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## CLASSICAL MOTIFS ON YINGPAN MUMMY'S CLOTHING

**Abstract:** A very well preserved mummy of a man has been found at grave 15 at the Yingpan site in the Tarim Basin. Chinese archaeologists have dated the find to the Later Han dynasty (1st–2nd centuries AD), but it seems to be much later. The burial presumably took place at the end of the Jin dynasty (5th century AD). It is difficult to establish who the deceased man was. According to some scholars, he was a local ruler, while others think him a wealthy merchant. His rich attire and generous grave goods testify to high status. The most interesting element of the man's clothing is a woollen robe adorned with classical motifs. Representations in a similar style are also found on two cloths discovered in the Tarim Basin. The provenance of the textiles remains unknown. They may have been made in local workshops, in Bactria or the Levant. Due to certain technological features, manufacture in Central Asia is presumed. Presence of classical motifs may be explained by the influence of traditions from the Graeco-Bactrian period. It is, however, more likely that they reached Central Asia via Roman imports. Similar ornamentation may have been found on imported textiles and metal or glass vessels.

**Key words:** Silk Road, textiles, classical motifs, Tarim Basin, Yingpan

The Silk Road is one of the most fascinating cultural phenomena. The vast Asian territories traversed by merchants from distant lands, by artisans, monks and political refugees became a focus for intense exchange, both commercial and cultural. The directions and intensity of contacts and influences may be glimpsed primarily from material remains. Interpretation of remains found in the course of archaeological excavations fails, of course, to provide a full picture of culture of any given region, but combined with analysis of textual evidence must serve as the basis for research on the transcultural dimension of the Silk Road.

One of the most puzzling issues connected to the long-term exchange of ideas and goods is that of contacts between the peoples of Central Asia<sup>1</sup> with the classical world and culture. The present paper is dedicated to the attire of the mummy at the Yingpan site [Fig. 1], which constitutes one piece of evidence for their presence. The man's robe is adorned with six rows of symmetrically placed human figures, animals and plants [Fig. 2]. If pomegranate trees and antithetically placed bulls or goats could derive from Persian art,<sup>2</sup> the people are represented in a classical convention.

<sup>1</sup> For "Central Asia" read both west Turkestan (present Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and east Turkestan (present Uyghur Autonomous Republic of Xinjiang).

<sup>2</sup> LI 2006, p. 247.



Fig. 1. Mummy from grave 15,  
Yingpan (ZHOU, LI 2004, fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Classical motifs on Yingpan mummy's woollen robe  
(ZHOU, LI 2004, fig. 3)

They are naked, dwarfish figures of warring men, whose sole attire is a fluttering cape. Motifs derived from a variety of cultural traditions attest to the textile's manufacture in Central Asia. It is, however, intriguing how classical motifs found their way to east Turkestan. Were it to be a remnant of the Hellenistic period in Central Asia, it would testify to popularity of the motif in the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, which would then be copied in subsequent centuries. Given the absence of similar representations seems, however, to point to the possibility that it reached Central Asia with imports from the Roman Empire. In order to correctly interpret the way classical motifs took to find themselves on the mummy's robe, one must reconsider the dating of the find and the textile's provenance.

The Yingpan lies in the Tarim Basin in the Uyghur Autonomous Republic of Xinjiang (the People's Republic of China). In the past, it lied on the trade routes linking the West to China. This particular route was a branch of the northern road between the Tien-Shan mountain range and the Takla Makan desert. The fork in the road lied by the Iron Gates and led by the edge of the Quruk Tagh mountains to the city of Dunhuang in the Gansu Corridor. Yingpan was inhabited from the Chinese Han period (206 BC – AD 220) to the T'ang dynasty (AD 618–906).<sup>3</sup> The site was excavated over 1989–1999 by the Xinjiang Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute. The city hosted a military garrison and remains of signal towers, temples, monasteries and simple dwellings have all been found.<sup>4</sup> Outside the city, an extensive cemetery (1000 m × 250 m) has been located, functional in the Han (206 BC – AD 220) and Jin (AD 265–420) period. Archaeologists excavating at Yingpan have identified 122 graves in an undisturbed context and 120 looted graves.<sup>5</sup> In 1995 a man's mummy, which constitutes the subject of the present paper, was found at grave 15. It was one of the richer burials, lying at some distance from the other graves. The man with Caucasoid features<sup>6</sup> was buried in a wooden painted coffin, covered by a woollen carpet with a stylised depiction of a lion. The body rested on silk fabric, which covered a felt blanket. The man's head was rested against a pillow of embroidered Chinese damask. The man's high status is also apparent from his clothing, consisting of woollen trousers covered in embroidered rosettes,<sup>7</sup> a woollen robe that constitutes the subject matter of the present paper and a silk shirt adorned with gold plaques. Ornaments of precious metal can also be found on his felt shoes and the mask that covered his face.

