

CHINESE WEAVES OF THE SECOND CENTURY A.D.

SIR AUREL STEIN'S recent excavations in Central Asia have brought to light some remarkable Chinese silk and tapestry weaves interestingly described in the following extract from the *London Times* of July 27, 1917.¹

"Between about 100 B.C. and 300 A.D., Loudan was a place of considerable importance on the ancient route by which the Chinese had first expanded their political power and their trade into Central Asia and thence westwards. It formed, indeed, a kind of western bridge-head beyond that portion of the route which crossed the salt-encrusted wastes of the prehistoric dried-up Lop Sea. Since the third century of our era, the river which once carried water to the Loudan tract has ceased to flow, and the whole area has remained an utterly lifeless solitude. No drinkable water can be found now within 100 miles or so of the ancient station, and neither rain nor snow falls. Wind erosion has cut down the surface of the ground, where not protected by ruins or dead trees and the like, to twenty feet or more below the original level.

"Fortunately the ancient burial grounds escaped destruction by this powerful agent, owing to their having been placed, probably on purpose, on high clay terraces. From the series of large grave-pits excavated by Sir Aurel Stein, there was a bewildering yield of antiquities. Mixed up with human bones and fragments of coffins there emerged in abundance, objects of personal use, implements, Chinese records on wood and paper, and, above all, a wonderful variety of fabrics, especially of fine silks. It was clear that these were all remnants of garments which had been used for wrapping the bodies. It seemed like a representative exhibition specially arranged for posterity of that ancient

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Chinese silk trade which is known to have been the chief factor in opening up this earliest route for China's direct intercourse with Central Asia and the classical West. The materials were far older than the decorated silks and embroideries the explorer discovered ten years ago in the cave of the 'Thousand Buddhas' of Tun-huang. On various grounds they could safely be assigned to the period which followed the first expansion of Chinese trade and power into Central Asia about the close of the second century B.C. . . .

"The conditions of burial disclose a high degree of reverence for the dead and a conscientious endeavor on the part of the living to equip the deceased for his stay among the shades. It appears to have been usual to place finely woven silk in immediate contact with the body, and coarser, but well-made, fabric outside. The extraordinary state of preservation of the burials of 2,000 years ago has afforded many exquisite examples of silk fabrics with their colours and patterns frequently perfectly fresh and distinct. The most striking are the finely woven brocades in which grotesque animals, generally winged, disport themselves among scrolls of floral or tree-coral type. The treatment of the design and the method of the 'repeat' evidence Chinese skill and the recurring Chinese characters with which the fabrics are sprinkled leave no doubt of their origin.

"The ground colour is usually a rich deep blue or a bronze brown. The pattern is mainly in golden yellow, modified with pale green, thin lines of crimson, and one or two other shades. Satin stitch is used, and the fabric is always very firm, substantial, and of lustrous surface. These brocades are generally made up in the form of a broad sash or scarf, lined with a fine plain silk of green or blue, with a stiffening linen fabric between.

"The ingenuity of the designs is considerable. In one the delicate scroll work clothed with small leaves suddenly throws out a bold peacock-tail-shape mass in which a contained and well-proportioned counter change restores the threatened balance of the pattern. In another, where rows of foliate grotesque beasts in blue, buff and green stand on a rich copper ground, a recurring lozenge-shape angular scroll unfolds into a kind of stiff snake or dragon and seizes a foliate bird, while a small dragon in blue, coiled in the same angular shape, roams above.

"In a small fragment of floral pattern used as a patch on a garment

appear griffins regardant, flying birds, and, in a kind of shrine, a pair of winged lambs kneeling and supporting between them an altar or tree. Of purely geometrical forms there are many, but they are generally relieved from extreme severity by the introduction of some small qualifying element, such as a flower at the junction of the repeat, a ring of dots, or in some cases, in a repeating lozenge, a pair of small dragons playing with a ball.

“A few pieces of tapestry also used apparently as a body-band show the perfection to which the textile art was carried. The colouring is rich and subdued and the pattern well massed. The technic is fine, and curiously recalls the so-called “Coptic” tapestries of the third-fourth century A.D., in Egypt. A noticeable feature is the manner in which the junctions between colours are effected when these occur in a line parallel with the warp. In modern Gobelins these slits are sewn by hand after the weaving is finished. In old Peruvian tapestry the slits remain open. In the specimens received from the Lop Desert, at intervals of about eight stitches the opposite colours are carried across alternately as binders. This is not sufficiently noticeable to give a broken line, yet it forms a reasonably strong join.

“The patterns used on the fragments are a kind of fleur-de-lys; birds with uplifted wings alternating with bi-symmetrical scrolls; the Chinese fret introducing groups of four Swastikas formed by the crossing of the lines of the fret; and a series of thin vandykes or chevrons, with a mid-rib terminating at its base in a square spiral, and others. Rainbow bands carried across the fabric frequently occur.

“A much damaged but important fragment used as a patch exhibits the right side of a human face about half life-size. The conventions of work and colouring closely follow those of the Hellenistic-looking angels which decorated the walls of the ancient Buddhist shrines at the Miran site, south of Lop-nor, explored by Sir Aurel Stein in 1907. Beside the face, on the dark-blue ground, is a symbol faintly resembling a caduceus, in yellow. It is probably part of a Buddhist subject and was perhaps a hanging.

“Many of the plain fabrics are of great interest. They include specimens of very finely woven jean in various colours—as close and compact a fabric as the modern machine-made cloth; several specimens of a

flannel-like cloth with the surface finely teased up into a velvety texture; felts of all grades; and a plain silk cloth of a texture so fine that the surface is like that of plum silk, the threads being almost too fine to see without a magnifying glass. Attached to a garment made of such fine silk, of a beautiful dark 'pastel' red shade, are tiny cubes of metallic substances of extreme hardness, probably pyrites, drilled with a fine hole to take the cotton with which they are sewn on."