Recent excavations in Qinghai Province, China, have disclosed textiles and artworks from Tuyuhun-Tubo (Tibetan) tombs, dated to the 7th-9th centuries, that suggest artistic and cultural exchanges along an external southern branch of the main Silk Road, between Gansu and Sichuan Provinces, across the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau toward the Himalayas. Many similar textiles, possibly from this area, have appeared lately on the art market and ended in private collections. Although these textiles, dated to the early Tibetan period, follow a popular prototype established in Central Asia in the 6th century, the technical features, colors, and other indigenous elements suggest that they were woven in workshops different from those established between Sogdiana and Gansu. The exhibition “Cultural Exchange Along the Silk Road – Masterpieces of the Tubo Period,” organized by the Dunhuang Research Academy and the Pritzker Collaborative Art between July and October 2019 in Dunhuang, Gansu, was a groundbreaking event that gathered scholarly attention on early Tibetan material culture, but a relevant publication is still forthcoming. In my previous work, I briefly discussed a group of silk textiles, possibly from Qinghai or Sichuan, that I analyzed in 2014 in the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, Zhejiang. In light of the recent material excavated, published online, or displayed in Dunhuang, in this article, I reevaluate the data previously collected, and discuss in detail the technical and iconographic features of one of the fragments held in Hangzhou. Eventually, the piece was recognized as the ending part of a large
panel, which is now in the Abegg Stiftung in Riggisberg, Switzerland.²

Keywords: Beaded roundel; Tent; Nomads; Southern Silk Road; Transhimalayas; Weft-faced weaving; Qinghai

Introduction

Between the 7th and 9th centuries, the Tubo (Tibetan) people established a large empire that stretched from the Tibetan plateau to the western regions of China. Recent archaeological discoveries in Qinghai Province have disclosed textiles and metalworks that show the interactions of early Tibetans with other populations along an external south-western branch of the main Silk Road (map 1). Some of these objects might have been produced for the newborn empire in Sichuan Province or southern Central Asia and imported across the Transhimalaya. In light of the new material discovered, this paper discusses and recontextualizes a textile fragment in the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou that I initially analyzed in

² I presented the reconstruction of this fragment in 2018 at the British Museum Mellon Symposium “Textile from the Silk Road in Museum Collections,” but a detailed paper on this subject has never been published. This paper presents some new data collected in the last two years. Regarding new discoveries in Qinghai see Lau, “Relics Unearthed.”
2014. The fragment, which matches part of a panel held in the Abegg Stiftung in Switzerland, exhibited in 2017 and again in 2019, suggests the consumption of luxurious textiles among early Tibetans who might have used them to decorate their tents, which in Chinese texts are referred to as “golden tents.” This paper lays the foundations of a new project that has recently received a significant grant from the Henry Luce Foundation/American Council of Learned Societies with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The new project, titled “Across the Tuyuhun-Tubo Kingdom: Visualizing Material Culture from Dunhuang to Sichuan between the 6th and 9th centuries,” aims to reconstruct the textile entanglement between Gansu to Sichuan and clarifies whether the Tuyuhun-Tubo people produced, commissioned, or only traded these textiles.

**Between Iran and Turan**

Some of the textiles I analyzed are decorated with re-elaborations of earlier Sino-Iranian patterns and motifs often seen on metalworks. In *Silberschatze des Orients* (Silver Treasures of the Orient), Boris Marshak referred to them as “late baroque Sasanian-style” objects. The Sasanians who ruled the last pre-Islamic Iranian empire (224-651 CE) are generally and simplistically referred to as the original creators of a specific zoomorphic iconography that spread across Eurasia on textiles and metalworks and continued to be used in Qinghai after the fall of their empire. As reported in the *Xin Tangshu* (New History of the Tang) composed in 1060, the last Sasanian ruler, Peroz III (636-639), and his son Narseh fled to China and asked for Tang (618-907) support against the Arab invasion. In 751, the Tang army was eventually defeated by the Arab Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), supported by Türkic and Tibetan groups of people on the Talas River in present-day Kazakhstan. In 2003, Etzuko Kageyana, by building upon the scholarship of Phyllis Ackerman and Dorothy G. Shepherd, distinguished textiles from Xinjiang into Sasanian and Central Asian, or more specifically, Sogdian. The latter group is similar to some of the textiles from Qinghai published in *Central Asian Textiles and Their Contexts in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Regula Schorta in 2006. Recently, Matteo Compareti has also mentioned unpublished textile material from Qinghai in “Iranian Composite Creatures between the Caucasus and Western China: The Case of the So-called Simurgh” and noted that a few motifs, such as the *simurgh* and the boar’s head, were preferred only in some areas along the Silk Road.

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5 Bai, *Zhingguo Huibei Minzu Shi*, 224-225.
6 Kageyama, “Use and Production of Silks”; Ackerman, “An Unpublished Sasanian Textile,” 42-50; Ackerman, “A Sasanian Tapestry,” 2-4; Shepherd and Henning, “Zandaniji Identified?”
7 Schorta, ed., *Central Asian Textiles*.
8 Compareti, “Iranian Composite Creatures.”
But the textile trade and circulation between Gansu, Xinjiang, and Sichuan, or Central Asia and Sichuan across the Himalayas, mediated by people of different origins, including nomadic groups, who contributed to the development of (Han) Chinese aesthetics during the Tang period (618-907), has not yet been discussed. The fragment that I present in this paper is part of a larger group of textile items held in the China National Silk Museum and the Abegg Stiftung and exemplifies the processes of acculturation and identity through “peripheral” material culture and pictorial art. Here, I discuss the combination of “Sasanian” Central Asian zoomorphic motifs with indigenous Qinghai-Tibetan elements, as they appear on a large silk weft-faced panel, which might have been initially used in a nomadic tent. Sino-Iranian artistic models were re-elaborated by Türko-Tibetan and proto-Mongolian populations across and beyond Central Asia. During the Sasanian period, this area was identified as Turan, the opposite spatial unit of Iran, or Iranshahar, the land between the Oxus River (Amu Darya) to the East and the Euphrates River to the West.

