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Abstract: For more than a thousand years, long-distance trade in silk flourished over trade routes passing through some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. Commerce in silk persisted for two main reasons. First, silk became a status symbol in several important states. Both China during the Sui and Tang dynasties and the Byzantine empire established dress codes in which silk indicated high status in bureaucratic and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Both states also enacted sumptuary laws banning the wearing of silk and other unwarranted clothing by commoners. Second, silk became a sacred object and a token of sacred objects among both Buddhists and Christians. Buddhist monks and merchants carried silk to India out of devotion. Meanwhile, silk costumes became necessary regalia for Christian priests, and silk fabrics served as ceremonial covers for the relics of saints. From the eighth century Islamic rulers brought sericulture and filature to the vast area from India to the Mediterranean basin. The Islamic textile industry produced large quantities of silk fabrics and made silk available in much of Eurasia.

Silks and Religions in Eurasia, c. A.D. 600–1200*

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Silk trade of long distance across the Eurasian continent lasted more than a thousand years from its beginning during the second century B.C. The trade routes passed through some of the most desolate and inhospitable terrain on earth. Transactions involving silks continued even during periods extremely unsuitable for long-distance trade. The marvelous persistence of the trade linked it to some important developments in world history. When Europe began to emerge from its dark age, the revived trade of the late medieval period was mainly in textiles. A few centuries later, the industrial revolution also started with textiles. Actually, the earliest sponsors of modern textile research came mostly from the textile industry in Europe. Silk production and trade were significant activities in the ancient period and also left a rich legacy influencing later economic developments in the world. This article offers a sketchy outline of a cultural history of silks, relating the changing status of this special commodity to major religious movements in Eurasia during late antiquity and the postclassical era. Discussion of the silk trade is

divided here into three sections, each dealing with a major circle of the trade, as illuminated by literary records and traceable material evidence of silk transactions. The three major circles of the silk trade happened to coincide with the three major spheres of religious movements of late antiquity and the post-classical era.

Salient features of the silk trade—including the long distances and large areas that it covered, the physical difficulties of travel, and the beautiful designs and fine quality of surviving samples—made the “silk roads” a fabulous topic of study. Archaeologists and art historians today overcome great hardship to study remains in deserts. Murals and sculptures in the ancient temples and caves along the silk roads have inspired modern art, dance, and literature. Chinese documents excavated from central Asia and Chinese Buddhist texts referred to silks made in many parts of Eurasia. An early sixth-century Buddhist text contained a reference to silks made in “Daqin,” meaning either the Roman empire or Byzantium. The silk was said to be used by the king of Kuqa in the Tarim Basin to honor the respected Buddhist teacher Kumarajiva.¹ Chinese documents from tombs dated to the mid-fifth century in Turpan in Chinese central Asia referred to patterned silks from Kuqa (Qiucijin).² Silk weaving, if not sericulture, developed at an early date in central Asia. References to patterned silks from Kashgar (Shulejin) and possibly India (Tipojin) occur in sixth-century tombs³ and from Persia in seventh-century tombs.⁴ Even in the official history of the Tang dynasty, there was a reference to Arabian (or Muslim) traders selling textiles, including various silks, in central Asia.⁵

So far, these literary records of foreign silks that went into the Chinese market—at least the Chinese central Asian market—have not been confirmed by archaeological discoveries. The records nevertheless demonstrate that the silk trade passing through central Asia was not one-way traffic but a complex of transactions of multiple parties. Thus, to understand the content and implications of the ancient silk trade, one must study all aspects of silk as a commodity, luxury, religious item, and currency from a world history perspective. Only in Eurasian scope is it possible to identify trends concerning its circulation, the origins of its supply and demand, and the relationship between silk transactions and social institutions, especially religious institutions. However, while modern scholars and artists from all over the world have shared curiosity about ancient civilizations in the deserts they have often viewed and examined scholarly issues about the silk roads from totally different angles.

In the view of most Chinese scholars, China exported silks to various countries, mostly to the West. This presumption was based on common sense: China invented sericulture, filature, and silk weaving. Silk textiles were so abundant in China that their production was almost as popular as linen before the thirteenth century, when cotton began to be produced on a large scale. Furthermore, official Chinese histories recorded silk production and taxation, and also mentioned the grant or sale of exquisite silks to foreigners. Thus Chinese archaeologists often classify excavated silk simply according to the date of their sites – calling it “Northern dynasties” silk or “Tang dynasty” silk, for example – and rarely discuss its provenance.⁶

Meanwhile, Western scholarship on ancient and medieval textiles has mostly concentrated on Byzantine silks and, to a less extent, on Persian and central Asian silks. Western research also follows common sense, in that most silk samples dated before the twelfth century outside China were preserved in European church treasuries, and most patterned precious silks among them were made in the Byzantine empire, while a few came from Persia or central Asia. Even some Islamic silk found its way into churches at later dates. However, silk with typical Chinese patterns was rare in Western collections. A recent study of more than one thousand pieces of patterned silks preserved in European churches, dated from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, shows that only one sample was clearly from China.⁷ This finding does not seem to verify the picturesque assumption that in this period caravans of camels loaded with silks from China, passing through the central Asian deserts, went all the way to the Mediterranean regions.

Since the samples studied by most textile experts are patterned silk textiles, one cannot exclude the possibility that silk yarn and plain silks flowed from China to Western lands. The difficulty is that silk yarn and plain silks offer little indication as to their provenance, since quite a few countries mastered the technology of sericulture and filature after the sixth century.

Islamic countries probably also used Chinese silk materials in addition to their own to produce silk and half-silk textiles. Art historians of Islamic textiles have carefully catalogued and dated all the available *tiraz* textiles – that is, textiles with edges tapestried or embroidered with Arabic or Persian inscriptions praising Allah and dating the rulers. Most of the *tiraz* textiles were excavated from tombs in Egypt, while some were preserved in European churches. Studies on the provenance of Islamic silks show that they often came from central Asian sites, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv, and that they rarely show direct links with China.

