western patterns” (Baumer 2000, p. 136). Stein suggests that certain weavings which bear more purely Hellenistic motifs (such as the figure of Hermes cited above) because of the similarities to the Miran frescoes found in situ,

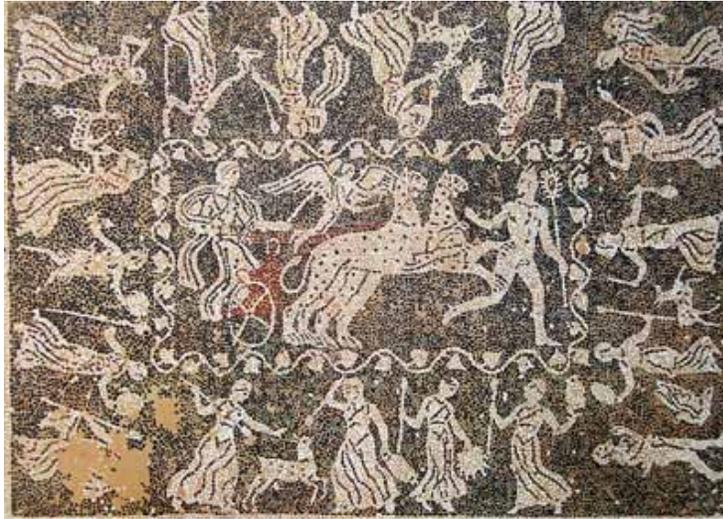


Fig. 15. Dionysus mosaic in the Villa of Good Fortune, Olynthos. After: David M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthos, Pt. xii (1946), pl. 1.*

were “...produced within the Tarim basin and not an import from the distant West” (1928/1981, Vol. 1, p. 241). Further scientific analysis may reveal more about this in the future.

The remarkable textiles we have looked at are evidence that Hellenistic and Greco-Persian influenced woolen textiles were being transported eastward

along the trade routes between Central Asia and the Tarim Basin kingdoms from about 100 BCE, just as silk was being carried west. While the knowledge and history of such contact is widely accepted, and while much study on the question of Hellenistic influences on the art and culture of ancient Xinjiang has already been done, new and sophisticated techniques in textile analysis will point “in directions which ultimately are going to tell us a lot we did not know” (Waugh 2008b). Nevertheless, the spectacular nature of these particular discoveries described above is compelling, and while it is easy to show that the textile motifs demonstrate strong parallels with similar art motifs from the Hellenistic world, further investigation in other analytical directions is warranted.

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Notes

1. This paper is a preliminary treatment of material which has been the subject of numerous short articles, many in Chinese, but until very recently of no major treatises in a Western language. That is changing as knowledge of these textiles becomes more widespread through exhibitions such as that published by Wieczorek and Lind 2007. For a review of this exhibition, see Waugh 2008a.

2. A good overview of exchange in silk textiles, weaving techniques and styles is Zhao 2004.

3. Kozlov's discoveries are discussed by Schaefer 1943 and Rudenko 1962, esp. Chs. 4, 6, 11. Stein (1928/1981) reports on his textiles in *Innermost Asia*, and discusses them briefly and illustrates some in his book *On Central-Asian Tracks* (1933/1982, pp. 153-154; figs. 64B and 65). Stein's materials are surveyed by O'neale 1936.

4. Silk in smaller quantities had been moving west far earlier than this, judging from its discovery in ancient Egyptian, Siberian and Bactrian tombs. It is likely though that some of the silk found in the West is "wild" silk and not imported from China.

5. The centaur apparently has Assyrian antecedents, as seen on cylinder seals of Middle Assyrian date (13th century BCE) (Padgett 2003, pp. 129-133; exhibits 11 and 12).

6. The object next to the figure of Hermes in this fragment has been identified as a caduseus (or *kerykeion*), one of the attributes of Hermes. However, it appears to be a knotted rope, in the intertwined form of the deity's rod. Further research might establish the object's true nature, caduseus or not.