

## Perspectives on the wide world of luxury in later Antiquity: silk and other exotic textiles found in Syria and Egypt

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I look outward from the Eastern Roman provinces farther east beyond the frontiers toward fabulous places with their exotic luxury goods (Fig. 5.1). My perspective on this wide world of luxuries locates silk among other textiles that may be identified as exotic at a given site by their imported material, rare weaving technique, style of clothing or, my main concern, distinctive ornamentation. I begin in eastern Syria with selected textiles of the second and third centuries from the well-documented sites of Dura Europos and Palmyra, which I compare to roughly contemporaneous textiles from other sites, including Karanis in the Fayum in Egypt; I then turn to later examples from Antinoë and Panopolis in Upper Egypt. Luxury textiles from these sites furnish evidence for cosmopolitan tastes and inter-related markets throughout this period, from the second to the seventh century, as Syria and Egypt remained two of the wealthiest provinces of the Empire partly because of their roles in long-distance trade. Taking up a broader and more speculative outlook inspired by Liu Xinru's *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600–1200* (1998), which considers commerce as a vector for the spread of religion, I propose that such textile finds may reflect conceptions of the cosmos that incorporated trade in luxury goods from the east.

### **Dura**

Known as Europos during earlier periods of Hellenistic Greek and Parthian Persian rule, Dura entered the sphere of the Roman frontier in the second century CE not as a caravan city but as a small *polis* populated mainly by Roman military including a cohort from nearby Palmyra as well as locals. Its military role was to guard traffic on the roads and the

Euphrates River to ensure the remarkable mobility of people, goods, and capital (Leyerle 2009, 110) that characterized the Empire throughout Late Antiquity. Roman Dura looked in *all* directions: to the Persian threat to the east just across the Euphrates River, and to the river itself and its traffic linking north and south. From Dura, routes led to the Persian Gulf and west all the way to the Mediterranean. In consequence, Dura has been recognized since its discovery as a vibrantly multi-cultural hub, a character it retained until its final mid-third century destruction caused through a long siege by the Persians (Brody and Hoffman 2011).

Textiles found at Dura reflect the diverse character of this settlement and its access to trade goods. Just over 300 textiles were found on the embankment along the city wall and towers and in some tombs of the abandoned Citadel. These textiles, which are fragmentary and show signs of hard wear and patching, are mainly plain and tapestry weaves in wool (e.g., Figs. 5.3–4). Dark purples, blues, reds, and yellows are the most common colors, and they were made with common dyestuffs (Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 4 and 6). The only gold thread (Yale University Art Gallery, hereinafter YUAG, 1938.5692) was found in a small bundle and the core for the thread is missing, so perhaps, as suggested by Rudolf Pfister and Louisa Bellinger in their publication of the textile finds, this thread is what remains from a cloth that had been burnt to recover the valuable gold (Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 60).

Although Durene textiles were mostly local products, several exceptions offer evidence of a local market for imported materials. One of these exceptions is a fragment with imported undyed cotton (identified as “Levantine” rather than Indian cotton) weft threads, belonging to a trio of large fragments of what may have been a tent (YUAG 1929.504;



Fig. 5.1: Sketch map including places mentioned in the text (drawing by the author).

Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 52–53). The silk of two small fragments from the site would have been imported as well. One was described as fine monochrome brocade, that is, with patterning made by a supplementary weft.<sup>1</sup> The other silk is a compound weave, that is, a fabric structure with more than two sets of elements, more than one warp or more than one weft system (Fig. 5.2) (YUAG 1933.486; Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 52–53). Bellinger identified its silk fiber as Chinese and the spun threads (strong twist to the right) and weft-faced, compound-weaving technique as characteristic of Central Asia and Syria, speaking of a compound cloth: one main, one filling warp and two wefts carried at a time, as well as of red, tan, and undyed silk, rather than the unspun, warp-faced compound-weaving technique characteristic of China (Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 53; additional discussion at 1–3 and 9). This piece is well preserved thanks to a history of careful treatment (Snow 2011, 39) and much studied, although with few uncontested conclusions (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1988, 209–211). Recently, Zhao Feng identified the design, two geometrical, angular patterns on parallel stems, repeated in red on undyed silk and undyed on tan silk, as characteristic of Han-period China, and identified the cloth as a silk taqueté, i.e., tabby or plain compound weave, with a “Han-style” design, likely originating in China (Zhao 2004, 70). This is in contrast to Krishna Riboud’s earlier characterization of the design as “non-Chinese” and “inspired by a tapestry pattern” (Riboud 1975, 155; see also Sheng 1999, 147–168). This piece may be early (third-century CE) evidence of weft-faced compound weaving produced on looms that were developed for their capacity to be set up to repeat precisely the same design (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1998, 374–430; Muthesius 1997, 22; Wild 2003, 141). It has a technique indicative of emerging technology, a design that resists easy attribution, and imported material: in many ways, this was an exotic textile for Dura.

Another piece from Dura was characterized by Pfister and Bellinger as imitating in tapestry weave a repeating diaper pattern of a floral motif repeated in rows that regularly alternate their spacing, “making a diagonal as well as a linear pattern” like those associated with popular compound-weaving designs (Fig. 5.3) (YUAG 1934.469; Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 38–39, cat. no. 138). Unlike the marked regularity of compound weaves, in tapestry weaving discontinuous wefts were “drawn” freehand, resulting in irregularities in pattern, tension, and surface texture.

Brocading, compound weaving, and its local imitation in tapestry are unusual among the clothing and cloth furnishings from Dura, and entirely absent from paintings of textiles at the site. Textiles and depictions of cloth from Dura present traditional styles of loose-fitting Roman tunics utilizing solid-color ground fabrics with symmetrical arrangements of thin weft bands in solid colors, usually paired, and geometric motifs (Fig. 5.4). Although there is a dearth of Parthian Persian material culture from Roman Dura, the visual arts

often do depict Persian-style ornaments such as arrowheads, and close-fitting, Persian-style tunics with a wide ornamental band arranged vertically along the center of the torso (Fig. 5.5). Such garments may well be represented among the textile artifacts, but the pieces are often so fragmentary that we cannot be certain they belong to garments (Fig. 5.6). Of the furnishings from Dura, one large wool blanket (or hanging), reused as a shroud, was ornamented with continuous weft bands of solid colors (Fig. 5.7) (YUAG 1938.5683; Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 34, cat. no. 116). Numerous textile fragments further attest to the frequent occurrence and variety of solid-color bands (Fig. 5.8).