A survey of the distribution of surviving silk samples and literary records about silk transactions shows that there were three major circles of silk trade from late antiquity to the Mongol conquest. The first was between China and India. Although there has been no discovery of Chinese silks in India due to the tropical climate and the tradition of cremation, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tamil literature after A.D. 600 recorded that Chinese silk was popular in India. The second circle was between the Byzantine empire and western Europe. This is evident from the many Byzantine silks preserved in church treasuries throughout Europe. The third circle, which gained importance in the latter part of the period under study here, was the Islamic world, stretching from central Asia to the Mediterranean basin and including North Africa, Sicily, and Spain at various periods. Finally, because central Asia was a crossroads of various cultures, it witnessed silk transactions among the followers of many religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. It thus became also a crossroads of the three trade circles.

The Sino-Indian Circle

Silk was a common textile in China. Tacky plain silks were products of peasant households, and from the Han dynasty they were a main form of tax paid to the government. Fancy silk textiles – embroidered and various patterned silks produced by sophisticated weaving techniques – were symbols of status from the Han dynasty through the Northern and Southern dynasties, that is, from the second century B.C. until the late sixth century A.D. Many sumptuary laws governed the wearing of silk, though the laws on luxurious silks were not necessarily always enforced.⁸ When the Sui and Tang dynasties reunited China, the rulers tried to establish new codes of clothing, which corresponded to the hierarchy of an emerging bureaucratic system. The Sui and Tang rulers, especially the latter, created a bureaucratic system by breaking the hierarchy of blood aristocracy. The struggle to build the bureaucratic hierarchy lasted a long time and caused much bloodshed. But the new bureaucratic hierarchy certainly offered more opportunity for social mobility. Henceforth, it was even more important than before to signify officials' status in the bureaucratic hierarchy by their apparel, because their surnames were no longer the criterion of status. In the new clothing code, yellow was reserved for the emperors. Purple ranked in prestige just behind yellow; purple robes were for the highest three levels of officials in the Tang court. This practice deviated significantly from traditional Chinese values of color, which had condemned purple as an impure color derived from red.

The Tang rulers implemented sumptuary laws on silk textiles by issuing edicts restraining production and trade in silks reserved for official use. Those

restrictions, however, were never very effective. Fancy silks appeared in both domestic and foreign markets. Because the Chinese used silks as effective economic inducements when conducting diplomacy with nomadic peoples, silks had flowed northwest out of China from ancient times. With the spread of Buddhism, silk became one of the sacred and precious objects in Buddhist rituals and thus an important commodity for Chinese to carry to India.⁹

Buddhists – preachers, pilgrims, and traders – were not necessarily the only ones to bring silks to India, but certainly they were important carriers. There is no evidence that silks became status symbols in India, though Indian society was hierarchically structured. Silk trade with India continued even during the centuries between the Han and the Tang dynasties, when a divided China suffered from frequent warfare.

With the growing prosperity of Buddhism in China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, communications between China and India became even more frequent. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and Indian teachers were voluntary or involuntary carriers of silk or agents of silk transactions. In his trip to India in the early seventh century, the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang stopped at the central Asian state of Gaochang at Turpan. The king of Gaochang, a great patron of Buddhism, equipped Xuanzang with many silks and other gifts. He wrote for Xuanzang twenty-four letters to the kings of the states along his route, and every letter was attached to a bolt of damask. To the most powerful king, the Yabgu khan of the Western Turks, the king of Turpan sent 500 bolts of damask and plain silk and 2 cartloads of fruits. In addition to these gifts, he also provided Xuanzang himself with gold, silver, and all kinds of silk clothes, plus 500 bolts of damask and plain silk to support his travel. Xuanzang needed thirty horses and twenty-five laborers to carry all these gifts and treasures.¹⁰ By the time he reached northern India, Xuanzang had donated all the silks to Buddhist stupas and establishments along the route.

Some pilgrims received silks before they started their journeys. When he reached the Mahabodhi monastery in Bodh Gaya, Yijing (635–713), a Chinese pilgrim who traveled to India to obtain texts of monastic rules, made a ritual robe with the same measurements as the statue of the Buddha there by using the silk donated to him by the monks and lay devotees of Shandong, China. He also presented tens of thousands of gauze silk canopies to the monasteries for his friend the dharma teacher Xuan from Puzhou.¹¹ By giving silks to monks or envoys embarking on pilgrimages to India, the donors earned merits for themselves. By spending the silks on their routes, pilgrims earned merits for both themselves and their patrons.

Both Chinese Buddhist monks and Indian monks who resided in Tang China received silks or silk ritual robes from the Tang emperors as rewards for their religious services, translations, and preaching activities. Beginning in the mid-Tang dynasty, purple robes were established as the highest badge of honor that monks could receive. Many outstanding Buddhist monks received purple robes from the court.¹² Among the foreigners, Indian monks probably received the most silks and robes. The Tantric teacher Amoghvajra (c. 705–774), who arrived in China about the year 720, received so much silk from the emperor that the pieces piled up like a hill, yet Buddhist sources claimed that he never accumulated possessions.¹³ It is not clear how much of that silk went to India through his connections. It is certain, however, that as a major form of wealth in the society, large quantities of silk flowed into the treasuries of Buddhist institutions and individuals.

Chinese aristocrats used to bury fancy silks in their tombs to carry to the other world, as evident in the Han dynasty tombs of Mawangdui and elsewhere. Whatever their perception of life after death, even commoners who could not afford fancy silks in life were eager to carry currency to the other world by burying an inventory of goods, mostly clothing and silk textiles, in their graves. In Turpan in Chinese central Asia, this custom dated from the fourth century. In the early tombs of the region, the inventories name only a few pieces of clothing. In the following centuries the lists became longer and longer. The written inventories, however, cannot be taken as an accurate list of burial goods. Yoshihisa Oda studied the inventories and the excavated items from an early tomb where the inventory was short and looked realistic and a later tomb where the inventory was long and looked exaggerated. In both cases the excavated items did not match the items listed on the inventories. In a tomb dated to A.D. 436 (Ast TAM 62), only the “pair of shoes” listed in the inventory was matched by a pair of paper shoes among the excavated items. In a tomb dated to 596 (Ast 66 TAM 48), the long list of items on the inventory had almost nothing to do with the real burial goods.¹⁴ Therefore, the written inventory did not intend to list the real burial goods, but rather figured as another burial item for ritual purpose.

