



PLATE I

TWILL WEAVE SILK. 26 X 35 C/M, BYZANTINE 9TH CENTURY, INSIDE LINING OF UPPER OR FRONT COVER OF THE MS. "THE FOUR GOSPELS," VARIOUSLY KNOWN AS THE LINDAU OR ASHBURNHAM GOSPELS, IN THE PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY.

TWO MEDIÆVAL WOVEN SILK FABRICS IN THE
BINDING OF THE 9TH CENTURY MS. "THE FOUR
GOSPELS" IN THE PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY,
NEW YORK CITY

by

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The writer is under great obligation to Miss Belle daCosta Greene, the Director of the Morgan Library, for the photographs used for the illustrations in this article and for her kindness in placing all the information regarding the bindings at his disposal, as well as for her helpfulness in the examination of the textiles therein.

A NUMBER of interesting early woven fabrics, which otherwise would have been lost to posterity, have been preserved in the bindings of mediæval manuscripts or between their pages, where they were placed to protect the illuminations.¹

To such a fortunate circumstance we owe the preservation of the two woven silk fabrics illustrated and described in this article. Both are rich silk stuffs with designs of animals and birds. Anastasius, the Librarian,² in his lives of the Popes, from Adrian I (772-795) to Adrian II (867-872), written during the 9th century, speaks of rich all-silk stuffs (*holosericum cum historiis bestiarium*) used for religious purposes. Perhaps the use of silks with animal and bird designs for such purposes found its justification in the Book of Psalms,³ in which all living nature is called upon to praise God.

The two silks are part of the binding of the 9th century manuscript "The Four Gospels," in the Pierpont Morgan Library, written and illuminated in the Monastery of St. Gall, Switzerland, and variously known as the Lindau or Ashburnham Gospels.

What is now the lower cover, sheathed on the outside with beaten gold

¹ The most notable of the latter are the 53 pieces still attached to the pages of the MS. of Theodulf, Bishop of Orleans (+821), formerly preserved at Le Puy en Velay, France. Michel, "Recherches sur les Étoffes de Soie, d'Or," etc. Vol. I. pp. 68-70.

² Anastasius, the Librarian, is quoted in this respect by Dr. Bock, Michel, and others.

³ Psalm 148.



PLATE II

TWILL WEAVE SILK, 27 X 35 C/M, HITHER ASIA, FIRST HALF OF THE 9TH CENTURY, OR EARLIER, LINING OF PRESENT LOWER OR BACK COVER.



PLATE III

EDGES OF MANUSCRIPT AND BINDING, 10 X 35 C/M, WITH THE TEXTILES SHOWING UNDER THE ENGRAVED AND JEWELLED BANDS.

ornamented with enameled plaques (pl. V) and edged with plain gold bands inscribed with sentences from the Gospel of St. John, was probably made in St. Gall between 825 and 850. It has as its inside lining a heavy all-silk fabric in a weft twill weave (pl. II). This silk, by its position in the cover,⁴ and under the engraved gold bands (pl. III) edging the cover, appears to be part of the original binding of 825-850, and if so, must have been woven during the first half of the 9th century, or somewhat earlier.

This dating seems to be confirmed by the design, as well as by the technique employed in its weaving. The main warp is of heavy lightly twisted yellow silk threads, covered entirely by the weft. Supplemental warps of lighter weight and consequently thinner silk threads, yellow and grey-blue, tie in the grey-blue, rose, and yellow weft threads, which make both the twill weave and the design. These silk weft threads apparently lying on top of each other are brought to the surface as each color is wanted.⁵ The color combination is rather unusual and can be clearly recognized in plate II: the dark color of the ground and certain details in the design representing the grey-blue; grey, the rose; and white, the yellow.

The design is geometrically well balanced on vertical axial lines, thus facilitating the weaving and the repeat of the motives in the width of the fabric. The pattern is arranged in horizontal rows of eight-pointed stars, filled with eight heart-shaped leaves or petals arranged around a circular centre. The rows of eight-pointed stars alternate with rows of paired griffons⁶ confronting a conventionalized tree of life form. The interspaces are wider between the stars than between the paired griffons, whose tails touch a double circular rosette. This rosette contains a form possibly derived from the fire-altar of the Zoroastrians, shaded by split palmettes, the whole surrounded by Sassanian disks or beads between the circles.

⁴ This was probably the upper cover of the original binding; the silk lining it is upside down and has not been pasted on the wood part of the cover, to the outside of which the beaten gold and enameled plaques and the gold bands are attached.

⁵ As the back of the silk cannot be examined, this appears to be so from the use made of the colors on the face of the fabric; some of the yellow binding threads float loosely over a number of weft threads.

⁶ Balanced pairs of animal figures are a very ancient form of art. They can be dated back to Sumerian Art more than 5000 years ago.