Fig. 5.2: Silk in a weft-faced compound plain weave with multi-colored bands and repeating bands of an angular motif in alternating colors. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (© Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1933.486; used by permission).



Fig. 5.3: Fragment of weft-faced wool tapestry weave with repeating motifs in an overall diaper pattern. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (© Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1934.469; used by permission).

Indeed, a wide range of ornamental bands is found among the Durene finds. Shaded weft bands well known among the finds from third-century Syria are especially indicative of cosmopolitan tastes, as Annemarie Stauffer has shown (Stauffer 2007; Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 9), and of expense through the use of the valuable dye – kermes – and imitations of valuable dyes (Koren 1999). Typically at Dura these bands modulate between dramatic contrasts of deep colors meticulously combined in the dyeing of the fleece and spinning of the yarn and may be combined

with other motifs (see Fig. 5.9). In one variation (Fig. 5.10), modulation between bands was accomplished by alternating picks of color combinations (e.g., from red-tan to red-blue) in the center rows framed by registers of bands in solid colors. The silk compound weave (Fig. 5.2) might be included in the category of shaded bands because of its sophisticated juxtapositions of the close tonalities of tan and undyed silk, although the design is not related by motif or color scheme to the most common types of shaded bands. Shaded bands combined with bands of vegetal motifs have



Fig. 5.4: Wool tunic with purple clavi and cuff (weft) bands. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945, pl. v; © Yale University Press; used by permission).



Fig. 5.5: Fragments of a wall painting of Mithras and Sol. From the Mithraeum at Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (© Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1935.99a-s; used by permission).

third-century, contemporaneous counterparts, for example, in Western China, where they were utilized in narrow pieces of cloth for second- to third-century boots from Niya, which typically employ a brighter color scheme of “rainbow stripes” including pink and light blue (Fig. 5.11) (Mair 2011, 198; Sheng 2011; Zhao 2002; Schorta 2001, 101–103). There is a similar aesthetic at work that accommodates, as Stauffer has argued, the adaptation of a Syrian design; such adoptions and adaptations of motifs and designs contributed to an expanded ornamental repertory employed across vast territorial distances and cultural realms.

Textual and archaeological evidence also indicate that textile designs with shaded bands were produced in numerous locations and traded widely. Maria Mossakowska-Gaubert identified the term *skiotos* in a first-century sailing itinerary for the Red Sea, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, as referring to shaded bands (2000, 312). In addition to the artifacts from China, Egypt, and Syria are examples

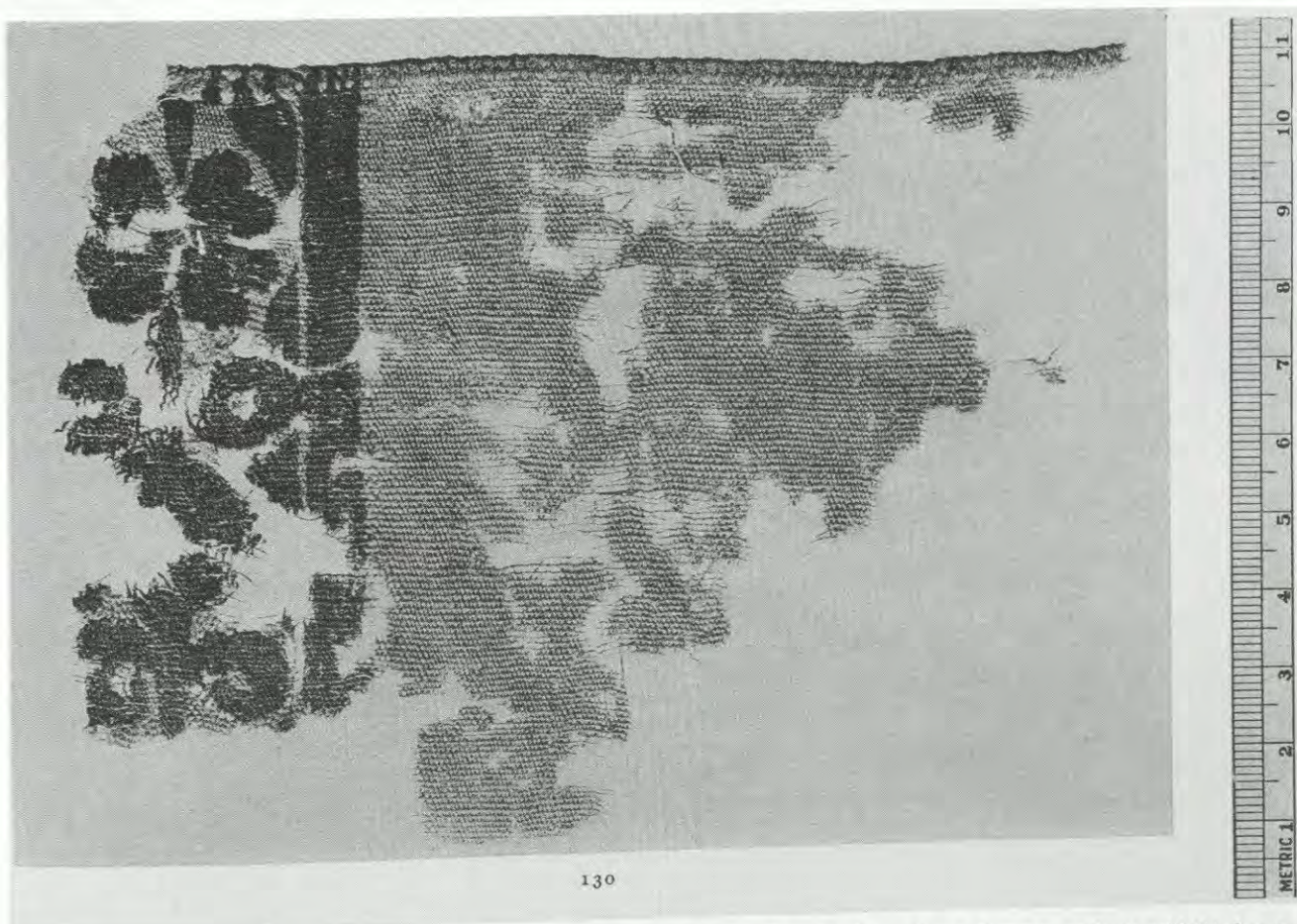


Fig. 5.6: Fragment of west-faced wool tapestry weave with a band of vegetal motifs. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945, pl. xix; Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1938.5683; © Yale University Press; used by permission).