The format and phrasing of the inventories changed with time. From those changes one can sense how the vision of the world after death grew clearer in people’s minds. An inventory from A.D. 437, after naming the clothes of the dead, lists “a bundle of yellow silk yarn thirty feet long in his hand,” followed by the Chinese geomantic symbols: “black dragon on the left, white tiger on the right, red skylark in front, Xuanwu behind.”¹⁵ If the thirty-foot-long yellow silk yarn seems strange here, its purpose will be revealed by some

inventories from a later period. An inventory dated to 548 is fairly typical. It lists among grave goods:

ten thousand gold coins,
one million silver coins,
one thousand pieces of brocade,
ten thousand bolts of damask,
one thousand catties of silk floss,
ten thousand bolts of plain silk,
1,000,090,000-foot-long silk yarn for climbing to heaven.

A disciple of the Buddha, monk Guoyuan, moves the great deity of the five roads for the disciple of the Buddha Guangfei who passed away in the big city of Gaochang, who had been observing the five abstentions, making the ten merits, but unfortunately had to pass the five roads. Please do not detain her. The witnesses are those present at the time, Zhang Jiangu and Li Dingdu. Whether she wants to go to the end of the east sea, or the wall of the east [west?] sea, no one should stop her. Immediately follow the statutes and ordinances!¹⁶

Though the listed amount of gold, silver, textiles, and clothes was extremely large, and growing larger all the time, the inventories often claimed that those items were all personal belongings for the dead to carry to the other world.¹⁷ Here we see a Buddhist monk helping a devotee go over to the other world – presumably one of the heavens – with the instrument (the silk yarn) to climb up to that heaven ready to hand. Meanwhile, the great deity of the five roads had to be taken care of by the Buddhist monk. Compared to the “yellow silk yarn thirty feet long in his hand,” the “1,000,090,000-foot-long silk yarn for climbing to heaven” offers a clearer picture of where the deceased would go.

Under Tang rule, Buddhism became further involved in funeral rites. A new genre of inventory appeared, including not only clothes and wealth as personal belongings and currency for the dead to spend but also the merits they had accumulated. An inventory dated to 673 was a will made by a man before he died. He told the Buddha that he had had images made of the Buddha and two bodhisattvas and that he recited the Ullambana Sutra. The merits he had accrued, in addition to many silver coins and silks, plus named female and male slaves who were his personal property, would provide him with enjoyment in the other world.¹⁸

Some inventories of merits were made by the relatives of the dead. A woman in 674 listed the merits of her mother-in-law, including the payments she had made for sutras to be recited by monks and her donations to the monks.¹⁹

Another woman listed the many merits of her father-in-law, who died in the year 672, including the sutras recited, the silk banners made, and silk clothes

donated. This extremely long list recorded the many things done to try to buy him back from death during the year he had been ill.²⁰ The old man nevertheless passed away. Though these credits were not enough to recover his health, they would be his property as he passed beyond this world. In the tomb, dated about 708–710, of a certain official the inventory lists only the merits he had gained by reciting sutras, namely the Sad-dharmapundarika and the Vajra Prajnaparamita, as the wealth he wanted to carry over; nothing material appeared on the list.²¹ This may have been because he was an honest official, and thus poor, or because it was considered inappropriate for an official to claim to possess much wealth. From these inventories, one sees an equation between material wealth, particularly in the form of silks, and the Buddhist merits to be carried to the unfathomable beyond.

The perception of future lives stimulated Chinese Buddhist devotees to donate their wealth, often in the form of silk textiles, to Buddhist institutions. Incidentally, this was a period when relics of the Buddha gained significance in both India and China. In India, sites with relics of the Buddha became destinations of pilgrimage and centers for Buddhist rituals. In China, the Sui dynasty sought to prove its legitimacy by claiming possession of true relics of the Buddha. The Tang dynasty witnessed Buddhist pilgrims going to India to search for relics. Xuanzang first came back with relics from India.²² Then in 661 the emperor Gaozong sent the envoy Wang Xuance with 4,000 bolts of silk to obtain a precious parietal bone from Kapisa in northwestern India.²³ Thereafter, many Chinese pilgrims tried to obtain relics from India. Because relics were well-guarded treasures in India, many pilgrims failed in this quest, though some of them managed to bring back a few pieces. Occasionally, foreign monks also donated relics to the Tang rulers or monasteries. With all these efforts, by later Tang times most major monasteries in China owned some relics from India.

As Buddhist relics became objects of worship in the Tang dynasty, they attracted a great deal of wealth to Buddhist monasteries in both China and India. The relics preserved in the Famen monastery near the Tang capital of Changan were frequently taken out for worship by monks and rulers. Those times were precious opportunities to donate wealth to the Buddha. An excavation in 1987 revealed the stelae recording those ceremonies and donations. According to one of the inscriptions, after performing a rite of bathing the relics in 649, the monk Huigong donated 3,000 bolts of silk to the relics in 656.²⁴ An inscription of 874 recorded all the donations made by generations of emperors, empresses, princes, and those who were qualified to do so.²⁵ Archaeologists actually found more than 700 pieces of silk clothes

listed in the inscriptions, though most of them were carbonized beyond recovery.²⁶ An inscription dated to 742 from another site of relics, the Qingshan monastery, reports that the relics were covered with exquisite silks.²⁷ Those associations of silks with Buddhism, as material expressions of the religious function of relics linking life and death, caused more silk textiles and clothes to be carried beyond the borders of Tang China.