Breasted, "The Conquest of Civilization." p. 135.

From the top of the rosette mounts another form of tree⁷ rising to the space between the stars, pairs of birds sit under the tree and on its topmost branches. It is probable that this piece was woven somewhere in Hither Asia, in the first half of the 9th century or earlier. The designer, inheriting the Persian tradition, had no doubt come under Saracenic influences. In the late 8th and during the 9th centuries these combined influences are found in the then beginning to widely spread Baghdad school of design.⁸

The present upper jewelled cover (pl. IV) is said to have been the work of the monkish goldsmiths of the Abbey of St. Denis, France, late in the 9th century. Its inside lining is also a heavy all-silk fabric in a weft twill weave (pl. I) which appears to have been placed in the cover when the cover was made, as there are fragments of it under the jewelled bands edging the latter. Evidently the sharp edges of these bands cut the silk, and some time late in the 18th or early in the 19th century it was pasted on a marbled end-paper of the period, as can be seen in the lower left corner of the illustration (pl. I), and replaced in the cover.

In technique with slight variations the weave of this piece of silk is similar to that of the other. The main warp is of heavy red silk threads, irregular in thickness,⁹ with three supplemental warps of lighter weight red and green silk tying in the red, light green, darker green, and white silk weft threads which make the twill weave as well as the design. The variations in the twill weave outline the design and the warps are used somewhat differently as one of the supplemental binding warps lies between the threads of the main warp, and the others above.

On a ground of satiny twill¹⁰ horizontal rows of paired falcon- or eagle-like birds, holding in their curved beaks rings from which hang jewelled

⁷ In this form said to represent a conception of the date palm, which seems from great antiquity on, to have had a religious meaning.

Goblet d'Alviella, "La Migration des Symboles."

⁸ The designers of Baghdad did not strictly observe the regulation of the Prophet Mohammed forbidding the portrayal of living beings, human or animal. A notable example of this can be found in the wall decorations or rather mural paintings discovered at Samarra, some of which are reproductions of textiles.

E. Herzfeld, "Die Ausgrabungen von Samarra." Vols. I-II-III.
Wandschmuck der Bauten von Samarra, etc.

⁹ This shows plainly in Plate I.

¹⁰ Satin twill (serge satiné) is made by the loosely twisted weft threads crossing more of the warp threads, i.e., the float is longer than in other twills.