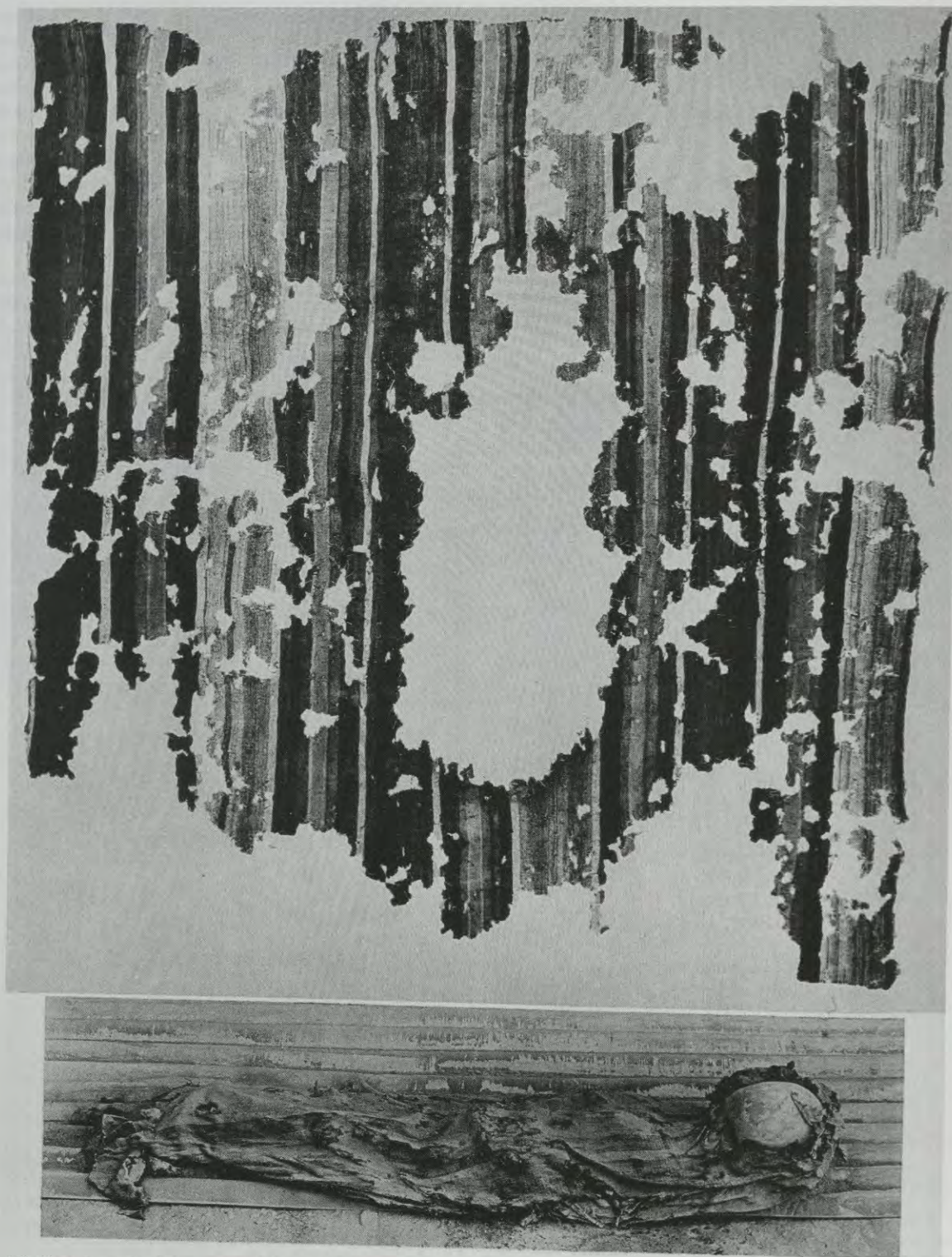


Fig. 5.7: Shroud, wool, plain weave with multi-colored weft bands. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945, pl. xvi; © Yale University Press; used by permission).



Fig. 5.8: Fragments of plain-woven wool with multi-colored weft bands. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945, pl. ii; © Yale University Press; used by permission).



Fig. 5.9: Fragment of plain-woven wool with multi-colored weft bands. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (©Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1933.542a; used by permission).



Fig. 5.10: Fragment of tapestry-woven wool with weft bands of shaded colors alternating with composite ornamental bands. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (after Pfister and Bellinger 1945, pl. iii; © Yale University Press; used by permission).

from Palestine and Central Asia (Koren 1999; Schorta 2001) and a furnishing (cushion cover?) with brightly colored shaded bands in wool and cotton found at the Nubian site of Qasr Ibrim in a Roman-Meroitic context (British Museum EA72334; excavation registration number 1990,0127.503). Among the 3500 textiles found at the Roman town site of Karanis in Egypt, many of the sixty-five examples of locally produced shaded bands adopted a strikingly subdued color scheme of browns and tans, sometimes with designs added in weft-wrapping similar in appearance to brocades (Fig. 5.12); one example of three small pieces sewn together (Fig. 5.13) is executed in brighter colors closer to the color schemes of the boots from Niya and the variation from Dura (Figs. 5.10 and 5.11).

The far-flung find sites of textiles with shaded-band designs attest to remarkably widespread markets and what we might call a syncretization of taste. (Here, I use the term syncretism to “focus attention precisely on issues of accommodation, contest, appropriation, indigenization and a host of other intercultural processes” (Stewart 1995, 28)). Indeed, these and other design families of Late Antique trade textiles seem to represent visually striking, deliberately inter-cultural, ornamental repertoires.