In addition to pilgrims who carried silks to India, rulers were also eager to show their devotion by sending ritual robes to India. In the early period of the Tang dynasty, the emperor Taizong frequently sent envoys to the Mahabodhi monastery in Bodh Gaya to worship and to donate ritual robes.²⁸ During the reign of Gaozong, one of Wang Xuance's missions to India in 657 involved taking a robe for the Buddha.²⁹ This tradition continued to the eleventh century, when two Chinese monks donated a gold-embroidered *kasaya*, or Buddhist ritual robe, to spread over the throne of the Buddha in Mahabodhi.³⁰

The Byzantine and Western European Circle

While Buddhists in Asia were busy traveling between China and India, searching for relics of the Buddha and donating silks to stupas and monasteries, a similar kind of religious movement was taking place in another part of the globe. The rise of the cult of saints in Christian Europe initiated a traffic in the relics of saints, pieces of the Cross, and other items associated with holy individuals. Meanwhile, European Christians sought out silks from the East even more eagerly than had wealthy Roman citizens a few centuries earlier.

Silk weaving within the territory of the Byzantine empire had begun during the Roman period in eastern Mediterranean cities, such as Beirut and Gaza. Early silk textiles produced there were made from Chinese yarn. Because the supply was scarce, weavers even unraveled plain silk fabrics to make silks for the Mediterranean market. Only after Constantine established the new capital at Constantinople in A.D. 330 did silk weaving develop into a full-fledged industry. By the time of Justinian in the sixth century, the Byzantine state owned a silk-weaving industry and also had issued a dress code reflecting the bureaucratic hierarchy of the court and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the church.

The code represented a total break from the republican tradition of equality among citizens and helped consolidate monarchical rule. During this era of political transition, the new industry of silk weaving combined with a traditional industry associated with luxury textiles in eastern Mediterranean regions – namely, the production of purple dye – to create distinctive regalia

worn by European monarchical and ecclesiastical powers from the sixth century onward.

Purple dye made from murex, a shellfish found in the eastern Mediterranean, had been established as a symbol of status as early as the second millennium B.C. in the Near East.³¹ Because the cost of extracting the dye from a large quantity of the shellfish was extremely high, and because purple was the only fast color known to the ancient Mediterranean world,³² it became the most durable status badge in history. Even though purple wool had been associated with royalty and divinity from a very early date in the Middle East, purple was not restricted for the exclusive use of certain social groups in either the Greek cities or the Roman republic. Up to the early empire Roman citizens still had the freedom to wear purple clothes according to their means. It was the introduction of the silk industry and the combination of silk and purple dye that signaled a change. The silk textiles produced under Byzantine government monopoly were silks dyed in purple or embroidered with gold thread. Restrictions on silk, purple, and gold embroidery were issued in the early fifth century by Theodosius,³³ and the inclusion of the law in the code of Justinian put it in force.

Because Roman citizens treasured the freedom of wearing purple and distinguished themselves from the barbaric kingdoms that restricted purple for use in royal insignias, it took hundreds of years for the Byzantine emperors to prevail over the defiant attitude of their subjects.³⁴ Justinian virtually extinguished the private silk industry in Byzantine territory by imposing a ceiling price of eight gold pieces for a pound of silk material. Only then did the government monopoly on silks in purple and those with gold embroidery become effective. Because the ceiling price was lower than what silk traders could afford to charge, the government monopolized the trade of silk material and drove the private silk industry out of the market.³⁵ Purple dyehouses and silk workshops became government operations housed in the imperial treasury under the administration of the minister of finance.³⁶

Fancy silk textiles, purple silks, and gold embroidery became important weapons in diplomacy when the military power of the Byzantine empire declined. Byzantine rulers closely guarded their monopoly on fancy silks from their own citizens and foreign commoners, but they generously donated to churches, and for strategic purposes, they carefully allowed some silks to go to foreigners through gift exchanges or trade.

Byzantine rulers showed generosity toward churches not only out of devotion to God but also because of their ambitions to become leaders of the whole of Christendom. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to grant

Christianity the status of a legal religion. But he was soon puzzled by the vehement debates among the Christian theologians. In their efforts to establish a Christian orthodoxy, Christian thinkers labeled one sect after another heretical and expelled them from the Church. Depressed by the fierce debates between the theologians Arius and Athanasius, Constantine called for the council of Nicaea, which condemned Arians as heretics.³⁷ The council of Chalcedon in 451 condemned both Monophysites in Alexandria and Nestorians in Antioch as heretics.³⁸

In the sixth century, to identify himself as leader of a unified Christian empire of the five patriarchates – Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem – Justinian outlawed paganism and persecuted various heresies. He was severe, perhaps ruthless, when trying to achieve his goal: “for in his eagerness to gather all men into one belief as to Christ, he kept destroying the rest of mankind in senseless fashion, and that too while acting with a pretence of piety. For it did not seem to him murder if the victims chanced to be not of his own creed.”³⁹ Justinian was more confident about his knowledge of Christian theology than Constantine, and he actively participated in theological controversies in hopes of bringing different sects into his fold. He nevertheless failed miserably. During his reign theological sects developed into separate churches in Syria, Egypt, Armenia, Ethiopia, and Persia. During the next century, those nationally based churches paved the way for Byzantium’s loss of those provinces. Monophysites in Egypt were more willing to be ruled by Arabs than by the Byzantines.⁴⁰ A strong Nestorian church held its ground in a large area from Syria to China for centuries. In spite of all his efforts to champion orthodoxy, Justinian died as a heretic, according to the orthodox priests of the time.⁴¹

In the competition between Constantinople and Rome for leadership in the Christian world, the fatal mistake of Byzantium, at least on the surface, was the iconoclasm movement (726–843). The principal causes of the movement were the conflicting interests of state and ecclesiastical powers in Byzantium. Because iconoclasm was ultimately condemned as heresy, this movement weakened the religious authority of Byzantine rulers in Christendom. In contrast, the pope in Rome emerged as the winner of the debates over iconoclasm. The letter of Pope Gregory II denouncing iconoclasm was decisive in bringing about its condemnation at the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787.⁴² To the dismay of the Byzantine emperors, the see of Saint Peter gradually claimed supremacy among the five patriarchates and assumed the leadership of the Western Christian world.