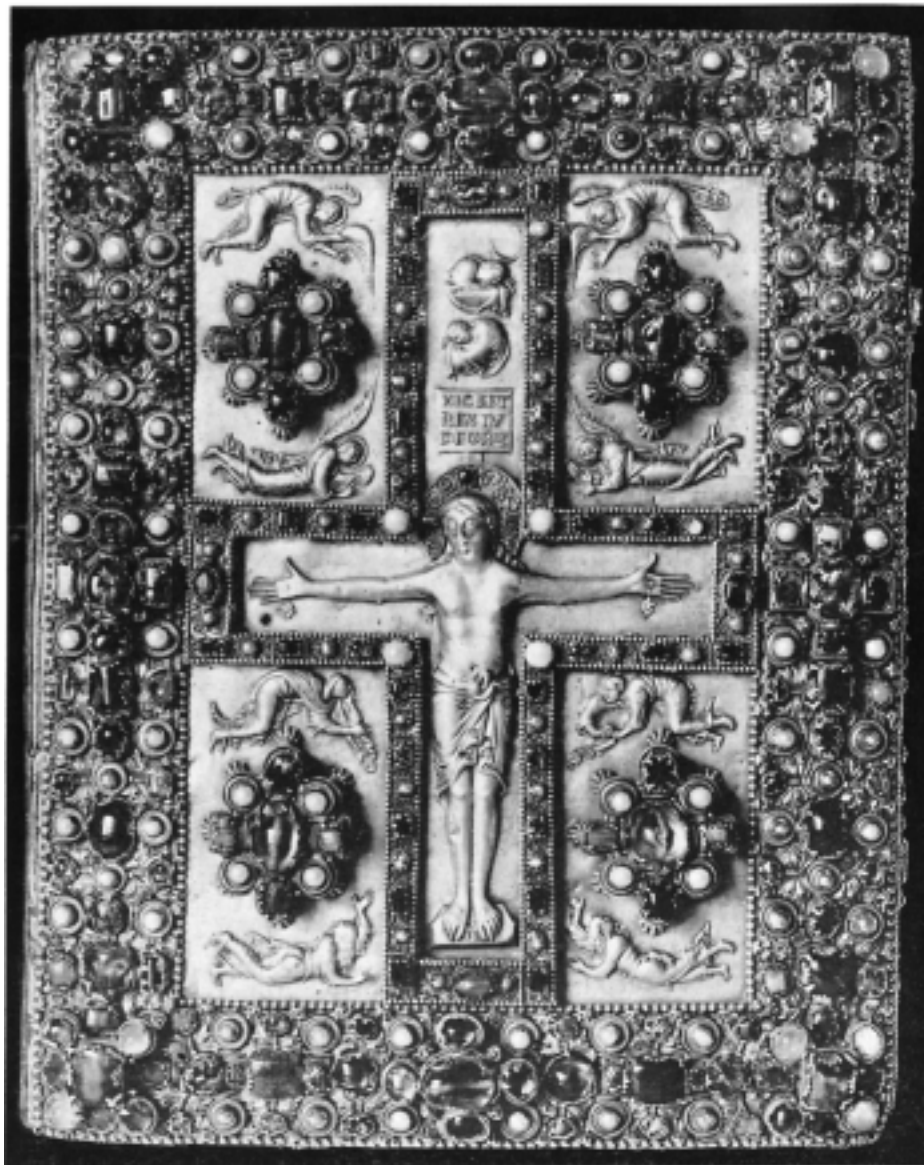


PLATE IV

UPPER OR FRONT JEWELLED COVER, 27 X 35 C/M. PLATE I ILLUSTRATES ITS WOVEN SILK LINING.

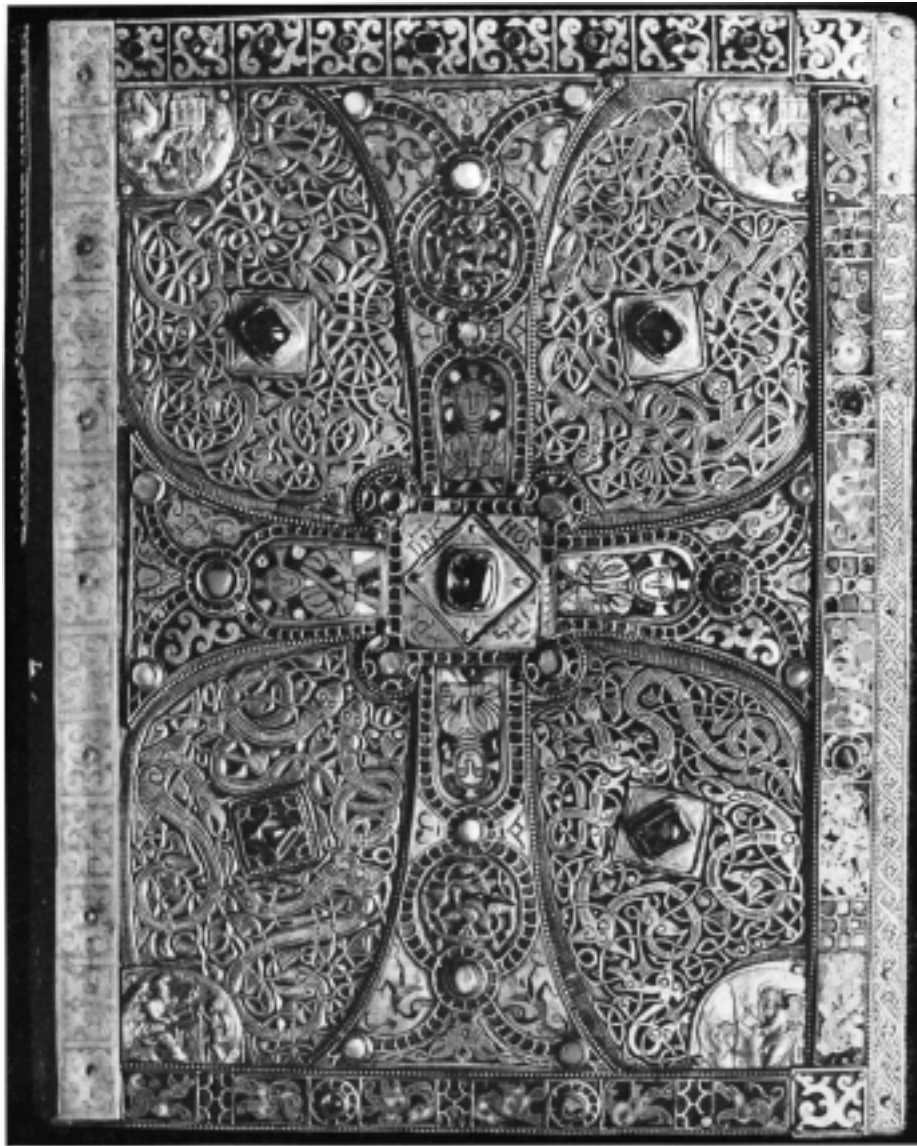


PLATE V

LOWER OR BACK COVER, 26 X 35 C/M. PROBABLY ORIGINALLY THE UPPER OR FRONT COVER. PLATE II ILLUSTRATES ITS WOVEN SILK LINING.