Although the eastern boundaries of the Sasanian empire are already mentioned in a few Sasanin documents, they are described explicitly in 10th-century Central Asian and Persian literature. As argued by Gherardo Gnoli, it was the Sasanians that clearly defined the borders of Iranshahar to fit their agenda. By the Sasanian period, the Zoroastrian sacred centers had already been moved from Central Asia (as described in the religious texts, Avesta) to the western parts of the Iranian plateau. Thus, in the Iranian epic poem Shāhnāma (The Book of Kings), written by Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010, Turan, initially included in the Iranian world-system, became the land of non-Iranian people, or the Türks. According to the Arab geographer, al-Maqdisi, in the 10th century, also Tubbat or Tibet, was part of the land of the Türks. Although the origin of the Tibetan Bon religion is still debated, Russian scholars of Tibetan studies have long ago pointed to its Iranian origin and identified some Bon divinities with Zoroastrian divinities, such as Wise Bumkhiri as Ahura Mazda. It has been suggested that the biography of the Bon’s founder, gShen-rab (Shenrab), which was recorded in a 9th-century edition, was originally compiled in Aramaic in Elam (Iran) and centuries later translated into Tibetan from the Zhang-Zhung language, which was spoken in northwestern Tibet. From an excerpt of this biography, it appears that sTag-gzig (Tagzig) and Zhang-Zhung, where gShen-rab had lived before moving to central Tibet, were lands inhabited by Iranian tribes and nomads of Iranian origins, respectively. But sTag-gzig was likely in Central Asia rather than Iran, where the Bon religion began, including some Zoroastrian elements.

9 In this essay China refers to Han China. The Han were, and still are today, the majority ethnic group in China.
11 Gnoli, The Idea of Iran.
13 Bosworth; Aktürk, “Representation of the Turkic Peoples,” 16.
14 Akasoy and Burnett, eds, Islam and Tibet Interactions along the Musks Routes, 22-23.
15 Kuznetsov, “The Highest Deities of the Tibetan Bon Religion,” 47-48; “Influence of the Pamirs on Tibetan Culture.”
Technical Analysis and Graphic Reconstruction of Fragment #2011.57.4 in the China National Silk Museum

Among the fragments that I analyzed in the China National Silk Museum in 2014, there was a damaged, thick, rectangular, silk piece, measuring 68 x 52 centimeters, woven as a weft-faced compound 1/2 S-twill, with Z-twist warps, and with eight weft colors throughout, which is the highest number documented to date, dated to between the 8th and mid-9th centuries. A weft-faced textile is made with a main warp, a binding warp, and a weft composed of two or more series of threads that can be ended in tabby (also known as taqueté) or twill (also known as samite). The top edge has open stitches, which suggest a seam. It has about a quarter of a roundel at the top left corner and three smaller roundels at the bottom right corner linked with a heart-shaped petal. Each of these roundels encloses an animal that is only partially visible. Above one of the three roundels, the fragment features a running half animal with hoofs on the right. Below these three, between the right and central roundels, a triangular motif appears on a curved band enclosing crescents that suggest a giant, central medallion (fig.1). I reconstructed the missing portions and the overall design by measuring every graphic element and comparing these with other similar fragments in the same collection and in other institutions that I had previously analyzed (fig. 2).

Figure 1. Textile fragment. Possibly from Qinghai, Sichuan, or Central Asia. 8th – mid 9th cent. Silk. Weft-faced S-twill. 68 x 52 cm. Courtesy of China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou (#2011.57.4).

Figure 2. Measuring of one of the roundels on the textile fragment #2011.57.4 in the China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou. Photo by author.
The roundels, which should all be the same size, have different diameters. This characteristic is typical of these textiles. Another example in the same collection that clearly shows this feature, and helped the reconstruction of the piece under discussion, is a rectangular weft-faced S-twill with two-lobed roundels, each enclosing a single duck facing right with a Sasanian pativia (royal ribbon) and a necklace with three medallions held in the beak. Above these two, two other almost-half roundels are visible, enclosing the feet and wings of different birds facing left (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Textile fragment featuring a row of two lobed roundels enclosing a duck facing right with pativia and suggested measurements of the missing roundel(s) by author. Possibly from Qinghai, Sichuan, or Central Asia. 8th – mid 9th cent. Silk. Weft-faced S-twill. Courtesy of China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou (#2013.16.3) Measurements and reconstruction (two possible birds facing left) by author.

This fragment (# 2013.16.3) (a) is almost identical to others discovered in Dulan, Qinghai, which together compose a complete image (# QK001859) (b). Both are 1:2 weft-faced S-twill compounds with Z-twisted dark brown warps and have a selvage of 2.5 centimeters. The overall size of the first roundel on sample a is 28.5 (weft direction) x 34 (warp direction) centimeters. In comparison, the second roundel measures 31 (weft direction) x 34 (warp direction) centimeters. The roundel reconstructed on b is 34.5 (weft direction) x 21 (warp direction) centimeters. Like other textiles from the Qinghai-Sichuanese area, these samples occasionally have wefts floating on the back (fig. 4).17 But, more important for reconstructing the panel fragment in Hangzhou were a few other fragments held in the Abegg Stiftung, mostly dated to between the 8th and 9th centuries. On one of those, mirrored ducks enclosed in smaller medallions with a flower at every cardinal point appear as the secondary motifs

17 Zhao, “Weaving Methods for Western-style Samit,” 197-198. According to Zhao the motif also includes lions, tigers, horses, and flower.
that accompany larger, lobed roundels framing a pair of mirrored, standing lions, and two mirrored, running wild donkeys underneath them (fig. 5 a, b). Each lobe of these roundels encloses a different animal. Both these elements and the overall structure, which suggest a unique style, recall the piece in Hangzhou.

