Two Hispano-Islamic Silks

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With the violent spread of Islam, the new religion that emerged from the East in the early seventh century of the Christian era, the face of the Old World of the Mediterranean changed. Shortly after the death of Muhammad, the army of Allah carried the new faith across the borders of Arabia. After the Byzantine garrisons in Syria had been overrun, Persia was invaded and conquered. Then Egypt was subjugated, and less than a century after the Prophet’s death North Africa fell and the Arabs faced the Spanish mainland. Looking across the straits at the mountain that was to become the monument of that fateful day, the Arabs named it Gebel Tariq (“the mountain of Tariq”) for their general Tariq ibn Ziyal; today it is known as Gibraltar. In the summer of 710 the mainland was invaded. Spain collapsed after the battle at the mouth of the Barbate the following year.

But the Arabs brought not only war and their soldiers; once they had won the battle, Spain, and subsequently Sicily, which was conquered in the beginning of the ninth century, were incorporated in the great new empire of Muslim faith and culture. Soon after the fighting was over, Spain flourished in greater splendor than ever before. The importation of objects of art from the East, as well as of artists from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, stimulated great artistic and scholarly activity.

Cordoba openly rivaled Baghdad, the city of the caliphs of the East. With the erection of the Great Mosque in the second half of the eighth century, it became a new center of Muslim theology and devotion. A school of scholarly studies, particularly medicine and languages, that had opened its doors earlier in the same century soon achieved international fame. With the proclamation of the Western Caliphate in 756, Cordoba became the official residence of the new caliph, and all Muslim Spain joined in an effort to outstrip the East; traditional crafts continued, and new arts and crafts were introduced with the new rulers.

As it is quite certain that sericulture was known in Spain only after the conquest, it seems permissible to assume that this new industry, which was to become one of the most important in medieval Spain,1 was among those introduced by the Arabs.

Though a good many historical reports about Spain in that period have come down to us, there has long been difficulty in identifying the products of Spanish workshops. The arts of Sicily, southern Italy, and the Near East, with their intricate fusion of cultural traditions, add to rather

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than clarify the problem of making exact distinctions. The Museum has recently acquired two fragments of medieval silk weavings\(^2\) of great beauty and importance which add to our knowledge of the art of that period. As there are in New York no other examples of the patterns shown by our new silks, they are a most welcome addition to our collections. They form part of a group of silks which, because of similarity of design, use of color, and identity of technical detail, have been attributed to a single workshop. A detailed description will show the very close relationship of our two silks to each other and to the others of the same group.

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Fig. 1. Silk with eagle pattern. Hispano-Islamic, XII century Museo Episcopal, Vich

The basic pattern of the weavings of which our pieces are fragments consists of rows of big medallions, tangent to each other or connected by interlacings, containing large quadrupeds and birds. Each medallion is framed by two narrow bands of pearl ornament that enclose groups of fantastic animals. Between the medallions appear intervening ornaments composed of geometric, floral, and animal motifs grouped around a central rosette. The pattern is woven in purplish red against a buff ground; a few decorative details are in white and yellow. The heads of the animals in the medallions are woven in fine gold brocade; those of the smaller animals contained in the medallion frames and in the intervening ornaments are woven in yellow, as if to substitute for the brocading on a less magnificent scale.

The two pieces have certain stylistic elements in common: the design is an all-over pattern and hardly any space is left undecorated; a strange contradiction between the static, heraldic quality of the main pattern and the somewhat grotesque activity of the small prancing animals is particularly noteworthy.

One of the silks (Frontispiece) shows a pair of rampant griffins, back to back with their heads turned toward each other. They are separated by a bar on which appear a small arrangement of palmette petals at the top, a heart-shaped leaf at the bottom, and between the griffins' backs a saltire surrounded by eight wafers. This decorative device appears to be a debased version of a common Near Eastern motif, the Sacred Tree, which often serves as a center for such heraldic animal groups. Two gazelles, rather difficult to distinguish, occupy the lower left- and right-hand corners of the medallion, below the front paws of the griffins, and fill what free space remains. The small creatures in the frame of this medallion are loose assemblages of several disparate parts: a snake's body, a gazelle's head and neck, a pair of abbreviated wings, and a disproportionately large lion's foreleg. These fantastic animals are also arranged in heraldic pairs, each flanking a stylized blossom. The ornaments between the medallions are composed of an eight-pointed star surrounded by pairs of small quadrupeds and containing a central rosette set in a circular frame of bead pattern. This composition
ends in abstract trees that fill the spandrels created by the arrangement of the large medallions.

The second silk (Figure 2) shows a medallion containing a heraldic eagle with spread tail bordered by a row of eight small rosettes. His wings are divided by a horizontal band bearing a short pseudo-Latin inscription. Each shoulder is occupied by a small medallion containing a single quadruped similar to those in the frame of the large medallions. His body is decorated with a pattern of hearts. He wears a necklace of pearls; and a similar band of pearls appears at the juncture of body and tail. In his outstretched claws the eagle holds two tablets on the right one of which is written the Arabic word baraka ("blessing"), which appears in mirror image on the left.