It is difficult to unambiguously determine identity of the man buried with such honours. Wang Binghua, the director of the the Xinjiang Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute, sees in him the ruler of the local Shan kingdom,<sup>8</sup> though an overwhelming majority of scholars claim him to have been a wealthy merchant.<sup>9</sup> The issue will remain in the realm of speculation. Due to the inter-cultural character of oases in the Tarim Basin it is not even possible to determine the man's ethnic identity. The Tarim Basin was since at least the second millennium BC populated by a Caucasoid people linked to the Tokhars.<sup>10</sup> Around the second century BC the Shaka tribes reached Xinjiang. Their presence is confirmed primarily for the cities of Hotan oraz Tumxuk.<sup>11</sup> Merchants, primarily from Sogdiana, also inhabited the oases. One must also bear in mind the constant Chinese presence since at least the Han period and the Turkic population influx. Due to the Caucasoid features, it may be presumed the man was a Tokhar or, which seems more doubtful, Shaka. It cannot, however, be ruled out that the burial is of a Sogdian or Kushan. The Sogdians, as believers in the local version of Zoroastrianism, exposed their dead, although merchants in remote regions adopted local funerary practices,<sup>12</sup> which rules out the character of the burial as a firm indication of ethnicity. The man's clothes also fail to speak to his ethnic origins. A long robe and loose trousers were popular with all the people of Central Asia.

<sup>3</sup> BUNKER 2004, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> ZHOU, LI 2004, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> ZHOU, LI 2004, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> The man ca. 1.9 m tall, big eyes and auburn hair (SHENG 2010, p. 39).

<sup>7</sup> Very similar rosettes can be found on the felt carpet discovered at tumulus V at Pazyryk (Scythian, 5th century BC).

<sup>8</sup> Za HANSEN 2010, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> ZHAO 2012, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> MALLORY, MAIR 2000.

<sup>11</sup> ZHANG 1996, pp. 284–285.

<sup>12</sup> LERNER 2005.

An issue fundamental to its analysis is the correct date for the textile. According to the excavation report of 1999, the grave may be dated to the Han dynasty (AD 25–220). That date has been adopted by some scholars as a given and become the cornerstone of a wider interpretation of cultural phenomena.<sup>13</sup> Further analysis of the burial has, however, demonstrated that its earliest possible date is in the fifth century AD.

Among the elements confirming the hypothesis of a later date for the burial is the hem on the woollen cloak, executed with a weft-faced compound tabby. This braid is known from east Turkestan, but the earliest such finds have been dated to the fourth century AD.<sup>14</sup> Such ornamentation at the Tarim Basin would be an anomaly at such an early date. Another factor that drove the author to reject the original dating of the find is the striking stylistic similarity of decoration to the woollen fabric from the Abegg-Stiftung collection [Fig. 3].<sup>15</sup> Depicted on it are cyclical motifs of eagles staring snakes, which crawl on vines, antithetically placed birds on either side of an amphora or cupids catching butterflies. The cupid figures [Fig. 4] are, moreover, represented in the same manner (dwarfish and disproportional), as the warriors on the Yingpan mummy's robe. The C<sub>14</sub> radiocarbon date for the Abegg-Stiftung cloth is AD 430–631 (with 100 % precision).<sup>16</sup> The fabric's provenance remained unknown until another fragment was found at a looted grave at Yingpan.<sup>17</sup> Taking into account the similarities between the cloths and their finding at the same site, it seems highly likely that both were made at the same workshop, which moves the dating of grave 15 to the fifth century AD at the earliest. It is not the only Yingpan burial from the late Jin dynasty, as attested by the discovery of a glass vessel of Persian origins.<sup>18</sup> Such objects were a frequent export from the Sassanid empire to Central Asia and China in the fifth century AD.<sup>19</sup>