Figure 4. Floating wefts on the back of fragment #2013.16.3 with ducks in the China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou. Photo by author.

Figure 5 a (verso on the left) and b (recto on the right). Textile fragment featuring standing lions on running donkeys or horses enclosed in lobed medallions with animals. External medallions with a blossom, enclosing a (mirrored) duck. Floating wefts on the back and Tibetan inscription. 8th – 9th cent. Silk. Weft-faced S1/2 –twill.
Location and Owner: Abegg-Stiftung, CH -3132 Riggisberg, inv. No. 4864 a.
Photo credits: © Abegg-Stiftung, CH -3132 Riggisberg, 1997 (photo: Christoph von Virág).
Based on the material analyzed at that time, I traced the patterns on acetate sheets using different colors and added the missing parts with a black marker (fig. 6). The first roundel on the right frames a half body of an animal decorated with vertical weave motifs that recalled the striped body of the tigers repeated on a red fragment in the Abegg Stiftung (#4865a). Instead, the central roundel has two animals; a running wild donkey (which I had initially identified as a galloping horse) at the bottom, facing left, and what looked like a Himalayan blue sheep above it, facing right. The left roundel featured what I believed looked like a saiga antelope with a necklace. The top left mid-size roundel on the fragment (which was made of a band with overlapped leaves that I will discuss later) showed only the hoofs of an animal facing left, followed by a stretched curly-mane lion facing the opposite direction, and a winged pedestal at the bottom. These elements suggested that they were part of a roundel enclosing a mirrored image, likely another animal. By considering several textile fragments, generally identified as Sogdian or Sasanian (meaning Central Asian or Iranian), featuring stags, deer, and antelopes with identical feet, I decided to reconstruct the missing animals as stags.

Figure 6. Graphic reconstruction of textile fragment #2011.57.4 on acetate sheet in the China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou, by author.

I had initially designed 15 identical roundels. However, the Abegg fragment discussed above features 16 lobes enclosing animals. Most likely, as previously explained, the original piece in Hangzhou, like other fragments, must have had roundels of different widths. For this reason, I modified the 15 roundels to make them uneven, and I forced another roundel into the pattern. Eventually, I also considered other fragments with similar compositions for the final reconstruction, and I added two more roundels (for a total of 18 roundels). But the motif in the large central medallion was still undetermined. It had to be of significant visual
impact as reconstructed, considering the piece’s dimensions. I took into account two designs, a seated curly-mane lion with raised front paws and a running donkey underneath from another fragment in the Abegg Stiftung (#4864 a), and a stag featuring unique antlers made with small crescents, perhaps an elk (or red deer) wearing a necklace with three medallions from a fragment in the China National Silk Museum (#2011.15.3). Both of these animals were considered regal among Central Asian people; however, these two, as designed on these fragments, appeared unique (fig. 7).

The Panel in the Abegg Stiftung

Because all these fragments above differed from what I had analyzed at that time in terms of structure, dimensions, and designs, I believed that the one in Hangzhou was the remnant of a large panel composed of four pieces, measuring about 80 centimeters each, for a total of 320 centimeters. To date, the loom used for weaving these compounds, which likely lacked a tool that equally separated the warps, has not yet been discovered. As Zhao Feng has suggested, it might have been similar to the vertical zīlū loom, which is still used today in Meybod, Iran, used to create textiles with a width of ten meters and a height of four
meters. Using a vertical loom, the weavers could also produce the floating wefts on the reverse of the compounds, as they appear on many of the fragments from Dulan. However, the type of loom used for weaving some of these textiles had to include a system of cords crossing the warps and leashes, each connected to a set of warps according to the design that had to be produced. Pattern repeats appear in the weft direction, but not “mechanical” repeats in the warp direction. Since this loom (which was not a mechanical engine as used today) lacked a patterning program, the weaver could only proceed following a “pick-up method” done on a simple, on cords, or directly on the warps. By analyzing the weaving sequence of a pattern, it is possible to distinguish the type of pick-up. In our case, it is likely that the pick-up occurred on a simple with leashes and that the weaver started the pattern from the outline toward the inline and then completed the rest of the ground in a straight sequence (1234...1234...) (fig. 8).

Figure 8. Weft-faced loom with cord-lash system, pattern pick-up on simples with lashes.
In Zhao Feng, “Weaving Methods,” 209.

In 2017, I eventually discovered that the fragment I had analyzed in Hangzhou in 2014 was identical to a section of a textile panel now held in Switzerland (#5682) that includes a fragmented plain fabric at the top and polychromatic trim at the bottom edge. Unlike my

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18 Zhao, “Weaving Methods for Western-style Samit,” 204-205.
20 The Abegg Stiftung displayed some of their new acquisitions in the exhibition “Material Tracing: Conserving and Exploring Textiles,” from April 20 to November 12, 2017, including the panel. I discussed it in Transcending Patterns, 86-90.
reconstruction, the original panel in Switzerland showed only the giant central medallion framed by 20 small beaded roundels (or pearl medallions) and petals and a little more than a quarter of a medium-size roundel at each corner enclosing a bull. The central motif was two mirrored elks with antlers made of small crescents standing on rear feet in front of a Sasanian-style tree of life, like the type carved in Taq-e Bostan (fig. 9). Surprisingly, the animal was one of the two types I had selected as a central (mirrored) motif for my reconstruction. Like a central axis, the tree divides the composition into two mirrored parts and suggests that the loom’s width comprises only one pattern.

![Figure 9](image)

Figure 9. Drawing by author of the textile panel held in the Abegg Stiftung (#5682) measuring 175x181 cm followed by the fragment held in the China National Silk Museum (#2011.57.4).