The spread of such luxury textiles may have occurred via various channels. Elites and government officials would have brought luxury goods with them and acquired others on their travels. The military as well as merchants served as important conduits for the dissemination of desired goods within the Roman sphere, laying the foundation for cosmopolitan taste even in smaller towns like Karanis in Egypt’s Fayum Oasis, and Dura on the eastern frontier of Syria (Bender Jørgensen 2004; Wild 2006; Thomas 2001; 2012, esp. 54, 58). Karanis, for example, which had a sizable population of military settlers from around the Roman world through at least the fifth century CE, preserves documentary texts recording the stationing of soldiers in Syria who came from Karanis. In 108 CE, one soldier stationed in or near the Syrian port city of Tyre wrote home to his mother in Karanis about the abundant shopping opportunities in Tyre to reassure her that he was in an altogether good place.<sup>2</sup> He also asked that a particular kind of linen be sent to him from Alexandria as he was unable to find it in Tyre.

One tiny fragment (16.4 × 6.4 cm) from Dura (Fig. 5.14) (YUAG 1933.502) combines alternating thin weft bands of solid colors, checks, and what appears to be a vegetal motif in an unusual design (Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 38; cat. no. 136). It seems to belong to the design family of a similar pattern depicted on a tunic in a devotional panel painting from Egypt, now in Brussels, which dates to the later second or early third century (Fig. 5.15). The two larger militant pagan divinities may be identified by their cloaks, weapons, and armor as belonging to a type of god that gained popularity during the Roman period and especially along the frontiers of the Empire (Kantorowicz 1961). The military





Fig. 5.11: Shoes with tapestry-woven wool with weft bands of shaded colors framing a central band of floral motifs. From Niya, Tomb 5 of Cemetery 1, second–third century (after Mair 2011, 198; © Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum Collection; by kind permission of the Director of the Xinjiang Museum, Prof. Hou Shixin).



Fig. 5.12: Fragment of tapestry-woven wool with weft bands of shaded stripes and supplementary weft-wrapping. From Karanis, fourth century? (© Kelsey Museum of Archaeology / University of Michigan, 13873; used by permission).



Fig. 5.13: Sewn and knotted fragments of plain-woven wool with multi-colored weft bands of shaded stripes. From Karanis, fourth century? (© Kelsey Museum of Archaeology/University of Michigan, KM 12973; used by permission).

divinity identified by Vincent Rondot (2001) as Lycurgus wears extraordinary clothing below his cloak, including the tunic with multiple decorative bands. The patterns of these bands change from one portrayal of Lycurgus (or similar soldier deity) to another: however, the constant seems to be that the tunic is patterned in multi-colored bands similar to those found among the Dura textiles (as in, e.g., a painted panel at the Wadsworth Atheneum, 1934.6; Sörries 2003, no. 15).

Garments with distinctive banded patterns like that worn by Lycurgus would have functioned iconographically much as any other clothing attribute: that is to say, as a marker of identity or character (Parani 2007), clothing the figure in exoticism that could be quite specific, as certain types of widely traded textiles came to be identified by their places of origin in a common naming practice that could be narrowed down very closely to a specific geographical location. So, for example, in Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices, some linens are designated as "Tarsian-Alexandrian," referring to Alexandria as the place of production and Tarsus as the place of origin of the type of cloth, whereas others are identified as "Tarsian" (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1988, 301; Carroll 1988, 8 and 12; Mossakowska-Gaubert 2000, esp. 309, 313). Unfortunately, these and other named types of textiles cannot be securely linked to artifacts now for lack

of evidence and because we are much less knowledgeable about types of textiles and their origins than ancient and medieval consumers were (Golombek 1988). Just as textile types and copies of them were often specifically identified by place of origin, it is possible that the patterned cloth worn by Lycurgus may have referred visually and materially to the location of his cult origins or an important cult center: however, as neither is known for Lycurgus, any such references remain obscure. Suggestions made without consideration of his dress include far-away Thrace along the northern frontier, which may be the origin of Lycurgus's companion in the panel, the soldier-deity, Heron; Syria and Arabia, Rondot's suggestions, seem more likely (2001, 232–233; 2013). Further consideration of the use of textile patterns in Roman and Late Antique visual culture may well enhance our understanding not only of related textile markets, but also of related religious syncretisms and other cultural amalgams made possible by expendable wealth.

### Palmyra

Roman-era Palmyra, in contrast to Dura, was a caravan city, and has long been known to owe its remarkable prosperity to trade along the network of overland routes popularly known as "the Silk Road" (Browning 1979; Mathews 1984) and

the sea routes that also linked Palmyra and western markets to China (e.g., Maechen-Helfen 1943, 358). During the second half of the third century, Palmyra outgrew its role as an ally of the Roman Empire, and its ruler, Odenathus, who had stopped the Persian advance after the long siege and eventual destruction of Dura Europos, emerged as a possible contender for the imperial throne of Rome. Quite possibly his assassination was inevitable: however, his widow, Zenobia, continued to rival Roman imperial power by military conquest in the East across Syria-Palestine, Osroene, and Egypt in 269 until, just a few years later, in 274, her imperial ambitions were finally checked (Fig. 5.1) (Stoneman 1995; Fowden 1999, 80). According to one account that is very evocative of the legendary fortunes of Palmyra brought under Rome's control, after her capture Zenobia was paraded through the streets of Rome in golden chains (*Historia Augusta, Tyranni Triginta* 30, 24–26).

The riches of Palmyra (and the later Roman Empire) are reflected in the five hundred textiles found at the site that date to the first three centuries CE and are much more opulent than those of Dura. Most were found in the tombs of two prominent Palmyrene families, who like others of their status had acquired their wealth through trade as merchants, caravan financiers, government officials, and the like. The Palmyrene finds present a broad array of exotic materials (cashmere, cotton, silk, and gold, in addition to linen and sheep's wool) and expensive dyestuffs, including the "true" purple famously harvested from the *murex* mollusk on the Syrian coast at Tyre. The several types of silks include locally produced damasks, a double-faced fabric structure with patterns in surface relief, a block twill, and Chinese warp-faced compound weaves as well as plain and patterned silk cloth imported from China, sometimes with silk embroidery added locally. One example (Fig. 5.16) provides an interesting comparison to the piece from Karanis mentioned above (Fig. 5.12) for surface decoration in the relief and color scheme of the weaving.