In the vicissitudes of theological and political struggles that lasted centuries, the only advantage Byzantine emperors had over their Western rivals and dissatisfied subjects was cultural and material superiority. The eastern part of the Roman empire was the homeland of the Christian religion. Byzantium possessed especially important relics, such as the True Cross, the robe, the shroud, the girdle, and the swaddling clothes with marks of the Virgin's milk,⁴³ plus corporeal relics of numerous saints. Even during the age of iconoclasm, those relics were rarely touched. The True Cross had been a source of relics distributed throughout the entire Christian world for centuries. The whole Christian calendar and liturgy – the worship of Christ and the Virgin, the festivals celebrating the Annunciation and the Nativity, and the solemn and awesome rites and heavenly decorations in basilicas – first took shape in the eastern part of the Roman empire during the time of Constantine, then spread to the western part of Christendom.⁴⁴ No less important was the material culture that made the liturgy possible. It is difficult to overestimate the impressive effect of the grandeur of Constantinople in converting new Christians. Byzantine culture reached the most distant points of western Europe through relics of saints, covered by symbolic Byzantine silks, often in the form of a relic pouch. Relic pouches made in Byzantium spread to many archaeological sites in western and northern Europe.⁴⁵

Only in this context can we realize the significance of Byzantine rulers' patronage of the Christian Church with silk textiles. Ever since Constantine had given a robe "fashioned with golden threads" to Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem for use on the occasion of baptisms,⁴⁶ figured silks made in imperial workshops had been used for liturgical purposes. Purple silks, gold-woven silks, and pure silks continued to be given to Christian priests. To portray themselves as patrons of Christianity, Justinian and his empress Theodora had their images represented on an altar cover made of silk and gold in Hagia Sophia, along with images of Christ and the Apostles.⁴⁷

Soon sacred vestments came to be made from purple silks. On sacred artworks, Byzantine court costumes appeared to cover the bodies of the images of Christ, Mary, and angels.⁴⁸ The association of precious silks with divinity elevated their status and prices and also increased demand for silk in Christian society. To identify themselves with the saints, rulers and priests had themselves buried in fancy silk costumes.

Meanwhile, having established its religious authority, Rome became the base from which Christian religion and Culture spread to central and western Europe. Roman Catholic cosmological elements – monotheism, the Trinity,

and Christian eschatology – replaced those of polytheist religions and heretical Christian sects. Cults of saints replaced cults of woods, river, or grove. The rise of the papacy and increasing Roman influences in western Europe changed the objects of saints' cults. Up to the seventh century, most saints worshiped by Franks and Anglo-Saxons were local, either recluses who had led austere and pure lives or bishops who had been successful missionaries. Even virtuous kings could become saints, such as King Oswald of Northumbria, who died in battle in 642 and then became a saint who protected others.⁴⁹ As early as the sixth century, however, relics from Rome or farther east came to be treasured. Bishop Gregory of Tours sent his deacon to Rome to get relics in the year 590.⁵⁰ Gundovald, the pretender to the Merovingian throne, seized relics of a saint from a Syrian merchant about the year 585 “for protection.”⁵¹ Relics of the twelve apostles were especially important for missionaries. When the missionary Willibrord of Northumbria received permission from the local prince to preach in Frisia in 690, he hurried back to Rome to fetch relics.⁵² Pope Gregory the Great sent relics to the missionary Augustine in England during the early seventh century. In the time of Bede in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, visiting Rome was recognized as a great merit among Christians in England.⁵³ A book about holy places was compiled for pilgrims.⁵⁴ Christians might also have wanted to visit Jerusalem and other sacred sites in the East, but Rome was a more practical destination and was prestigious enough to confer status on the pilgrims. When Bishop Wilfred of Northumbria visited Rome on pilgrimage or for business in 652, 679, and 704, he visited shrines of saints and collected relics to take back to his church.⁵⁵ Benedict Biscop, the abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow, made five trips to Rome in the mid-seventh century to venerate relics, and he took books, relics, and silks back to his monasteries in Northumbria.⁵⁶

Once initiated by the pope, translations of relics to various churches in Europe gained momentum and developed into a full-blown business during the Carolingian era. Roman saints increasingly replaced local saints as objects of veneration. Though many places already owned relics from Rome or Eastern lands, pilgrims continued to flow to Rome. In the ninth century pilgrimage itself was a tourist business. In Rome all national groups, whether Anglo-Saxons, Frisians, Franks, or Lombards, had their own hostels, including church, lodging, and cemetery. Guidebooks led them to the shrines holding relics among the ruins and churches of Rome.⁵⁷ Rome had the largest supply of saints' relics because many martyrdoms had taken place there in early Christian times. Romans used to bury their dead out of the city, on the roadside or in the catacombs. Saints shared tombs with commoners, whether Christian or pagan, in those cemeteries.⁵⁸ Before the seventh century, the

bishops of Rome had to visit the catacombs to worship the relics of martyrs. Only in 648 were the first relics translated into the city and enshrined in a church. Afterward many such translations took place. The heads of Saints Peter and Paul, enshrined in the Lateran, became the center of worship for all of Christendom.⁵⁹ The pope was the guardian of the body of Saint Peter, who had been entrusted with the keys to heaven by Jesus Christ, and who was considered the first bishop of Rome, or pope. This teaching thus provided legitimacy for the pope's claims to be leader of the Christian world.