Among the animals enclosed in the smaller roundels, there was a tiger with vertical weaving stripes in the body, a blue sheep and a donkey running in opposite directions, a female antelope or dromedary with reins, a curly-mane lion, a boar, a bull, an ibex, a duck with a ribbon, and an elephant. The two central roundels on the vertical axis instead enclosed two different flowers. The composition, as it stands, can only be compared to a blue and white double-face fragment in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran (fig. 10). This fragment, likely from the 10th or 11th century, shows a row of double medallions enclosing two seated mirrored griffins in front of a central (palm) tree. There are 16 double-beaded roundels between the two medallions, each framing an animal, except for the two roundels at the top and bottom on the central axis that enclose a star-flower. Interestingly, secondary motifs are

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21 Regarding the definition of the beaded roundel motif as “pearl medallion or roundel” see Melikian-Chirvani, “Parand and Parniyand Identified.”
smaller medallions enclosing a flower, with a small blossom at each cardinal point, similar to those graphic elements on some of the fragments in the Abegg Stiftung, enclosing ducks (or bulls) (fig. 5a).

Figure 10. Textile fragment featuring double beaded medallions enclosing roundels with animals and mirrored griffins against a tree at the center. Secondary motifs are roundels with small blossoms at each cardinal point, enclosing a star-flower. 10th-11th cent. Silk. Double-face.


By reconstructing the whole pattern, I had imagined a larger panel made of four pieces of 80 centimeters each, with a perfect medallion at the center. The panel in the Abegg Stiftung, instead, is woven as a single piece of 181 (length) x 175 (width) centimeters (instead of 160 centimeters like the total width of the two central panels, according to my reconstruction). For this reason, the central roundel looks like an oval framed by 20 small roundels of different dimensions. Only a loom similar to the "zilu," not equipped with a divisional warp tool, such as the one mentioned above, could have produced a panel of these dimensions. 6th-century documents from Dunhuang and Turfan refer to some polychromatic textiles as 锦 jin, which were made in warp-faced and weft-faced structures. The latter generally were 190-216 centimeters in length and 95-107 centimeters in width. However, a few documents also mention a type of textile called 大锦 da jin, meaning "large jin," which differed from the 中锦 zhong jin (medium jin) that measured 230 x 110 centimeters. The da jin, measured by the pi (length) in Dunhuang and by the zhang (piece) in Turfan, was likely larger than the zhong jin.

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The documents, however, do not specifically explain the patterns and motifs woven on these textiles, but we know that textiles referred to as Central Asian were classified as 番锦 fanjin.\textsuperscript{23} The small number of Chinese weft-faced jin incorporating Central Asian motifs but with S-twisted warps have mainly been discovered in Turfan and a few also in Dulan.\textsuperscript{24} However, the panel discussed in this paper has Z-twisted warps, which are generally seen in Central Asian weavings. The spinning direction of the warp is usually recognized as Chinese if it was twisted clockwise (S) and Central Asian if it was twisted counterclockwise (Z).

Iconographic Analysis

The material evidence discussed above makes it clear that the panel was part of a unique textile production that differed from those developed earlier between Eastern Iran and China or, more specifically, between Sogdiana and Gansu. Although some of the motifs appear very similar to those on the fragments from the Turfan-Dunhuang area, the overall combination of the graphic elements, the color palette, and the thickness of the fabric suggest a further step in the development of Central Asian iconography on weft-faced compounds. In China, this textile structure was acquired through the arrival of foreign monks, merchants, and artisans and the establishment of Türkic and Iranian colonies around the 6th century.\textsuperscript{25} But with the rise of the Tibetans in western China in the 7th century, Central Asian textile iconography seems to have developed into a new form, which eventually became part of the semi-nomadic people that formed the Tibetan empire. In Qinghai, in 663, the Tibetans had absorbed the local Tuyuhun of proto-Mongolian origin that had migrated to that area around the 4th century. However, under the Tibetan ruler, the Tuyuhun continued to use their socio-political and cultural systems and presented tributes to the Tibetans, supplying them with materials and paying taxes. They were in contact with the Hephthalites in Bactria (a Central Asian region between the north of the Hindukush and the south of the Oxus River) and acted as their translators in China. Historical records demonstrate a certain level of Chinese acculturation and the use of the Chinese writing system.\textsuperscript{26} Recent excavations in Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, have brought to life well-preserved tombs of later Tuyuhun and early Tibetan royal families, containing luxurious items, including metalwork, textiles, and also documents in an unknown language written with Chinese characters.\textsuperscript{27}

It is likely that the Tuyuhun directly imported textile material from both Central (or South) Asia and China. As it is seen in the famous painting Bunian Tu 步辇图 (Emperor Taizong...
giving audience to the Ambassador of Tibet) by Yan Liben 閻立本 (600-673), the Tibetans were already accustomed to Central Asian textiles at the rise of their empire. The scroll illustrates the Tibetan ambassador (or perhaps a Türk or a Tuyuhun?) wearing a robe made of two types of textiles: a red ground featuring ducks in roundels, like the type discussed above, and arches enclosing various animals on a beige-yellow ground (fig. 11). A cloak made of this latter type, R-14 dated to the 7th century, now in the Abegg Stiftung, was displayed in Dunhuang in 2019. It features curly-mane lions, ibexes, bulls, and elk, however, a Tibetan ink inscription has been found in the hem, which implies that it was written before transforming the fabric (perhaps a hanging) into an outfit. The custom of inscribing textiles with ink was not unusual. Some fragments in Switzerland, previously mentioned, also disclosed Tibetan inscriptions.29

Figure 11. Detail of the Tibetan Ambassador portrayed in Emperor Taizong giving audience to the Ambassador of Tibet [步辇图 Bunian Tu] by Yan Liben 閻立本 (600-673). 7th cent. Palace Museum Beijing. Public domain. Source: Wikepedia.