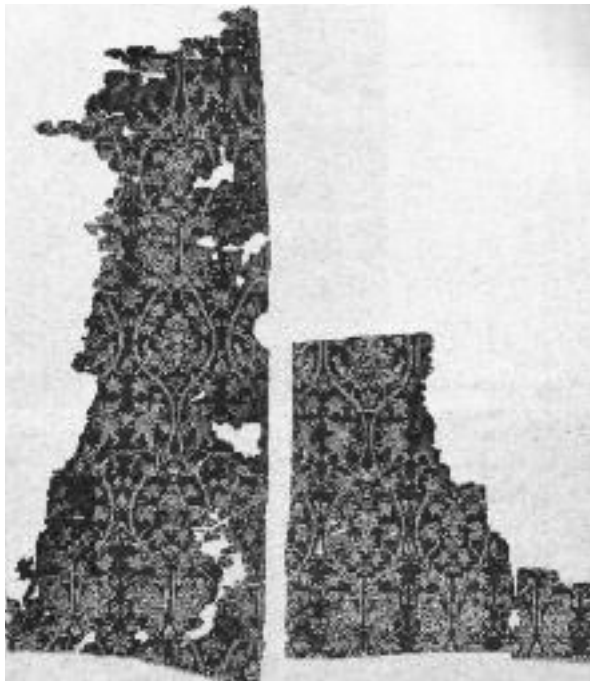


Fig. 3. Textile from Abegg-Stiftung collection (BUNKER 2004, fig. 1)



Fig. 4. Cupids on textile from Abegg-Stiftung collection (BUNKER 2004, fig. 2)

<sup>13</sup> JONES 2009; YATSENKO 2012.

<sup>14</sup> YOKOHARI 1991, pp. 49–47.

<sup>15</sup> BUNKER 2004.

<sup>16</sup> BUNKER 2004, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> ZHOU, LI 2004, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> GAN 2009, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> JIAYAO 2002, pp. 79–94.



Another question raised by the analysis of the two cloths concerns the place of their manufacture. There are two possibilities to consider: the Byzantine Empire (primarily the regions of Levant and Syria famous for their textiles) and Central Asia. Let us look at the technical aspects of their execution. The woollen robe of the man buried at Yingpan is a double cloth. Its weave consists of the threads of warp and weft in two colours (red and yellow in this case) interlaced in such a way that each colour constitutes the background on one side and the pattern on the other. On the Yingpan cloth, the background on the right side is red and ornaments yellow, while the left side of the cloth has an identical pattern with reversed colours. The relationship of the strands of warp and weft stands at 1:1. The fabric density stands at  $14\text{--}16 \times 2$  per cm for the warp and  $44 \times 2$  per cm for the weft. Pairs of clockwise-spun warp threads (Z) were plied together in the opposite direction (S), while the pairs of the weft threads (Z) remained disconnected. The pattern is repeated cyclically every 118 cm throughout the length of the cloth and every 80 cm along its breadth.<sup>20</sup> In Iran and the Middle East no woollen double cloths have so far been found.<sup>21</sup> This may mean the cloth was manufactured in Central Asia.

The Abegg-Stiftung cloth was woven with a weft-faced compound tabby. It is a technique that allows for refined patterning of multicolour weft threads. Warp threads are divided into main and binding warp. They perform a merely technical function, binding the cloth together and separating individual weft threads. The relationship of the main warp thread to the binding warp in the cloth under study stands at 2:1. The cloth's density is 10–11 of binding warp per cm, 20–22 of main warp per cm and  $30\text{--}33 \times 2$  of weft thread per cm. The warp is made up of white, uncoloured yarn twisted clockwise (Z), while weft threads are made of uncoloured yarn and dark green-blue yarn twisted in the same direction as the warp thread.<sup>22</sup>

According to Regula Schorta<sup>23</sup> most technical aspects point to Central Asian origins for the cloth. In the Mediterranean, threads in use were mostly twisted anticlockwise (S), whereas both cloths have threads twisted clockwise (Z). Other technical features not found in western weaving include double weft threads and the 2:1 ratio of main to binding warp. Since these features are characteristic of patterned fabrics found in the Tarim Basin, it seems reasonable to presume that they were manufactured locally.