Textiles and dress reflect Palmyra's diverse cultural riches as well. Scholars have long noted distinctive Palmyrene combinations of Persian and Graeco-Roman forms of dress and ornament (Goldman 1994) although few have mentioned Arab components as in the shaping of the women's headdresses (Finlayson 2002; Stillman 2000). The Roman-style dress that predominated at Dura was less common at Palmyra (Schmidt-Colinet *et al.* 2000; Thomas 2003). Chinese inscriptions on Palmyrene textiles seem to have been appreciated, but as signs of exotic origins rather than legible language (von Falkenhausen 2000, 58–71). The wider variety of ornamental bands found at Palmyra include shaded bands in distinctive deep tones of black, crimson, and gold, alternating with bands of vegetal motifs (Figs. 5.17 and 5.18). Further evidence of Palmyrene cosmopolitan tastes shared by distant locations has been argued persuasively by Stauffer, perhaps most



Fig. 5.14: Fragment of tapestry-woven wool with multi-colored bands of alternating designs. From Dura Europos, early to mid-third century (© Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection, 1933.502a; used by permission).

strikingly in her comparison of a crimson-purple and gold damask tunic and sheet (?) of a girl's burial near Poitiers, in France, to a nearly identical find from Palmyra, proposing that textiles in the burial in France were Syrian products (Stauffer 1999–2000). Moreover, Stauffer has compiled an impressive listing of Syrians engaged in the manufacture and trade of luxurious textiles (true purple and gold) in the western European provinces of the Roman Empire (Stauffer 2007, 362). Throughout the Empire, Romans drew from the same repertory of colors, materials, motifs, designs – and exotica – to clothe themselves in distinction and glamour.

### Antinoë and Panopolis

Antinoë and Panopolis emerge as particularly important sites for the consideration of luxury textiles in Late Antiquity. These were major cities of the wealthy province of Egypt, well situated to participate in Red Sea and Indian Ocean

trade, which continued from the Roman period through a time of political uncertainty in the first half of the seventh century when Egypt was conquered first by the Sasanian Persians, then reconquered by the Byzantines, and finally taken by the Arabs to be incorporated along with Syria and

Palestine into the emerging Islamicate world (Wendrich *et al.* 2003; Nappo 2009; Schörle 2010; Sidebotham 2011). During the early Roman centuries, trading ships docked at Berenike, itself a site of exotic textile finds (Wild 2006). From there some ships sailed up the Red Sea to Myos



Fig. 5.15: Panel painting of Lycurgus, Heron, smaller servant and donor (?) figures. From Fayum, Egypt, second to early third century (© Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, E7409; used by permission).

Hormos, then on to Clysma, which provided access to the Nile and the Delta via Trajan's Canal, and which gained prominence from the fourth century (Mayerson 1996). There were, in addition, well traveled and well guarded overland routes from Berenike and other ports to the Nile (Nappo 2009; Schörle 2010; Sidebotham 2011). There is written but as yet little archaeological evidence for textiles and other luxury goods traveling across Arabia along the



Fig. 5.16: Silk damask, light brown, with mask, lozenge, and jade ring motifs overlaid by multi-colored silk embroidery. From Palmyra, attributed to China, first century (Damascus Archaeological Museum S10.1–6; © Palmyra Archive Bern; photo: A. Schmidt-Colinet; after Schmidt-Colinet and Stauffer, with *al-As'ad* 2000, cat. 451, 176–177 pl. VII; used by permission).

so-called Frankincense Road or Hajj pilgrimage roads into Egypt during Late Antiquity (Reza-ur-Rahim 1972; Stillman 2000; more generally, André-Salvini *et al.* 2010). Most recent discussion has focused on the role of Mecca in pre- and early Islamic trade (Crone 1987; Heck 2003, esp. 569–571; Kennet 2005). Relatively little is known of the commercial roles of the Arab kingdoms of the Ghassanids (Byzantine allies, third to seventh centuries) and Lakhmids (Persian allies, fourth to seventh centuries), and less still of the roles of Himyar and Axum, although the region promises to be a productive area for future research (e.g., Hourani 1995, 17–49; Shahid 1995; Hatke 2013).

Antinoë and Panopolis preserved significant quantities of luxury textiles that were excavated around the turn of the twentieth century, for which precise numbers and places of production are often not known (Schrenk 2006; Thomas 2007). The textiles have, however, been considered in light of long-distance trade since their discovery (e.g., Strzygowski 1903). Although until recently the textiles were dated mainly through stylistic and technical comparisons, now radiocarbon dating confirms a range of dates going up to the ninth century for textiles from the site, so they span the Roman, early Byzantine, Persian and early Islamic periods (Schrenk and Knaller 2004; Bénazath 2006; De Moor and Fluck 2006; Lintz and Coudert 2013). Throughout the long centuries of Late Antiquity, perhaps spurred by the third-century invasion by Palmyra and the seventh-century invasion by Sasanian Persians, as well as ongoing trade, several features of Persian-style dress such as fitted shapes and decorative trim around the edges of garments (Fig. 5.5) came to be incorporated into traditional,