28 Regula Schorta and Anja Bayer presented the results of the analysis carried on the Abegg’s textiles in a paper titled “Seventh to Ninth Century Woven Silks with Patterns of Animals and Birds: with a Case Study on the Transformation of a Western Asian Silk Panel into a Golden Cloak,” during the International Symposium Cultural Exchange Along the Silk Road (6th-9th Century) organized in Dunhuang from October 17-21, 2019.

29 Heller, “Two Inscribed Fabrics”; also Heller, “Recent Findings on Textiles.”
Other panels exhibited in Dunhuang in 2019 showed similar compositions with stags as the primary animals, often enclosed in medallions, surrounded by secondary zoomorphic motifs. But while some of these animals are already found on earlier textiles, such as ducks with a *pativia*, curly-mane lions, and bulls, others, such as crescent-antlered elks, tigers, ibexes, entire boars, running donkeys, and elephants, seem to be unique to these textiles. Although they can be traced back to earlier Iranian models, like those that also appear on metalwork, they are more naturalistic and combined with floral motifs typical of Tang art. The inclusion of animals into beaded roundels or lobes composing larger medallions, accompanied by other floral elements, suggests iconographic advancement in weaving weft-faced compounds in the post-Sasanian period.

Among the various animals represented on the panel, the duck with (or without) *pativia* requires more attention. It was one of the most popular motifs that widely appeared on various media across Eurasia. It is often attributed to the Sasanians, as it is seen on the costumes of some people carved in the rock relief of Taq-e Bostan in Iran and on the robe of one of the so-called Sasanian ambassadors in Afrasyab, Sogdiana, both dated to the 7th century.30 A coeval, similar example of unknown provenance but attributed to Iran that would prove the motif’s origin is a silk weft-faced twill fragment in the Cleveland Museum of Art (#1951.88) (fig. 12). The piece, which recalls those from Qinghai, shows two-lobed roundels enclosing ducks facing left. Above these two, there is a horizontal band with a sequence of overlapped leaves; a motif identical to an 8th-9th century band with a Pahlavi inscription mentioning the Iranian title “the Great, King of Kings” woven on the back, discovered in Dulan (#QK001858).31 The same leaf motif also appears on the roundel border at the corner of the panel in the Abegg Stiftung. In the 8th century, single or mirrored ducks enclosed in beaded or lobed roundels were still considered auspicious and royal motifs. A set of perfectly preserved silk weft-faced twill items (coat, sleeveless garment, boots, and trousers), featuring beaded roundels enclosing two facing ducks and lined with Chinese silk twill damask, most likely composed a princely outfit.32 But lobed roundels enclosing ducks also appear depicted on the pillow of the Buddha in *parinirvana* in Mogao Cave 158 dated to the mid-Tang period (781-848), when Dunhuang fell to the Tibetans. The Tibetan emperor, leading the rulers

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30 More information can be found in the online exhibition, The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Road by the Freer and Sackler Galleries. A section on textiles is forthcoming. https://sogdians.si.edu/.

31 More information regarding this band has been published in Zhao “Weaving Methods,” 199; Xu “The Discovery, Excavation, and Study,” 283; and Zhao “Silk in the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties,” 219.

32 Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 65-69. The coat and trousers are held in the Cleveland Museum of Art (# 1996.2.1; 1996.2.2); the sleeveless garment is part of the Pritzker collection; and the boots in the Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum in Japan. Recently, Zhao has presented the results of the textiles used for this set in a lecture titled “Chinese Textiles on the Silk Road” organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art on June 2, 2021. He reconstructed the patterns of each item and confirmed that they were all created from the same silk piece. The original silk cloth featured 11 rows of 5 roundels enclosing two mirrored ducks. According to Zhao the piece was used in full to produce the set, which might have originally included a second pair of boots or trousers (supposing that the textile was larger and included 11 rows of 6 roundels), accessed August 18, 2021, https://www.clevelandart.org/events/virtual-events/Degenfelder-Lecture-Chinese-Textiles-from-the-Silk-Road.
of the Buddhist world and mourning for the terrestrial death of the Buddha, was initially illustrated in the cave.\textsuperscript{33}

Figure 12. Textile fragment featuring two lobed roundels enclosing a duck and a band with overlapped leaves. 7th cent. Silk. Weft-faced twill. 8.3 x 114 cm. Possibly from Iran. The Cleveland Museum of Art (#1951.88). Creative Common License.

Regarding the other animals on the panel, the boar appears uniquely depicted with a whole body. Roundels with boar’s heads have been widely discovered in the Turfan area, and more recently, on embroidered items of unknown provenance, but likely from the Qinghai-Tibetan area as well.\textsuperscript{34} Deer and stags, which are connected to royal hunts in Iranian art, were preferred motifs among nomadic or semi-nomadic people and were seen as royal symbols. They appear on a significant number of fragments from the Tarim Basin and those discussed in this paper. However, on these samples, these animals are often depicted in pairs, standing on four feet or the rear feet in front of a plant or a tree, as they appear in real life in Central Asia and Trans Himalayan areas (fig. 13 a, b). The composition, thus, denotes a local iconographic character, which is not found on textile fragments discovered in Egypt or possibly from West Asia, attributed to the Sasanians, where the animals generally appear singularly depicted. But, the combination of stags and birds seems to be a feature of Tibetan material culture, as seen

\textsuperscript{33} The Tibetan rulers were originally depicted in the right-side wall, at the top corner, in the caves. That section of the wall collapsed or was vandalized in 1970s. In a black and white image of the painting, taken by the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Tibetan rulers are still visible. Cf. Karl Debreczeny, “Courts, Politics, and Sino-Tibetan Artistic Exchange” Society for Asian Art lecture series at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (April 28, 2018), accessed August 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ1-uO_DA6A.