squares, stand out in two shades of green. Around their necks are collars of white beads from which float waving ribbons or scarves,¹¹ their square feet are white with claws in red, and between each pair of birds a floral rosette is outlined as if engraved, by a slight variation in the binding of the weft threads. In the red ground between the horizontal rows of birds horizontal rows of alternately floral rosettes and vase forms, the latter ornamented with two crosses, appear as if engraved on or rather sunken into the fabric. There seems to be no doubt that the design of this silk is a Byzantine variation of Persian motives and that it was probably woven in the 9th century.

Twill weave silks, with double or triple warps and multiple wefts, appear to have been woven in all of the weaving centres in the Near East from the 5th to the 10th century. Whether this weave is a discovery resulting from the attempt to cover all the warp threads (as in tapestry), so as to have all possible of the lustrous silk show on the surface of the fabric, we do not know. This seems likely, as satin-faced silks are nothing but a broken and irregularly woven twill. By the slight variations in their weaving technique, but more by their designs, an attempt has been made to fix the period in which and the place where such twill weave silks were woven; unfortunately there are no records preserved, or none at least have been discovered, that can be of aid in a definite solution of these questions.

The dating of the first silk described is partly confirmed by the plan of the design, but more so by the weaving technique employed and the evidence that it was part of the original binding. One with a similarly planned design but different in pattern and in technique was found in the tomb of Charlemagne at Aix-la-Chapelle, by Cahier and Martin when the tomb was opened for them in 1843.¹² A fragment is now in the Kunstgewerbe Museum, Berlin, and is illustrated by Lessing and mentioned by Von Falke.¹³

For the second the dating as well as the provenance are confirmed not

¹¹ Both the disks or beads and the waving or fluttering ribbons are of Persian origin. The latter, according to Herzfeld, were adopted by the Sassanian artists from parts of Parthian costumes.

Herzfeld, "Am Tor von Asien." p. 55.

Kendrick, "Catalogue of Early Medieval Woven Fabrics." p. 8.

¹² "Mélanges d'Archéologie." Vol. III. pl. XVI. p. 143. Cahier and Martin believed that the condition of the silk proved that it had been buried with the Emperor Charlemagne in 814.

¹³ Lessing, pl. 45b. Von Falke, Vol. I. p. 125. Both consider this silk to be Sicilian 12th century.

alone by the design and the evidence that it was placed in the cover late in the 9th century, but also by the manner in which the twill is woven. The design is similar to others with paired birds¹⁴ and animals with certain Persian characteristics, for which proof has been found that they were woven in Asia Minor or other parts of the Byzantine Empire. A satiny twill weave with part of the design of the same color as the ground made by a variation in the twill, by which the outlines¹⁵ appear on the surface of the fabric as if engraved, has been decided to be a purely Byzantine manner of weaving. It is found, by the end of the 9th and during the 10th centuries, in Byzantine plain colored silk fabrics often called satins.¹⁶

The history of these two all-silk woven fabrics shows once more what priceless treasures have been preserved to us by the piety that fought for the protection of religious objects confided to its care. The manuscript which contains them was one of the treasures of the celebrated Abbey and Chapter of the Noble Canonesses of Lindau on Lake Constance, and is said to have been given to them by the Abbey's reputed founder, Louis le Débonnaire, son of the Emperor Charlemagne. The Abbesses had the rank of Princesses of the Empire, and tradition says this volume was carried before them in processions of state.¹⁷ The abbey was dissolved in 1803, and the MS. of "The Four Gospels" became the property of the last Abbess, the Baroness Antoinette von Enzburg. On her death it passed to Baron Joseph de Lassberg, and was by him sold to Bertram, 4th Earl of Ashburnham (1797-1878). At some period after the sale of parts of the latter's library in London in 1883-1884 it was acquired by the late Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan.

¹⁴ Birds similar in drawing with floating or fluttering ribbons or scarves are found in pieces that have been identified as woven in Asia Minor in the 9th century. There is one piece preserved in the 9th century Wolfenbüttel Codex in which it was placed between two illuminated pages for their protection.

¹⁵ Made by the crossing of one warp thread by the weft.

¹⁶ Lessing calls them damasks, while Von Falke describes them as more like satins, though not true satins. Both declare them Byzantine, as do Fischbach and others. For the weave see note 10. A later example is the chasuble of St. Willigis, Bishop of Mayence, † 1011, preserved in St. Stephens' Church in that City.

Lessing pl. 58. Von Falke, Vol. II. Ills. 231-232. p. 8.

¹⁷ Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Appendix part III. London 1881.