Belief in saints and veneration of relics were based on Christian eschatology. The fact that Jesus and most early saints were martyrs might lead one to wonder why those who did not defend themselves when alive would be trusted to protect others after death. However, if there is a relationship between this life and the afterlife, those who were faithful in the world and who died heroically would certainly be in a superior position in the other world and thus could wield supernatural power over living mortals. In western Europe beginning in the sixth century, tombs of saints became centers of religious life. Tombs and altars joined together, and churches were built on old cemeteries. This was because local saints originally were buried there, and also because it was a privilege for common Christians to be buried near saints, who could help them enter heaven. Therefore, chapels were built on pre-Christian cemeteries, and the cemeteries became Christian necropolises.⁶⁰

In early medieval Europe, wars and epidemics took many lives, both the elite and the lowly, in spite of the protection and curing power of saints and their relics. The theological explanation for the disasters that fell on innocent and devout Christians was that people incurred the scourge of God because of their sins. Sin was inevitable, and the scourge of God was inevitable. The only hope, therefore, was the promise of heaven after death. On this matter, the Christian Church never failed its faithful. Priests baptized the living and took care of the dead to prepare them for heaven. Only in light of their fear of death and their hope for happiness in another life can one understand the devotion of early medieval European Christians and their eagerness to give their wealth to the Church, which did not necessarily ensure their happiness in this world.

The rise of the cult of saints and the traffic in relics brought more wealth, including silks, into already wealthy churches in western Europe. Silks were preserved in churches in various forms: as church decorations and wall hangings, altar covers, decorations and wrappings on reliquaries, shrouds and tomb covers for bishops and kings. It was a time all magnates, secular or clerical, were buried in ecclesiastic institutions. Relics of saints encouraged commoners to bury their dead in churchyards, in proximity to holy power.

Foregoing spacious and neatly planned cemeteries in the country, the corpses were crowded into churchyards. Eventually the churchyards became so full that the bones had to be removed and piled up to make room for new arrivals.⁶¹ To mark the difference between regular human bones and those of saints, Christians decorated the relics of saints. From the sixth century onward, lay people regarded silk cloth covering a tomb as a sign indicating the grave of a canonized saint.⁶²

Most silks owned by churches were stored in church treasuries. But before the twelfth century, few treasuries existed in churches or monasteries. Instead, reliquaries and altars served as treasuries.⁶³ This custom began in Byzantium, then spread to Rome and western Europe. Relics from Byzantium often were wrapped in pouches made of silk. To obtain silk from Byzantium was not easy, however, even for a church. When Byzantine customs officers prevented him from taking purple silks out of the empire in 969, Liudprand, bishop of Cremona and envoy of Emperor Otto I, argued that the silks were for a church. Still he did not succeed in getting the silks out.⁶⁴ To meet the demand for patterned silks, Christian states embroidered plain silks, which were not under government monopoly. Even popes resorted to embroidery in response to the limited supply of silk created by technology and Byzantine monopoly. There was a gold workshop in Rome that produced gold-embroidered images on Byzantine silks. This enabled popes to give a silk with the image of the appropriate patron saint to a particular church. During the period of the iconoclastic controversy, those images of saints distinguished gifts of the pope from those of Byzantine donors.⁶⁵

As the Christian institutions in Europe became richer and richer, the demand for silks—a scarce commodity that most European states did not yet produce—also increased steadily. Most archbishops and bishops, and even simple priests, owned several silken costumes for various occasions. It seems that the Christian priests in western Europe did not care what kinds of pattern the silks bore. Therefore, silks from outside the Christian world found their way to European churches. Sassanian silks, central Asian silks, and even more frequently Islamic silks all appeared in church treasuries. A new market was formed when Islamic states joined the game.

The Third Circle: The Islamic World

While churches and monarchs in western Europe were trying to obtain silks from the Byzantines, a new silk industry developed in the Islamic world. The Islamic empire inherited a rich material and cultural legacy from the lands of ancient civilization that they conquered. Their occupation of the eastern part

of the Byzantine empire, including part of Asia Minor and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, brought many silk workshops under their control because the region had produced silk textiles from Roman times. The conquest of Sassanian Persia brought another silk-producing region into the Islamic empire. Islamic armies in central Asia ran into the military force of Tang China. After defeating the Tang at Talas in 751, the Arabs did not push farther east. Instead, they captured many artisans and took advantage of their skills in paper making and the weaving and dyeing of textiles.⁶⁶ Soon the paper industry displaced the papyrus industry in Egypt, and paper became a major medium of writing throughout the Islamic world. Also in this period sericulture became common from central Asia to the western Mediterranean. More important, the technique of protecting the long filaments of silk, previously unknown to many silk-producing regions outside China, spread in Islamic society. *Ibrism*, or long-fibered silk, was obtained by baking the cocoons under the sun to kill the worms.⁶⁷

Unlike the cases of Tang China and Byzantium, Islamic society had neither a strict hierarchy nor a dress code to mark status with costumes. But the Islamic empire inherited various textile traditions and established a state-run industry of textiles, especially silk. This system was called *tiraz*, a Persian word for embroidery. In the Islamic context the word referred to textiles with the border inscribed with reigns of Muslim rulers and date of production in Arabic or Persian. The inscriptions were executed through embroidery or tapestry weaving with silk thread. This system was necessary because the Arabian empire took over numerous textile workshops that had formerly been controlled by Byzantine or Persian governments. From Egypt to Persia, all kinds of textiles were sent to the capital of the caliphate. Because the production and exchange of the textiles had been regulated by the Byzantine and Sassanian states, the Islamic state had to replace the old regulations with a set of new rules. The regulations governing the production of textiles with Arabic inscriptions in those factories, known as the Dar al-Tiraz, were established after the conquests that created the Islamic empire. The tiraz system flourished and persisted to the thirteenth century, but its peak came during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, when the power of the caliphs was at its height.