Yet other clues to the fabric's provenance are provided by the chemical analysis of the dyes used in the Yingpan mummy's robe. Unfortunately this fails to yield unambiguous answers. The red dye contains alizarin and purpurin, which points to the use of *Rubia tinctorum*. The yellow dye is luteolin, found in plants such as reseda and dyer's broom (*Genista tinctoria*).<sup>24</sup> If the *Rubia tinctorum*-derived dye was used in Xinjiang, there is no evidence for use of plants containing luteolin. According to Chinese scholars, who published an analysis of fibres from the Yingpan site, the dye might have been imported from western Asia or the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> These results force us, however, to once again reconsider the question whether the cloths were manufactured locally.

Some scholars believe the cloths were woven in Bactria.<sup>26</sup> This would agree with Wu Min's theory of Kashmiri origins for the double cloth. According to this scholar, cloths made in this technique and found in Xinjiang were made in the Indo-Scythian or Kushan kingdom.<sup>27</sup> The hypothesis of the Yingpan cloth's origins in the Kushan kingdom must, however, be rejected as based on an excessively early date.<sup>28</sup> It should be borne in mind that as of the third century AD that kingdom was part of the Sassanid empire and then passed under rule of the Hepthalite state in the first half of the fifth century. All that is not, however, to rule out that the cloths were made by Kushan

<sup>20</sup> LI 2006, p. 247.

<sup>21</sup> WU 2006, p. 227.

<sup>22</sup> SCHORTA 2004, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> SCHORTA 2004, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> LIU *et alii* 2011, pp. 1767–1769.

<sup>25</sup> LIU *et alii* 2011, p. 1769.

<sup>26</sup> HANSEN 2010; YATSENKO 2012.

<sup>27</sup> WU 2006, p. 227.

<sup>28</sup> YATSENKO 2012.

weavers.<sup>29</sup> It seems doubtful that the classical motifs could have survived from the Hellenistic era. If the cloths come from the area of Tokharistan,<sup>30</sup> the patterning imitates late Roman or Byzantine art.

It is worth pointing out that in addition to the cloths under consideration, another textile fragment with a similar pattern has been found at the Tarim Basin. It is a double cloth found at the Niya site in 1959.<sup>31</sup> The fabric has survived only partially, which impedes efforts to reconstruct the pattern. The right side consists of a dark background and yellow ornament in the form of grapevine motifs (vines, leaves and grapes), an animal (only the head can be made out) and a dwarf-fish figure holding a necklace and draped in a sash. The material's dating to the second century AD<sup>32</sup> seems doubtful. Due to the stylistic similarity and identical technique of manufacture it seems probable that it dates to the same period as the Yingpan cloths under consideration.

The classical world's contacts with the Middle and Far East took place on many levels. For centuries a maritime route linked it to India, as described by the anonymous Greek *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, as well as such authors as Ptolemy, Strabo, Pliny and Ammianus Marcellinus. In addition to the most convenient sea route, there were also overland routes from Syria (Palmyra, Aleppo, Damascus), via Mesopotamia and Iran, to Sogdiana, Bactria and Xinjiang. The overland Silk Road trade was dominated by Sogdian merchants. They contributed to the dissemination of Persian cultural elements across Central Asia, but were also involved in trade with other parts of the world. Elements from western Eurasia may have reached Central Asia both via these intermediaries and directly. Chinese sources describe Roman merchants of Syriac origins, who sporadically reached China and even Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> Imports from Rome and then Byzantium have been found in present-day India, Afghanistan and China.<sup>34</sup> Elements of western art may have turned up at workshops of artisans of western Asian / Roman origins whose presence in east Turkestan is attested by frescoes discovered at the Miran site in the Tarim Basin and dated to the third–fourth centuries. They show elements of Graeco-Roman art. One of the depictions is signed with the name Tito, a variant of Titus. They may have been executed by an artist of Mediterranean origins.<sup>35</sup>