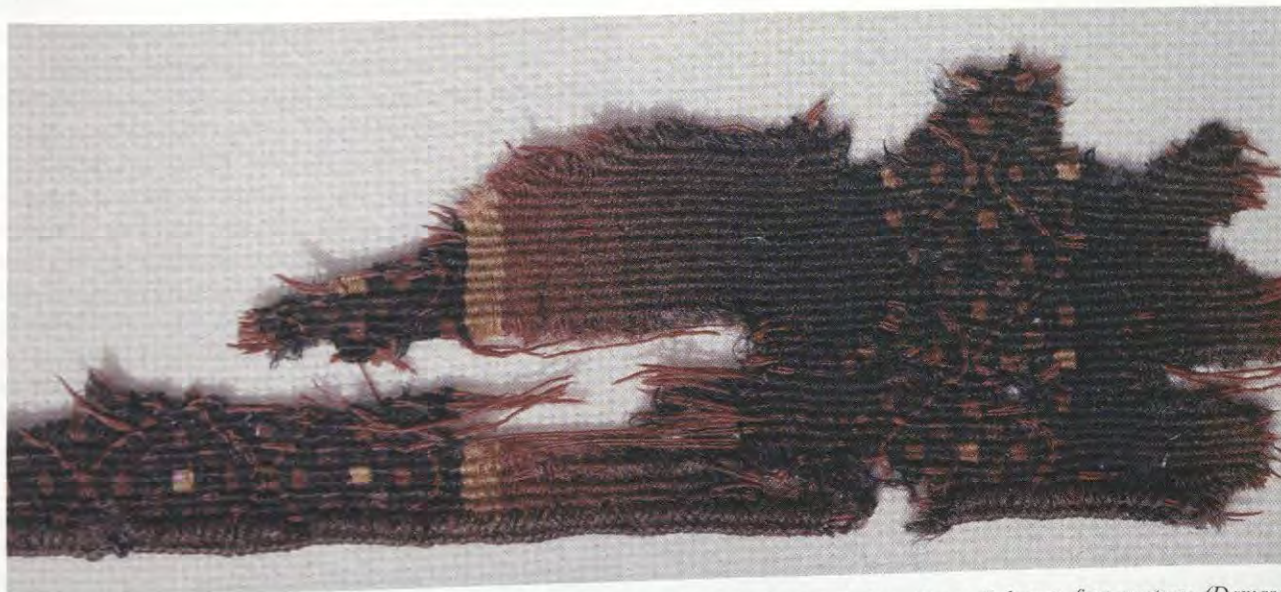


Fig. 5.17: Wool tapestry weave, multi-colored shaded bands alternated with lattice design. From Palmyra, first century (Damascus Archaeological Museum L 60; © Palmyra Archive Bern; photo: A. Schmidt-Colinet; after Schmidt-Colinet and Stauffer, with *al-As'ad* 2000, cat. 415, 169–170, pl. I; used by permission).



Fig. 5.18: Wool tapestry weave of multi-colored shaded weft bands alternating with bands of floral motifs and "S" motifs. From Palmyra, first century (Palmyra Archaeological Museum K 3; © Palmyra Archive Bern; photo: A. Schmidt-Colinet; after Schmidt-Colinet and Stauffer, with *al-As'ad* 2000, cat. 179, 132–133, pl. 1; used by permission).

loose-fitting, Roman-style Egyptian and Syrian dress (Fluck and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2004; Pritchard 2006).

In recent years, as scholars have researched the history of the excavations, findspots of the textiles and the assemblages of artifacts with which they were found, and the history of their treatment (Martiniani-Reber 1986; Calament 1989; Rassart-DeBergh 1997; Del Francia Barocas 1998; Schrenk 2006; Lintz and Coudert 2013), scholarly attention has turned to textiles from Antinoë that were recovered during the explorations of Albert Gayet. Of the textiles attesting an appreciation of exotic luxuries, one brightly colored shaded band in a recently analyzed burial assemblage extends the chronological span of the use of such bands by several centuries into the seventh century (Lintz and Coudert 2013, 251, no. 73), long past their main period of use in the first to third centuries (Granger-Taylor 1987, 22–23). No Chinese silks were found at Antinoë, however, of the compound-woven silk and wool textiles that have been attributed to Persia, many present motifs repeating in rows that regularly alternate their spacing to create a lattice grid. Numerous variations on this design may include majestic birds, fierce animals, human faces (masks?), crosses, jewels, and chalices brimming with fruit or plants. One wool taqueté, a plain compound weave (Fig. 5.19), presents a simple version of such designs: in this version, white circles against blue and red grounds may be read as a roughly hexagonal lattice grid from the front, with the colors reversed on the back (Martiniani-Reber 1997, 128–129). Also found at Antinoë are the better known silk twill compound weaves, known as samite, some with ground and motifs in two contrasting colors, and others with multiple

colors disposed in alternating registers (Schrenk 2006, 26). Diaper designs, with motifs in registers of alternating colors (Fig. 5.20) similar to the floral pattern at Dura (Fig. 5.3), are characteristic of many of the silks and other textiles excavated at Antinoë (Martiniani-Reber 1997, 86–87). This is of particular interest in regard to earlier designs of colored bands because what is suggestive of aesthetic links to later designs is the alternation of colors and motifs that play with the prioritization of foreground, background, and fields of vision. Even in the simplest compositions this has an animating effect: hence, my reconstruction images of the faded and damaged textile artifacts (Figs 5.19 and 5.20). Textile color patterning was indeed sometimes refreshed by paint in antiquity (Martiniani-Reber 1997, 63).

Textiles excavated at the cemeteries surrounding the city of Panopolis by Robert Forrer include compound-woven twills in silk, some, like the lattice designs from Antinoë, ornamented with vegetal and animal motifs, faces, bust-length and other figural motifs (Fig. 5.21) (Forrer 1891; Fluck 2008; O'Connell 2008; Thomas 2012). Pieces cut and shaped as *segmenta*, in long and short bands, squares, and roundels were applied to tunics. (To my knowledge there has been no study of how often these were found in instances of original use or reuse.) These apparently local Egyptian products may have been made from silk thread imported from Syria (where sericulture had been introduced in the sixth century) or from farther away. Similar designs seem to have been produced in Syria as well (e.g., a roughly contemporaneous figural medallion excavated at the site of Halabiyeh: Pfister 1951, 40–42, pl. xviii [Hal. 104a=99], and pls. xxvii–viii).



Fig. 5.19: Reconstruction drawing based on wool taqueté design of circles inside hexagons in an overall lattice pattern. From Antinoë, attributed to Sasanian-era Persia (drawing: the author; based on Louvre inv. AF 5666; after Martiniani-Reber 1997, cat. 75, 128–129).

Of special interest for considerations of commerce in the syncretization of taste are Panopolitan compound twills of the sixth–ninth centuries with designs of medallions that contain a fantastical kind of plant incorporating several varieties of stems, leaves, and fruits (De Moor *et al.* 2006; Thomas 2012); these medallions have also been found on larger sheets of silk, unfortunately without archaeological documentation (Fig. 5.22). Once dubbed “the medallion style” by James Trilling, related designs of repeating roundels were produced throughout the long Late Antiquity (and after) in numerous thematic variants all along the trade routes from China to the Mediterranean in silk artifacts and in depictions of silk clothing (Trilling 1985; Ierusalimskaya and Borkopp 1996; Juliano and Lerner 2001). Indeed, both the lattice and medallion design families, much like earlier shaded-band ornamentation, appealed to cosmopolitan tastes across the known world, in effect locating the wearer socially and cosmically.