There were two kinds of tiraz factories in the Islamic world: those of the caliphate, which produced garments for the family of the caliph and honorary robes for the warehouse of the caliphate, and the public tiraz, which produced garments with inscribed bands for the public. The inscriptions start with the religious statement that appears at the beginning of most chapters of

the Quran (“In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful”), followed by the name and title of the ruling caliph, with a blessing, such as “May God prosper him” or “May God strengthen him.” On a garment made in caliphate tiraz shops, there should also be the name of the wazir, or prime minister, who was also in charge of the royal tiraz workshops. The next phrase usually indicated the royal or public tiraz shop and the city in which a garment was made, and it was followed by the date in the Islamic calendar. After the eleventh century, when the central power of the caliphate had weakened, the format for the inscriptions became simpler, and they usually included one short pious phrase, such as “victory from God” or “the kingdom of God.”⁶⁸

The disintegration of the tiraz system began in the peripheral regions of the Abbasid empire, where sultans built their own tiraz system. From the mid-tenth century on, even the tiraz in Baghdad was under the control of Buwayhid princes. The caliphate could not stop the sultan of Pars in Iran from replacing the name of the caliph with that of the sultan on the tiraz.⁶⁹ By the eleventh century, when rulers all over the Islamic world appropriated the tiraz system, the caliphate was losing its power to the local rulers of peripheral countries. Many tiraz institutions in those regions were serving the local Muslim state rather than the caliphate. Weaving and decorating patterns were also variegated and enriched through transactions of goods and communications of peoples with diverse cultures. The restrictions against the representation of images on silk patterns were no longer effective, and Islamic silks were enriched with figurative patterns.

The tiraz system did not embrace the entire textile industry in the Islamic world, especially in areas remote from the center. Nevertheless, the large amount of textiles bearing inscriptions recognizing the religious and political authority of Islamic rulers created an institution parallel to the coinage system, whether serving the caliphate or a local sultan, that lasted up to the thirteenth century.⁷⁰ “It was the currency of mutual acknowledgement between the caliph, as religious head, and the people.”⁷¹ Under Islamic state patronage, the textile industry and trade in textiles made great progress through transfers of technology and fashion. Although most surviving tiraz fabrics were executed with silk thread on linen and cotton backgrounds, more silks with inscriptions were made after two or three centuries of Islamic rule, especially in Persia and Spain, respectively the oldest and youngest silk-producing regions in the tiraz system.

Although the tiraz system was a part of the state machinery of the Islamic empire, it never exercised a monopoly over certain textiles. Islamic law had no rules prohibiting Muslims from moving up in society. Muslims from

countries with highly centralized bureaucratic traditions, such as Egypt and Persia, soon moved into the upper bureaucracy. Muslims from pastoral traditions, such as some of the Turkish tribes, could reach the top levels of government through military service. This is shown in the fact that there were two “slave dynasties” – the Mamluk in Egypt and the first Delhi sultanate in India – in Islamic history. Similarly, many caliphs were born of slave mothers.

Meanwhile, Arab conquerors did not strive very hard to preserve their status as military or political elites. Trade had always been a prestigious profession among Arabs, and traders had always enjoyed high status in Arabic society. Muhammad himself was a merchant. Textiles had always been the most important commodity in Arabic culture. The Kaaba, the most sacred symbol of the Arabic world, had been covered with luxurious textiles even before Islam. Under Islam, rulers competed with each other and made complicated arrangements for the right of donating silk covers for the Kaaba.⁷² Keeping this in mind, one can understand why Arab warriors typically gave up their military careers after conquering a large territory. Facing the material cultures of the conquered peoples, they preferred to engage in trade, particularly the textile trade, and other civilized professions rather than keep the status of military elite. Garrison stations, such as Basra, Kufa, and Fustad, soon became prosperous cities of trade and industry. Arab rulers then began to hire slave soldiers to garrison their cities and territory, thus providing opportunities for slave soldiers and mercenaries to move up in a military career.

In this kind of society, there was no room for sumptuary laws marking differences of status. From time to time, there were discriminatory laws prohibiting non-Muslims from wearing luxurious clothes.⁷³ But no strict rules governed the wearing of silk by common Muslims. In Fatimid Egypt, where silk was still limited, only the highest officials received silk robes. But even in that country there was no rule prohibiting wealthy individuals from buying silk robes for themselves. Commoners also ordered special garments, often silk, for festivals or ceremonial occasions.⁷⁴ Letters preserved in the geniza at Cairo show that Jewish people under Islamic regimes wore gorgeous, bright-colored clothes, whose quality was equal to that of garments made for Muslim rulers.⁷⁵ In regions with abundant supplies of silk, servants often received part of their wages in silk. Caliphs and great nobles often outfitted their servants with silk garments.⁷⁶ A writer living around 860–936 wrote about costumes worn by the “elegant” people of his time, including various silk textiles with or without tiraz, such as *khazz* (floss silk), *ibrism*, brocade, Armenian, Chinese, and Kufan.⁷⁷ Under Islamic rules, silk production and

trade flourished to the extent that rich commoners could afford silk textiles coming from all parts of the Eurasian continent.

With the development of a silk industry in the Islamic countries, and with rising demand for silk in Europe, a market formed around the Mediterranean basin. Islamic silk entered European churches. The quantity and quality of Islamic silks made them attractive in the medieval Christian world, both in Byzantium and in western Europe. There was a guild in Constantinople that dealt exclusively with Syrian silks, meaning silks from the Arab world. Christians in western Europe, however, had to pay duty to the Byzantines to obtain Islamic silks through this market. Only with the Latin occupation of Antioch (1098–1268) and the kingdoms of Acre and Jerusalem (1098–1187) were Italian merchants able to import Syrian textiles in quantity.⁷⁸ Similarly, the Norman occupation of Sicily, the base of sericulture for the Fatimids, made Fatimid silks more readily available in European countries.⁷⁹

Spain was another point of contact between Muslims and Christians. In addition to regular trade, regional politics brought recurring gift exchanges among Islamic rulers and Christian princes. In 997, after a military victory, the Muslim minister Mansur rewarded Christian princes and the Muslims who supported him with 2,285 pieces of various kinds of tiraz silk, 21 pieces of sea wool (“suf al-bahr”), two robes perfumed with ambergris, 11 pieces of scarlet cloth, 15 of striped stuff, 7 carpets of brocade, 2 garments of Roman brocade, and 2 marten furs.⁸⁰