Emma Bunker believes the motifs decorating the cloths under consideration are connected to afterlife symbolism. According to her, most depictions reached Central Asia with objects imported from the east of the Roman Empire. These would include seals, metal vessels and textiles.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned items, classical motifs may have reached Central Asian on glass vessels. At the Kushan palace of Begram (present Afghanistan) two chambers have been found, filled with valuables from Central Asia, India and China. Particularly worth noting is the collection of painted glassware from the Roman Empire. The objects were presumably made in Egypt ca. AD 50–125.<sup>37</sup> The oblong vases are decorated primarily with mythological motifs. They constitute another piece of evidence for the Mediterranean world's contacts with Central Asia. They reached the Kushan state most likely by sea, though there is no reason to rule out that similar objects were traded overland. Decorations on the vessels may have served as the prototype for motifs adapted in Central Asian art, including patterns on luxury textiles.

The textiles under consideration in the present study constitute indubitable evidence of Central Asia's cultural contacts with the Mediterranean world. It remains impossible to close the discussion of their provenance, but it seems probable that they were made at Central Asian workshops. Their ornaments presumably imitated motifs seen on imports from the Roman Empire. Fashion for such depictions was probably stimulated by frequent contact with objects of western provenance. We can only guess at the kind of goods that served as carriers of classical art. The most frequent among

<sup>29</sup> HANSEN 2010.

<sup>30</sup> After the conquest of Bactria by Hepthalite tribes, the area came to be known as Tokharistan.

<sup>31</sup> JOHNSTON LAING 1995, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> JOHNSTON LAING 1995, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> BALL 2010, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> BALL 2010, pp. 133–139.

<sup>35</sup> BALL 2010, p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> BUNKER 2004, pp. 31–35.

<sup>37</sup> BALL 2010, p. 135.

them were presumably textiles, metal or glass vessels. It cannot, however, be ruled out that dissemination of classical art had an altogether different impulse. The author hopes that continued excavations will yield further evidence of contact between these cultural milieus and contribute to their greater understanding. She also hopes the textiles found along the Silk Road will be subjected to detailed technical analysis, which will allow for reconstruction of the technologies employed in individual weaving workshops. This will not only enrich our knowledge of the weaving industry, but will also allow to identify the origins of textiles and thus to reconstruct ancient trade routes and intensity of cultural influences.

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## Streszczenie

### Antyczne motywy na stroju mumii z Yingpan

W grobie nr 15 na stanowisku Yingpan w Kotlinie Tarymskiej odkryto bardzo dobrze zachowaną mumię mężczyzny. Chińscy archeolodzy wydatowali znalezisko na okres panowania Późniejszej Dynastii Han (I–II w. n.e.). Wydaje się jednak, że pochówek był znacznie późniejszy. Prawdopodobnie pochodził z okresu przypadającego na schyłek rządów dynastii Jin (V w. n.e.). Trudno ustalić, kim był zmarły mężczyzna. Według niektórych badaczy był on lokalnym władcą, według innych zamożnym kupcem. O jego wysokim statusie świadczy bogaty strój oraz okazały inwentarz grobowy. Najciekawszym elementem ubioru mężczyzny jest wełniany płaszcz ozdobiony antycznymi motywami. Przedstawienia ukazane w podobnej stylistyce znajdują się jeszcze na dwóch tkaninach odkrytych w Kotlinie Tarymskiej. Proweniencja tkanin nie jest znana. Mogły one powstać zarówno w warsztatach lokalnych, baktryjskich, jak i na terytorium Lewantu. Z uwagi na pewne cechy technologiczne przypuszcza się jednak, że utkano je na terenie Azji Środkowej. Występowanie antycznych motywów może być wytłumaczone wpływem tradycji z okresu grecko-baktryjskiego, choć bardziej prawdopodobne wydaje się, że motywy te dotarły na terytorium Azji Środkowej wraz z importami rzymskimi. Podobne zdobienia mogły występować na sprowadzanych tkaninach, naczyniach metalowych, a także przedmiotach szklanych.

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