#### Exotic textiles and their designs: speculations on commerce and cosmos

Among the later silks from Antinoë and Panopolis are examples of two of the most common designs for compound-woven silk in the Eastern provinces from the fifth century (if not earlier). Overall repeating patterns of diamonds and medallions, also widely represented in visual arts, were chosen to decorate the silk cloaks of a pair of soldier saints in a Christian icon preserved in the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai in Egypt, which may be



Fig. 5.20: Reconstruction drawing based on silk samite with palmettes and crenellations in a staggered arrangement in weft-bands of alternating colors. From Antinoë, Tomb 148, necropolis B, attributed to Sasanian-era Persia (drawing: the author; based on Louvre inv. E 29367; after Martiniani-Reber 1997, cat. 35, 86–87).

dated perhaps as early as the mid-sixth century (Fig. 5.23). The panel painting represents various types of sacrality in the creative hand of God descending from the firmament and spreading divine light, in the brilliant white of the angels below, the Christ child resplendent in gold clothing and Mary in majestic purplish-blue, as well as in the bright



Fig. 5.21: Color reconstructions, mainly of silk compound weaves with various motifs arranged in overall repeating lattice patterns. From Panopolis, fourth–eighth/ninth centuries (after Forrer 1891).





Fig. 5.22: Silk compound-woven twill (*samite*) with fantastical plant motifs in medallions and in the interstices between medallions. Find spot unknown, sixth–ninth centuries (© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1977.2; used by permission).

silk cloaks of the flanking saints. Care was taken to depict the characteristic luster and color schemes of the soldiers' silk cloaks (Fig. 5.24) and such characteristics of compound weaves as reversibility and the inversion of color scheme from front to back (Figs. 5.25–5.26). It is well known that in late Rome and early Byzantium, silk was rare and expensive enough that it was associated with elites, and certain types were legally the prerogative of the emperor and his court, such that, in modern art historical scholarship (which rarely addresses the archaeological evidence from Egypt), Byzantine silk is routinely associated with the imperial court at the capital city of Constantinople (Maguire 1997; Thomas 2012). Other associations may be significant as well.

The Christian icon was originally framed like the earlier pagan panel (Fig. 5.15). Based in part on such technical, textual and archaeological evidence from Egypt, Thomas Mathews has argued persuasively for a continuous tradition of painted panels in private devotional use (Mathews 2006; 2011; see also Sörries 2003; Rondot 2013). There is early evidence for this tradition in Syria at Dura as well (e.g., YUAG 1929.288; Brody and Hoffman, 2011, 322 and pl. 2; Rondot 2013). In both the earlier and later panels only the military figures are dressed in up-to-date versions of exotic fabrics. Such cloth characterizes the soldier saints as contemporary from an earthly, commercial perspective. In light of venerable habits of viewing in which the Roman elite cast themselves in the form of gods (and in the clothing or heroic nudity of gods) in daily life and in funerary imagery (Wrede 1981; Thomas 2000; Zanker and Ewald 2004), this would seem to be a deliberate reversal of that strategy, dressing divine or holy figures in the form of “people nowadays.” In another sense, such cloth might be seen in conjunction with other items of long-distance trade or great material value, such as in the Christian icon, the pearls and

gold on the Virgin's throne, materials that in early Christian religious discourse attained extra-material, spiritual value (Thomas 2012). Silk also acquired spiritual value, and seems to have assumed a mediatory role in its uses for wrapping sacred books and relics (see Fig. 5.32) (Fulgham 2002; Thomas 2012); in this sense, the icon presents a scene in the court of heaven in which silk envelopes the resurrection bodies of holy saints who mediate between God and humankind.

Further conceptual mirroring of links between spiritual significance and valuable earthly material specifically within the context of commerce is evident in the sixth-century text now known as *The Christian Topography* by the merchant-turned-cosmographer known as Cosmas Indicopleustes (Wolska-Conus 1962; 1990). Written and apparently illustrated in Alexandria during the sixth century, the treatise demonstrated in five chapters the folly of pagan conceptions of a spherical universe based in myth and science against a Christian scriptural view of the cosmos. In text and diagrams Cosmas presented the earth as a cubical chamber below the vault of heaven: this form had been revealed to Moses as a pattern of the world, then re-envisioned in the tabernacle built according to the divinely revealed specifications, in which the earth is a type of altar offering the fruits of the earth and the vault of heaven is symbolized by colored veils covering the tabernacle and separating the inner from the outer sanctuary (Brubaker 1977; Clark 2008, 25).

As the treatise was not well received in all circles, Cosmas later added chapters to refute critics of the first edition and a chapter citing his research into ancient pagan antecedents to Christian Old Testament accounts: this example gives us a sense of just how fluid these ideas, debates, and discourses were, and how deliberately interwoven. In the eleventh



Fig. 5.23: Panel painting of Virgin and Christ child enthroned, flanked by soldier saints and angels, below the hand of God. Sixth or seventh century (The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai; photo: the author; by kind permission of Father Justin).