Christian churches in Europe also preserved silk samples from a far more remote country, Bukhara in central Asia. Most of the *zandaniji*, a precious silk named after a village near Bukhara, were preserved in European churches. The Bukhara region continued to produce *zandaniji* after Islamization.⁸¹ Although *zandaniji* silk was woven in central Asia, the silk yarn and dye probably came from farther east, in China. According to D. C. Shepherd and W. B. Henning, the colors on these silks have faded badly. On one well-preserved piece, however, they show a combination of chartreuse, orange, and pink—a very unusual color combination in Persian and Byzantine silk, but a very common one in Chinese silk. The difference is that on Chinese silk, colors are always fresh. This suggests that even the dyes used by Bukhara weavers came from China, but that they could not fix the dye properly without the appropriate mordant.⁸² Judging from the design, Michael Meister further suggests that their style, though not Chinese, indicates “an attempt at some point in the development of the western pattern to translate onto western looms Chinese patterns of the sort seen in our Sui-period fabrics where the patterning warps, fixed as they were to the loom, produced

constant color effects throughout the length of the fabric.”⁸³ Thus, zandaniji suggests a link between the eastern terminus of the silk road and the western.

Conclusion

In spite of all efforts to maintain a monopoly over its special products, Byzantium eventually lost its religious and cultural supremacy. Revival of trade and the rise of Italian cities made Byzantine silks more widely available in western Europe. Weakened Byzantium relied more and more on its trading agreements and concessions to resist encroachment on its territory by its neighbors. From the ninth century Venice took advantage of this situation to gain more and more privileges from Byzantium and almost became its commercial partner. Finally, in 1203, during the fourth crusade, the doge of Venice, carrying the banner of Saint Mark, led the forces that attacked and occupied Constantinople. All the dress codes and hierarchies of fashion lost their significance in the Christian world. Similarly, in China after the Tang dynasty, there were no sumptuary laws prohibiting commoners from wearing luxurious clothes.

Silks were still very expensive textiles, but they were no longer reserved for rulers or officials in most parts of Eurasia after the twelfth century. Many different factors, including the various religious movements discussed here, contributed to this result. In this article Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious movements and their relationships with the silk trade have been discussed separately. But surely there must have been many links between the three major religious spheres and trade circles. Meanwhile, followers of religions other than Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam were also involved in the silk trade, sometimes as part of their religious activities. For example, Jewish traders who were active in Europe and the Mediterranean basin might have come all the way to central Asia, China, and India. Nestorian Christians are known to have been active in the silk trade. Though estranged from orthodox Christianity, they might still have served as links between the Christian world and Asian lands. Zoroastrians were well-known traders and preachers in Tang China. Manichaeans were found from the Mediterranean to China and left many artistic remains along the central Asian trade routes.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, silks made in various countries outside China were found in Chinese central Asia long before silk became a popular commodity on a Eurasian scale. In the same way that silk samples in Europe were mostly preserved in churches, the literary evidence and archaeological remains of foreign silks found in China and Chinese central Asia also largely related to religious life. They were found in tombs, recorded

in funeral documents, or used as wrappings for religious texts. Apart from testifying to the existence of interreligious and intercultural exchanges, what does their presence tell us about the religious life of the people living in and passing through China and central Asia? Who carried Roman and Byzantine silks to Chinese central Asia and even to China itself, and for what purposes? What kinds of Indian silks were available? Were they made in India, or were they Chinese silks made in Indian style for religious purposes? As more fantastic items are excavated from the deserts, civilizations buried by time seem more mysterious, and mysteries make the study of the silk trade even more alluring.

Footnotes

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- 1. *Gooseng Zhuan* (Biographies of Outstanding Monks), in *Trijijiluku* (Buddhist Tripitaka), 100 vols. (Tokyo, 1924–28), 50:331a.
- 2. Examples are seen in *Tulufan Chutuwendu* (Excavated Documents from Turfan), 10 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1981), 1:181, 187.
- 3. *Ibid.*, 2:18, 207. Early Indian silks were made of silk yarn from different species than the mulberry silkworms of China.
- 4. For example, a face-cover made of Persian silk is recorded in a document dated to A.D. 641 (*ibid.*, 4:32). Though Sassanian patterned silk textiles were famous in central Asia and even in China during this period, they might still be made of Chinese materials.
- 5. The “History of Kirghiz” in the *Xin Tang Shu* (A New History of the Tang) mentioned that Kirghiz obtained silk and woolen textiles from Anxi (Kuqa), Beiting (Beshbalik), and Dashi (the Arabian or Muslim empire). It is hard to decide whether this means that Muslims in Kuqa and Beshbalik, both under Tang suzerainty, sold textiles to Kirghiz, or that the three places all engaged in textile trade with Kirghiz. Oyang Xiu et al., comps., *Xin Tang Shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), 217b/6147–48.

6. For example, see *Zhongguo Meishu Quanji* (Complete Collection of Chinese Art), 60 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1985), vol. 6.
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13. *Tripitaka*, 50:294b.
14. Oda Yoshihisa, "Notes on the List of Clothes and Other Objects Found at Turfan," *Ryukokudaigaku Ronshu* 408 (1976): 92.
15. Xuanwu was an imaginary animal, a combination of turtle and snake. *Tulufan Chutuwendu*, 2:62-63.
16. *Ibid.*
17. For example, Astana 210 (*ibid.*, 6:64); Astana 327 (*ibid.*, 6:124).
18. Astana 4 (*ibid.*, 6:402).
19. Astana 201 (*ibid.*, 6:500).
20. Astana 29 (*ibid.*, 7:66-74).
21. *Ibid.*, 7:524.
22. Huili and Yanzong, *Daciensi Sanzangfashi Zhuan*, p. 126.
23. *Fayuandndm*, vol. 39, in *Tripitaka*, 53:497c-498a.

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