\textsuperscript{34} I have found a saddle, a quiver, and a pair of ribbons embroidered with this motif in three private collections worldwide. These pieces are of unknown origin; however, the first was allegedly stored in a temple in Nepal. Analysis will be undertaken next year, and the results presented in a future publication.
on a few pieces of garments from the same period (fig. 14). As suggested by Mario Bussagli, they might have been associated with “hunting magic” as an expression of a single force or power.\textsuperscript{35} In Tibetan culture, both stags and birds (of various species) are primarily guardians of the soul and bring good fortune.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13a.png}
\caption{Figure 13 a, b. Goats, ibexes and other animals while eating from plants and shrubs in Ladakh, Himalayas. Photo by author (2014).}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure14.png}
\caption{Figure 14. Drawing by author of a cape in the Abegg Stiftung, Riggisberg, Switzerland (#5405/5409), dated to the 8th – 9th cent., featuring large medallions enclosing two mirrored stags on a wing pedestal and external geometric motifs enclosing two mirrored ducks.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{35} Bussagli, “Bronze Objects Collected,” 345-346.

\textsuperscript{36} Heller, “Preliminary Remarks on Birds and Deer,” 15-20.
Still, the animal with reins is an unusual image that I had identified as a female saiga antelope with a necklace. The Abegg, instead, has described it as a dromedary, which differs from the popular Bactrian camel with two humps found across Central Asia. It might be a Bactrian-dromedary hybrid, known as Tulu camel, a breed used as a draft animal in Central Asia. However, one can spot these camels on some of the Tibetan coffins from Qinghai that depict royal hunts and banqueting scenes, including various animals (i.e., yaks, antelopes, donkeys, and a tiger with “weaving” stripes).\(^{37}\)

Although neither lions nor elephants are native to Tibet, they appeared in 8\(^{th}\)-9\(^{th}\) century Tibetan art due to exchanges with neighboring countries.\(^{38}\) In one of the earliest steles found in Central Tibet dated to the 8\(^{th}\) century, these two animals appear together. Their combination might be due to the spread of Buddhism; the lion was the symbol of Shakyamuni’s clan, the Shakya, and the (white) elephant was the ultimate incarnation of the Buddha before he was born to Queen Maya. Furthermore, seated curly-mane lion statues have been discovered in the Dulan tombs and Tibet. But the elephants that appear in the two beaded roundels at the bottom of the large central medallion are rarely found on textiles. As depicted on the panel, their body features recall the elephant framed by beaded roundels on Nepalese coins dated to the 7\(^{th}\)-8\(^{th}\) century. However, a green weft-faced twill fragment featuring beaded roundels enclosing two very similar confronting elephants, now held in the Xi’an Tang Market Museum, would confirm the acquisition of this motif (fig. 15).\(^{39}\) Still, similar elephants with a tree on the back appear on a few rare Byzantine, Central Asian, and Spanish fragments dated to between the 9\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\) centuries.\(^{40}\) The overall composition with elephants, trees, lions, and other animals, can be traced back to the 6\(^{th}\)-century mosaic floor of the Maon Synagogue at Nirim in Jerusalem. The remaining mosaics show similar iconographic elements. Among these, there are also two elephants under two palm trees, and above, at the center, a large menorah adjoined by two lions.

\(^{38}\) Heller, “Lions and Elephants in Tibet,” 55, 57.
\(^{39}\) A large blue textile with rows of elephants walking in opposite directions has been found in 2018 in one of the Tuyuhun tombs in Chashan Village, Tianzhu (Tibetan autonomous county), Gansu. The tomb belongs to Murongzhi (650-691), who was the third son of Nuohubo, the last ruler of the Tuyuhun Kingdom. The textile, however, differs greatly from those discuss in this paper. It might have been imported from South or Central Asia.
\(^{40}\) Renown examples are a textile from the Aachen Cathedral Treasury, Germany, showing roundels enclosing an elephant with a tree on its back, and a piece used as the shroud of Saint Josse, near Caen, Normandy, depicting elephants, composite beasts, camels, hearts, and an Arabic inscription, which was likely woven in Khorasan (northeastern Iran, Afghanistan and south Central Asia).
But a more relevant and coeval comparison can be traced with the coeval image of a ruler portrayed at Dokhtar-e-Noshirwan, Nigar, Afghanistan, dated to the 8th century (fig. 16). The figure, seated on a throne with two horse protomes, wears a crown made with wings and ram horns. The halo behind him is surrounded by various animals, among which there are also two elephants at the bottom. This figure has been interpreted as the Iranian god Bahman (Vohu Manah in the Avesta), the supreme being Ahura Mazda, or the protector of men and animals. Alternatively, he might be the more straightforward representation of a Türkic ruler portrayed as an Iranian god. The picture offers a good way to interpret the motif on the textile panel. According to the nomadic Türkic tradition, the khagan (ruler)’s tent was identified as the khagan himself. Therefore, on textile, the central, mirrored, royal animal that dominates the scene, which might be seen as a visualization of the nomadic universe, as I discuss below, might have represented the ruler (of the Tibetans). A similar analogy can be drawn between the arcade system with niches enclosing divinities behind the ruler at Nigar (also seen in Sogdian art) and the beaded arches with animals on the beige-yellow cloak in the Abegg.

