



ELEPHANT MEDALLION SILK WEAVE. EAST IRAN, XTH OR XITH CENTURY ORIGINAL IN THE COOPER UNION MUSEUM FOR THE ARTS OF DECORATION, NEW YORK CITY.

THE ELEPHANT MEDALLION SILK IN THE COOPER UNION MUSEUM

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AMONG the many rare textiles in the collection of mediæval fabrics presented to the Cooper Union Museum some years ago by the late J. Pierpont Morgan none is of greater interest than that found in one of the old churches in southern Spain. This silk, picturesquely described as "Los Elefantes" by Pedro Mg. De Artinano,¹ has for its central motif a crudely drawn elephant with large circular ears and claw feet, placed against the sacred tree symbol in a medallion² edged with a band of guilloche, a rosette device repeated in each of the intervening field spaces between the roundels.

Three remnants of this treasured weave have survived the ravages of time, and of these three the Cooper Museum piece is the only one in which a complete section of the pattern is preserved. The other fragments, one in the Barcelona Museum and a second in the Kunstgewerbe Museum in Berlin, are badly worn and show only small details of different parts of the design.

Archæological excavations in the Near East are constantly bringing to light records that necessitate frequent changes in the dating of ancient materials, and this holds good in regard to this silk which today is classified as a work of the tenth or eleventh century rather than a Byzantine weave of the eighth century, the date ascribed to it by Senor Badia, the eminent Spanish archæologist, by whom the nucleus of the Morgan Collection was originally assembled.

Weaving technique is, of course, an important factor in determining the provenance of a given piece; but this naturally has its limitations owing to various causes: the development of trade routes between the

¹ Catalogue of Spanish textiles in the Exposition of Madrid in 1917.

² The medallion measures 17½ inches in diameter—cm. 44-45.

East and the West; the migration of weavers under shifting potentates and diplomatic missions bearing gifts from one ruler to another,³ resulting in a confusion not only of technique but as well of ornamental details in design.

In weaving technique, the "elephant piece" is a heavy all silk twill. The warp is single and of fine, tightly twisted rose silk, while there are three wefts of white, red, and yellow loosely twisted silk lying one on top of the other—each color coming to the surface as needed—which in the weaving tends to produce a rather thick material. As in all silks of this period the fabric is a weft twill. This is obtained by dividing the warp threads into three groups; the first a series of single threads used to tie in the weft from the back; the second in which two threads alternate with the third group of three, four or more threads which are crossed by the weft and thus produce the diagonal weft twill.⁴

The schematized animal motifs that figure in some of these early medallion silks owe their derivation to the rock sculptures of Takibostan that portray the hunts of the Sassanian king, Chosroes II (590-628). In these sculptures the hippocamp and gryphon⁵ are but a survival of earlier forms handed down from the ancient art of Mesopotamia. In the elephant motif, however, no attempt has been made to do other than to represent the animal in its natural form, not as a fantastic beast of decorative quality such as is found in the Sassanian animal figures. Certain discrepancies in the drawing suggest that the designer was working in an unfamiliar field; as for instance where the cushioned toes of the pachyderm appear almost as claws, a peculiarity that appears also in a Baghdad silk of the eleventh century—specimens of which are preserved in Berlin and in the Cooper Museum—in the feet of the rampant dogs held by the arms of a central figure.

The elephant was not unknown in Western Asia in ancient and mediæval

³ Michel, F.: *Recherches sur le commerce . . . des étoffes de soie*, 1852, pp. 286-287, note 2. "Parmi les présents que les walis Ahmed ben Saïd Abou Amer et son frère Abdelmelic firent au Khalife de Gordoue Abderhaman en 950, il y avait, au dire d'Ibn Khalican, trente pièces de toile d'or et de soie, quarante-huit couvertures de cheval ou caparaçons d'or et de soie, tissés à Bagdad."

Ency. Brit. Ed. 9, 1877, Art, *China*, vol. 5, p. 560. During the reign of "Ming-te (65 A.D.) . . . the celebrated General Pan Chaou was sent on an embassy to the King of Sheng-shen, a small state of Turkistan, near the modern Pidjan."

⁴ Mr. H. A. Elsberg very kindly analyzed the technique of the weave.