The frame of the eagle's medallion is composed of two bands of pearls, as in the griffin silk, but here encloses groups of three rather than

Fig. 2. Silk with eagle pattern. Hispano-Islamic, xi century Purchase, 1958, funds from various donors
two animals. Two quadrupeds, similar to those of the small medallions on the eagle’s shoulders, flank another fantastic creature which has a cock’s or pheasant’s body but a human head. The medallion’s frame is interrupted by interlacings that connect the main medallions of the pattern. Each of these connecting motifs is arranged around a central star inscribed with an eight-petaled rosette, and the spaces between them are filled with motifs similar to those of the griffin silk. Floral devices occupy the spandrels, while what now appears to be free space was originally filled with an Arabic inscription running around the outer border of each main medallion. Much deteriorated but still legible, the inscription reads: “Blessing from God, success and help and ...” repeated four times.\(^3\)

Having recognized the points of likeness between our two new silks, it remains to relate them to the group we mentioned earlier as having been attributed to a single workshop.\(^4\)

A silk featuring an eagle in the familiar large medallion (Figure 1) is preserved in the Museo Episcopal in Vich, near Barcelona. It is very fragmentary, but enough has been saved to show its many close affinities to our silk illustrated in Figure 2.

Another important member of the group, also in the museum in Vich, is the famous Lion Strangler Silk (Figure 3) from the tomb of Saint Bernard Calvo, bishop of Vich from 1233 to 1243. Here the human figure is introduced into the pattern. A standing male figure, in front view, holds two lions, or rather lionesses, by their necks. This motif can be traced back to ancient Near Eastern prototypes and clearly shows the significance of Oriental tradition for these designs.

A pattern showing sphinxes being attacked by lions (Figure 4) is preserved in a fragment in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.\(^5\) This piece has always been of particular importance for the group, as it bears an inscription stating that it was made in Baghdad. If we could trust this information, the problem of place and date of manufacture would be solved for the whole group. For a time, scholars were inclined to accept this inscription as historical documentation,\(^6\) but doubts of its truthfulness have since been expressed. Its epigraphy points to a western

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Fig. 3. Silk with pattern of Lion Strangler. Hispano-Islamic, xii century
Museo Episcopal, Vich

Fig. 4. Silk with pattern of lions attacking sphinxes. Hispano-Islamic, xii century
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Islamic country rather than to Iraq, and so the question arose whether the inscription might not be an intentional deception. Only recently has it been possible to verify this suspicion.

Dorothy G. Shepherd, Curator of Textiles and Near Eastern Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, has discovered and published a fragmentary chasuble (Figure 5) in a little church at Quintanaortuña near Burgos. Its decoration resembles that of all the other silks previously discussed, and stylistic comparison with them proves that the chasuble had to be assigned to the group. Its particular significance, however, is that an Arabic inscription running through its pattern contains the name of a historical person. The inscription reads: “Victory from God to the Amir al-Muslimin 'Ali.” This can only refer to the Almoravid 'Ali ben Yūsuf ben Tāshfīn, ruler of Spain from 1107 to 1143. In the light of this information, the attribution of the piece and with it the entire group to early twelfth century Spain was established by Miss Shepherd.

Comparison with material of known Spanish origin may help to confirm this conclusion and at the same time show the silks in their context of Hispano-Islamic art of the period. A sculptured capital (Figure 6) of the twelfth century Spanish chapel of the church of San Martin in Fuentidueña, now on loan to The Cloisters, is decorated with pairs of rampant griffins back to back and turning their heads toward each other. Their

Fig. 5. Fragment of a silk chasuble. Hispano-Islamic, xii century San Juan de Ortega, Quintanaortuña
ilar to those in the little medallions on the eagle’s shoulders on our silk. Another relief (Figure 8), this one on a sarcophagus in the Alhambra dated 1304, once more shows the frontal eagle with spread wings. Here we have a perfect parallel to the silk design. Small quadrupeds on the shoulders of the eagle’s wings are rendered very similarly to those on the wings of the eagle of the silk. Small animals, here presumably lions, again appear above the eagle’s wings. But it can hardly be doubted that in the process of handing down the iconographic tradition of this eagle from the early period of Hispano-Islamic art to the beginning of the fourteenth century, the eagle with small animals above his wings was transformed.

Fig. 7. Relief showing eagle from Madina az-Zahra. Hispano-Islamic, x century
Museo Arqueolóxico, Madrid

Fig. 6. Capital with griffins from San Martin, Fuentidueña. Spanish, XII century. Now in the Spanish chapel at The Cloisters
Lent by the Spanish Government

capital. The form and position of the wings are also very close; even so characteristic an element of the silk’s design as the band pattern decorating the lower part of the griffins’ bodies appears also on the capital.