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43 Mode, “The Great God of Dokhtar-e Noshirwān, 480-481.
Although the iconographic meaning of the overall composition on the panel would require further research, one can assume that it carried specific symbology, which was adapted along the Silk Road through the movement and acculturation of different groups of people and the adaptation of religious and sacred meanings. While the circles in the bodies of the animals, by that time, had become standard features, the triangle that appears in the standing stags in front of the central tree and the elephants on the panel are unique. As I have discussed in my previous work, the circular motifs can be traced back to the internal organs in the bodies of the stags featured on the wool carpet discovered in Pazyryk in the Altai, possibly made in Bactria and dated to the 5th century BCE.44 They were eventually adapted and seen as representations of the sun and moon. All these elements were likely employed to express royalty, power, and glory. Both nomadic and princely traditions “shared an imagery in which the tent was seen as a replica of the sky, and the occupant was exalted by association with it.”45 But the triangle also recalls some of those bronze amulets collected by Giuseppe Tucci in Tibet. Its symbology is familiar to many traditions and carries a cosmogonic meaning that, according to Bussagli, is called “the original truth” in Tibetan mystical literature.46

44 Gasparini, Transcending Patterns, 25-26.
45 Andrews, Felt Tents and Pavilions, xxxii.
46 Bussagli, “Bronze Objects Collected,” 344. An earlier example is a Sarmatian gilded and inlaid with stones silver circle with griffin heads around a triangle, dated to the 1st-2nd cent. CE, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY (#1989.281.35).
Triangular variations associated with animals (such as the three-hare circle) also appeared in the Dunhuang caves around the 6th century.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, according to nomadic visualization, it looks like the triangle, two circles, and multiple beads in the animal body all represented the cosmos or universe.

\section*{Functionality of the Panel}

The trim at the bottom of the panel, and the fragmented plain fabric at the top, which might have appeared on the fragment I analyzed in Hangzhou, suggest that it was intended to be hung. Likely these panels were combined to decorate a space, such as the interior of a nomadic tent (fig. 17). According to the analysis undertaken by the Abegg Stiftung, gilded silver plaques (also exhibited in Dunhuang) featuring various birds or mythological flying creatures were attached to some of these textiles, including the cloak mentioned above.\textsuperscript{48} These pieces, as organized together, might have composed the interior of a large tent used for banqueting and great assemblies, similar to those still used in Central Asia today (fig. 18 a, b). In Chinese sources, a luxurious dwelling used by both the Tibetans and the Uighurs in the 9\textsuperscript{th} century is referred to as a “golden tent.” In particular, it is said that the interior was decorated with “golden animals... cast in the round.”\textsuperscript{49} But the custom of decorating the interior with silk panels and gold was already in use among the Türks in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century. The Byzantine historian Menander Protector describes three tents belonging to the Western Türkic leader, Dizaboulos (İstemi), where a Byzantine envoy was received. The first, which was constructed on two wheels, had the interior decorated with simple silk draperies of different colors, the second, also decorated with silk draperies featuring various figures, gathered gold objects (such as urns, basins, and jars) at the center, and the third one, which was supported by columns with gilded timbers, included a gold seat supported by four gold peacocks.\textsuperscript{50} These tents were also called “Hundred men tents,” a term used to describe Xiongnu tents in the past and continued to be used for Mongol tents later.\textsuperscript{51} This description suggested the dimensions of the space and implied the use of large interior panels.

\textsuperscript{47} Examples of three-hare in circle forming a triangle with their ears appear on the ceilings of several Dunhuang caves. Gasparini, \textit{Transcending Patterns}, 158.


\textsuperscript{49} Andrews, \textit{Felt Tents and Pavilions}, 144.

\textsuperscript{50} Menander Protector, \textit{Fragmenta Historiorum Graecorum}, 227-228.

\textsuperscript{51} Andrews, \textit{Felt Tents and Pavilions}, 144.
Figure 17. Panels as might have been assembled in a tent. Drawing by author.

Figure 18 a (left), b (right). Tent along the Karakorum Highway (from Kashgar to Tashkurgan). Exterior (a): cotton, felt, and sheep skin. Interior (b): Woolen rugs and textile panels. Xinjiang, China. Photos by author (2014).

Considering that Tibetan tombs, such as those in Tibet and Qinghai, are shaped as large trapezoid, square, or semi-circular mounds, recalling nomadic tents, a funerary use of these panels should not be excluded. The principal tomb excavated in Dulan has revealed an upper mound, which has been identified as a sanctuary, and a lower mound as the actual tomb containing remains of horses, sheep, and yaks. Also, on wooden coffins excavated in Qinghai, circular white tents and trapezoidal black tents are visible among hunting and banqueting depictions. Among the Türks and other nomadic groups, tent color distinguished aristocrats

from ordinary people, who were referred to as “white and black bones,” respectively.\textsuperscript{53} The complexity of the scenes, the luxurious clothing that is worn by some of the characters depicted, and the variety of animals and people (including foreigners) on the coffins recall earlier Sino-Sogdian funerary panels from Central China. As Amy Heller has pointed out, it is not easy to define the degree to which the Sogdians, Chinese, or Türks influenced these funerary narrative representations.\textsuperscript{54} Without a doubt, textiles and gilded, cast, and repoussé metalwork (generally identified as Central Asian) discovered in Qinghai tombs and caves suggest that they were highly appreciated among the Tibetans.\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Old Tibetan Annals}, found in Mogao Cave 17, Dunhuang, do not make any mention of burial practices but refer to the use of turquoise, gold, silver, brass, and copper items and their association with different social ranks.\textsuperscript{56} Those discovered in Qinghai were likely traded and imported from Dunhuang, northeast of Kokonor, and through the Pamir. However, as concluded by Marshak, some of these objects might have been produced by Tibetan artisans.\textsuperscript{57} As recorded in Chinese sources, Tibetans presented gold and silver objects to the Tang court between the 7\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{58} The different metalsmithing techniques suggest different provenances, but, similar to some of the textile fragments mentioned in this paper, several pieces of metalwork bear Tibetan inscriptions, which generally refer to the objects’ owner(s) and weight (fig. 19).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.6\textwidth]{figure19.png}
\caption{Gilded silver set (cup, vase, and rhyton) featuring felines, birds, stags, grapevines and other floral motifs. The cup carries a Tibetan inscription. 8th cent. Central Asia or Tibet. The Cleveland Museum of Art (#1988.67.1). Creative Common License.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{53} Andrews, \textit{Felt Tents and Pavilions}, 125.
\textsuperscript{55} Heller, “Tibetan Inscriptions on Ancient Silver and Gold Vessels and Artefacts.”
\textsuperscript{56} Heller, “Tibetan Inscriptions on Ancient Silver and Gold Vessels and Artefacts,” 263.
\textsuperscript{57} Marshak, 33 Plate, 80-83.
\textsuperscript{58} Heller, “Tibetan Inscriptions on Ancient Silver and Gold Vessels and Artefacts,” 265.
Like the Türks, the Tibetans also combined different religions and funerary traditions that eventually shared analogous aspects, such as self-laceration, which was a practice that is depicted in the Zoroastrian ritual on one of the marble panels of the funerary couch now in the Miho Museum in Japan, dated to the 6th-7th century, and in the mourning scene depicted in Dunhuang cave 158, previously mentioned. As reported by Peter Alford Andrews, in the Zhou Shu (Book of Zhou), completed in the 7th century, when someone of the Oghuz Türks died, the body was laid in the tent while children, grandchildren, and relatives sacrificed sheep and horses in front of it. Then they rode their horses around the tent seven times and slashed their faces each time they came to the opposite side of the tent’s entrance. After this first ritual, they chose a day and burned all the deceased’s belongings (including the tent). Then they dug a grave and buried the ashes. In the 7th century, after the fall of the first Türkic khaganate, however, the funerary custom of cremation was changed to burial. The Qinghai coffins, thus, visually exemplify multiple nomadic traditions that had been acquired and locally adapted by the Tibetans. Likewise, the sumptuous textile panel discussed in this paper highlights the use of animals in a mobile society and their sacrifice to ensure a good transition to the afterlife.