⁵ Cf. Dalton, O. M.: *East Christian Art*, Oxford, 1925, p. 379.

days. In the third century B. C., Pyrrhus imported fighting elephants from the East and used them in his campaigns against Italy and Sicily; and when he was defeated the Romans struck an elephant coin to commemorate their victory. While this coin was rectangular, a Carthaginian coin, circular in form of about the same date, shows a lion placed against the sacred tree motif that corresponds to the design of the elephant silk.

Of special interest in this connection are some coins found in a cache excavated at Corinth in 1926 among which were several designed with an elephant against the tree motif. While these are as yet unidentified they are considered to be of about the same date as the silk.

That this silk may be the work of Islamic artisans is indicated by a detail in the trappings of the elephant where, above the upper part of the second leg may be seen what appears to be an inverted pseudo-Kufic character which may possibly be the result of an attempt on the part of the weaver to represent the word "Allah." As the word "Allah" appears also on the elephant coin, it is at least an interesting coincidence, and, especially when one recalls certain historic episodes associated with the battle of Kadessa in 673 when the Arabs won a victory over Rustam, King of the Persians; an action vividly described by H. G. Wells in whose *History*⁶ this battle is recorded in the following stirring paragraphs:

"The battle lasted three days; each day the Arabs attacked and the Persian host held its ground until nightfall called a truce. On the third day the Arabs received reinforcements and toward the evening the Persians attempted to bring the struggle to an end by a charge of elephants.

"At first the huge beasts carried all before them; then one was wounded painfully and became uncontrollable, rushing up and down between the armies. Its panic affected the others, and for a time both armies remained dumbfounded in the red light of the sunset watching the frantic efforts of the grey squealing monsters to escape from the tormenting masses of armed men that hemmed them in. It was by the merest chance that at last they broke through the Persians and not through the Arab army and it was the Arabs who were able to charge home upon the resulting confusion.

"The twilight darkened into night, but this time the armies did not separate. All through the night the Arabs smote in the name of Allah

⁶ Page 585.

and pressed upon the shattered and retreating Persians. Dawn broke upon the vestiges of Rustam's army in flight far beyond the litter of the battlefield, and Rustam lay dead."

A victory of such magnitude might well have been recorded in a special issue of coinage, as in the case of the Roman victory over Pyrrhus above referred to, or possibly, later, in a royal weave commemorating the disastrous charge of the enemy's great war elephants pursued by the victorious Arab hosts whose battle cry was "Allah!"

While this weave has been variously attributed to Byzantium, Spain, and Persia, it is now generally conceded to have been produced in East Iran on the borderlands of Turkistan where, in the ancient silk country of the Sogdians—that today survives in the weaving centers of Bokhara and Samarkand—Sir Aurel Stein found in the outlying desert stretches to the east fabrics of similar texture which he believes to have been woven in that district.

Though it is true that these fragments were found in Spain, it is possible that the material originally may have been imported from the east; on the other hand it might perhaps be the work of Arab weavers of the western Caliphate who were striving to reproduce a Byzantine silk weave.

In the case of the other famous elephant piece from the tomb of Charlemagne preserved at Aix-la-Chapelle, its provenance is certified to by a Greek inscription woven in the fabric to the effect that it was woven "Under Michael, Chief Chamberlain and keeper of the privy purse, Peter being Archon (the manufactory of Zeuxippos)."⁷ This piece from the royal manufactory of Byzantium is of the same general type of pattern with the same crudely drawn, though more richly caparisoned elephant; the details, however, are much more elaborately worked out, and the colors are not the same; the elephant is yellow on a red ground and green and blue are introduced in the details of the border and rosettes. In the Cooper Museum piece which has every evidence of being the work of a less skilled artisan, the elephant is woven in red on a yellow ground; the guilloche border of the roundel is red on yellow and, like the yellow ears of the beast, has details in white. Both in technique and in drawing, to which the weave gives a stepped outline, this piece is very close to the lion silk discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in Turkistan.⁸

⁷ Dalton, O. M.: *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, Oxford, 1911, p. 595.

⁸ Stein, Sir (Mark) Aurel: *Sarindia*, Oxford, 1921, vol. iv. pl. cvi.