The eagle as it appears on the silk in Figure 2, in frontal position and with widespread wings and tail, can be found in many parts of the Islamic world; there are also many examples of it in Hispano-Islamic art. The carved reliefs of the beautiful eleventh century ivory box (Figure 9) in the cathedral of Pamplona show such an eagle in a multilobed cartouche. Many elements are rendered almost identically with the design of the silk: the peculiar little hornlike cars; the strongly curved beak; the division of the wings into an upper and lower part, the latter with vertically arranged long wing feathers; the pearl band at the juncture of body and tail; the attitude of the outstretched claws, here holding two small birds instead of the tablets. On a stone relief of the tenth century from Madina az-Zahra (Figure 7) we find an even closer resemblance to the design of our silk. Above the shoulders of this eagle appear two small animals sim-
into an eagle with such animals in the shoulders of his wings. The early fourteenth century relief appears to be a composite form of both images. Our eagle silk is a document of the second stage of this iconographic conception, which probably developed in the eleventh or early twelfth century.

It would be equally possible to trace in Hispano-Islamic art the iconographic tradition of the patterns of the other silks of this group. It may, however, be sufficient to show the close affinity between twelfth century Hispano-Islamic iconography and that of a striking motif in only one of the other silks. The strange figure of the harpy as it appears in the medallion of the Boston silk is a common feature in Spanish sculpture of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Two capitals (Figures 10, 11) from the Spanish chapel at The Cloisters show pairs of harpies which in many details correspond to the harpies of the silk. A more striking similarity appears on a capital from Lleida (Figure 12) where harpies, with the heads of monks, and little dragons are juxtaposed in much the same way as in the Boston silk. This motif of the harpy in Spanish Romanesque art certainly goes back to the iconographic tradition of the Persian peri, a similar creature with a bird’s body and a human face, seen frequently in early Persian painting and pottery. The appearance of this motif in Spanish art makes clear again how important the Near Eastern background is for the formulation of the designs of these silks.

An eleventh century ivory box (Figure 13) in the Museo Provincial in Burgos gives us, for a final comparison of monuments, a variety of motifs found on all these silks. Most noteworthy of all is the row of small medallions at the bottom of the panel, containing little prancing quadrupeds exactly like the ones so characteristic of the silks’ designs. The form of the inscription at
the top, the position of the heads of the lions attacking fleeing gazelles in the corner panels at the top and the bottom of the casket, and the decorative rendering of the peacocks in the center are all notable elements of a style and iconography which one recognizes as very close to that of the silks.

Adding this visual evidence to the historical inscription and technical analyses provided and interpreted by Miss Shepherd, one may safely conclude that our silks belong to the group de-

scribed as coming from Spanish looms of the twelfth century. The fact that both ivory boxes we have mentioned belong to a large group of ivory carvings reported to have been made in Cordoba\(^1\) may even suggest that the silks too are products of that city. As the history of medieval textile production is still full of unsolved problems, the possibility of a secure attribution of this group is of exceptional importance for our knowledge of the early history of silk weaving in western Islam.
NOTES

2 Frontispiece: accession number 58.85.1; height 17 inches; width 12 inches. Plain compound silk cloth, brocaded. Warps: tan; wefts: red, tan, yellow; reinforcing dark brown weft on back only. Figure 2: accession number 58.85.2; height 17 inches; width 13 inches. Plain compound silk cloth, brocaded. Warps: tan; wefts: crimson, yellow, tan; reinforcing dark brown wefts on back only. Other pieces of the same weavings are in the treasury of the cathedral of Sigüenza (see Florence May, Silk Textiles of Spain, New York, 1957, p. 38, fig. 24), and in the Cleveland Museum of Art (see Dorothy G. Shepherd, Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art, xliv, 1955, pp. 6-10).

3 The inscription was read by Dr. Richard Ettinghausen, Curator of Near Eastern Art, Freer Gallery, Washington, D. C., and is quoted by Miss Shepherd in the Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art, xliv, 1955, p. 9.


5 Ibid., p. 378, pls. 4C, 7. The piece comes from Burgo de Osma. A fragment of the same weaving is in the Cooper Union Museum (see Shepherd, “The Hispano-Islamic Textiles in the Cooper Union Collection,” Chronicle of the Museum for the Arts of Decoration, i, 1943, p. 368, fig. 7).


8 Shepherd, “A Dated Hispano-Islamic Silk,” op. cit., p. 373, pls. 1-3.

9 Ibid., p. 373, pl. 4A


Fig. 13. Ivory box. Hispano-Islamic, XI century Museo Arqueológico Provincial, Burgos
Archbishop giving the Benediction. Plate from Divers habillements des prêtres de Russie, by Jean Baptiste Le Prince. French, 1764. 9 x 5¾ inches  Schiff Fund, 1922

The archbishop wears a sticharion, the equivalent of the Western alb, and over it a saccos, clearly made of a richly decorated fabric. Over his shoulders is the long omophorion, embroidered with crosses, and hanging at his side is the stiff lozenge called an epigonaton. The candlestick with three candles should be in his right hand, but the engraver has reversed the original drawing.