Although the origin of this textile material, which likely belonged to high-ranking people, is still unknown, Sichuan seems to be the most plausible area where it was woven, as suggested by the technical analysis discussed above. Textile production had been established in the area since antiquity. A recent excavation in Laoguanshan, Tianhuhi, has confirmed the use of patterning looms for weaving warp-faced compounds in the Han period (202 BCE-220 CE). This compound, attributed to the Chinese, had the patterns repeats only in the warp direction. It was created with a complementary warp of two or more series and one weft. However, by the 8th century, weft-faced compounds had become the most popular structures and replaced the earlier structure. Because Qinghai was a key region between northern, central, and southern areas that had acquired importance, also thanks to the Tuyuhun activities, it is possible that, over the centuries, it had developed a unique trade of textiles and metalwork. It is well documented that trade between China and Central Asia occurred along the Northern and Southern Silk Roads around the Taklamakan Desert and at the edges of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau. Nonetheless, as suggested by Sato Hisashi, an exterior route from Kokonor to Lhasa might have been used in the Tang period (map 2). The primary iconographic elements of this material seem to have crossed the Himalayas from Central Asia and been modified along the way. The new compositions appear to have been made explicitly for the Tibetan empire, which also included part of Qinghai and Sichuan. The weaving process, the preference for red textile grounds, and the running wild donkey motif are unique features of these compounds.

60 Andrews, Felt Tents and Pavilions, 125.
61 Zhao et al, “The earliest evidence of pattern looms”; Zhao, Sardjono, and Buckley, A World of Looms, 199-203.
62 Hisashi, “The Route from Kokonor to Lhasa.” A recent study on the Qinghai-Tibetan route is Lancuo et al., “Simulating the route of the Tang-Tibet Ancient Road.”
Conclusion

The material recently excavated in Qinghai or that has appeared on the art market (likely from the same area) requires further analysis to understand the complexity of early Tibetan society along an external branch of the primary Silk Road, between Gansu and Sichuan, and across the Himalayas. The unknown provenance and the conservation status of these items that often appear as single pieces of a much larger patrimony, which has not remained untouched over the centuries, makes it challenging to determine specific cultural models among people of different origins. However, a technical and iconographical analysis, such as the one presented in this paper, can help to confirm historical records and, thus, identify the cultural sphere in which these items were produced, traded, and acquired. In this paper, the fragment held in the China National Museum, which I had reconstructed in 2014 as an interior panel of a nomadic tent, has been reevaluated in light of new data gathered after the publication of my manuscript in 2019. Some of the graphic elements that compose the overall composition of the panel are unique and not found on other Central Asian textiles. Although it reveals the cultural and artistic exchanges between Türkö-Iranian, proto-Mongolian, Chinese, and Tibetan societies that had begun a century earlier, the range of animals in the hunting scenes depicted on the coffins from Qinghai confirms that some of those on the panels were representations of indigenous animal species, such as yaks (bulls, oxen), donkeys, and tigers, (some of which might be extinct) that were also sacrificed for funerary purposes.

Between the 8th and 9th centuries, the weft-faced textile technique had evolved at the peak of the Tibetan expansion. It was used to create larger and thicker hangings that were customized to accommodate Tibetan tent constructions, which were likely adapted from Türkö-Iranian models. As I have argued in this paper, although Qinghai weaving production cannot be proved, it is not unfair to say that these textiles were created for the Qinghai inhabitants, perhaps in Sichuan, or imported directly across the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau from ancient Bactria (today’s Afghanistan or Pakistan), in the land of the Turanians, at the border of the Iranshahr, where Türkö-Iranian models had been assimilated and adapted during the Sasanian period. The Tibetans rose in a transition period between the fall of the first and the establishment of the second Türkic khaganate, which coincided with the change of nomadic funerary practices and the construction of monumental tombs. Besides the pictorial and material evidence available, today’s nomadic examples provide good sources of comparison for the historical material. The provenance of the panel fragment is unknown, but from the technical and iconographic analysis presented in this paper, it appears clear that early Tibetans shared the cultural and artistic background of other nomadic people. Likely, the panel comes from a bare mound-shaped tomb, which was conceived to recreate the “golden tent” described in historical records, and played an integral role in continuing the nomadic tradition in the afterlife.
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