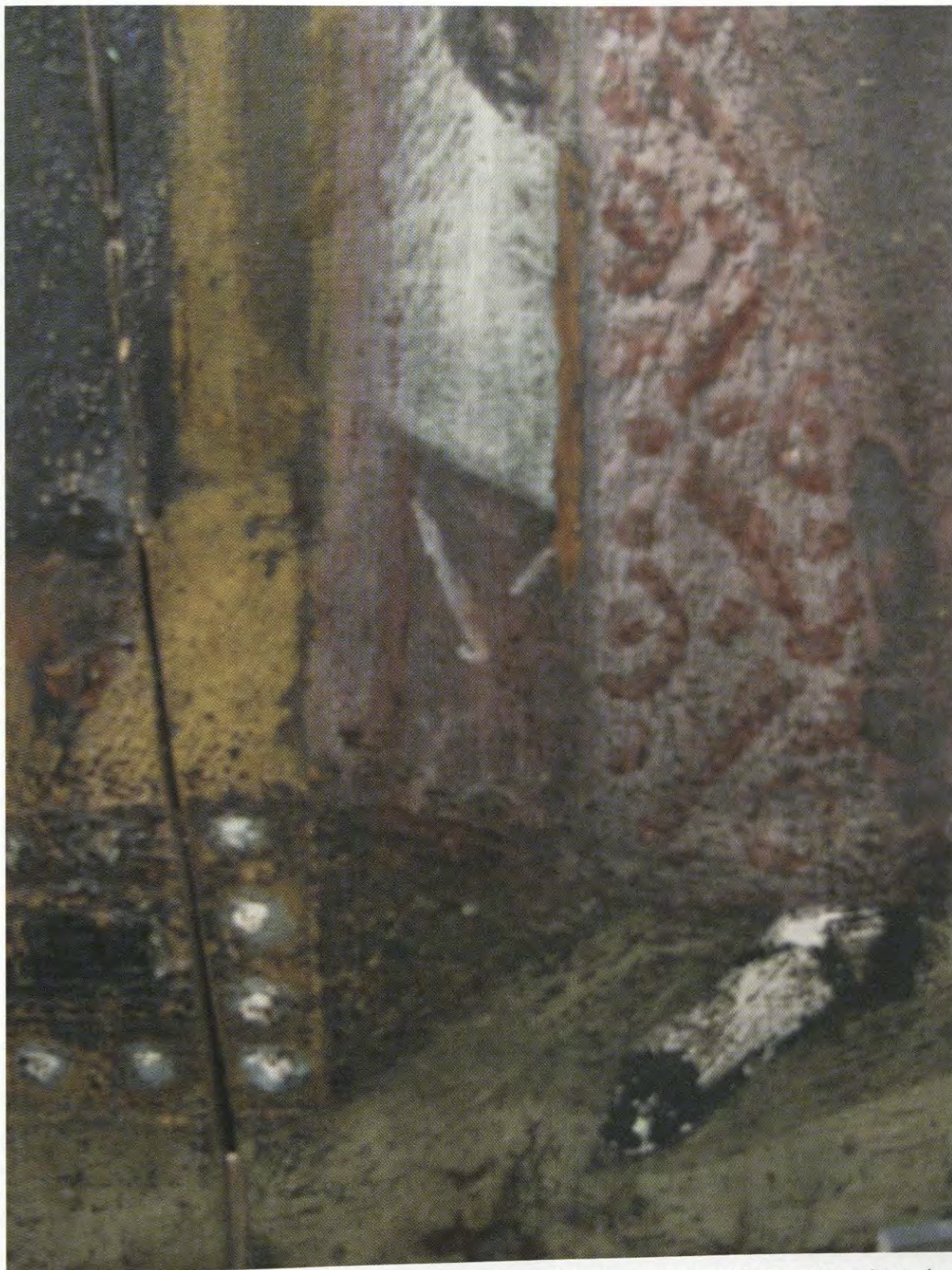


Fig. 5.24: Detail of painted silk cloak worn by saint at right in Fig. 5.23 (*The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai*; photo: the author, by kind permission of Father Justin).



Fig. 5.25: Silk textile fragment. Compound-woven twill (samite) with lattice vine framing birds in medallions. Find spot unknown. (Photo: "Textile Fragment. Front. 6th–7th CE. Attributed to: Iraq or Syria. Silk. Charles Stewart Smith Memorial Fund, 1915 (15.109). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A." Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY).

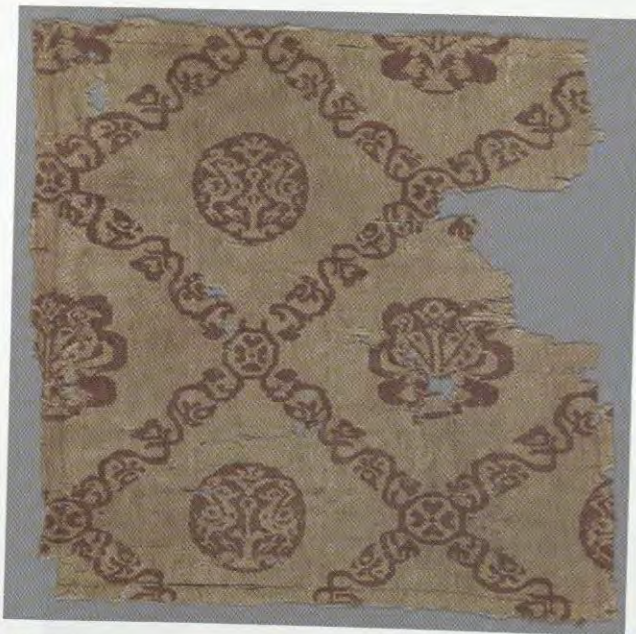


Fig. 5.26: Reverse of silk textile fragment in Fig. 5.25. (Photo: "Textile Fragment. Reverse. 6th–7th CE. Attributed to: Iraq or Syria. Silk. Charles Stewart Smith Memorial Fund, 1915 (15.109). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A." Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY).

chapter based in the author's extensive travels as a merchant and his knowledge of the places of origin of goods, Cosmas located the origins of silk in China at the edge of the world. Beyond the land of silk, "there is neither navigation nor any land to inhabit" (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography* II, 13). Beyond was Ocean, and beyond Ocean to the east lay Paradise, and beyond Paradise, the entrance to heaven where the righteous deceased are consigned until the Second Coming of Christ. In this view, the glamour of silk associated with its characteristic luster, intense coloration, difficulty of access, technological advances in weaving, expense, and rarity was incalculably enhanced by the proximity of its place of origin to Paradise.

In locating Paradise in the east beyond Syria and Arabia, beyond the far-off lands of Persia, India, and China, and beyond human access across Ocean, Cosmas drew upon an ancient tradition that had come to be widespread in Early Christian thought (Mayerson 1993; Podskalsky *et al.* 1999; Parker 2002). Although Cosmas himself visualized this idea in a diagrammatic map along with other explanatory images, the text and images of Cosmas' book now survive only in later Byzantine-period copies of the ninth and eleventh centuries, themselves luxury productions with lavish illustrations painted on vellum (Brubaker 1977; Clark 2008, 10, n. 1). As depicted in an eleventh-century copy of *The Christian Topography* at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, Paradise is a lush garden of plants and trees so fertile that they bear blossoms and fruit simultaneously and is the source of the four rivers that run below Ocean and then appear again in the inhabited part of the world as the rivers Phison (Ganges), Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile (Weitzmann and Galavaris 1973, 52–65). These waterways, it should be noted, re-distribute Earth's bounty, God's blessings, through commerce. Conception and images rely upon ancient, pre-Christian cosmographies that resonate with citations in the final chapter for pagan antecedents for Cosmas' Christian, scriptural worldview (Maguire 1987a, 7, 23, 26, and 37; 1999a).

Although scholars have paid little attention to the eleventh book of *The Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, its imagery as presented in the Sinai manuscript may be seen to operate in a visual language by which distinct places are represented by their distinctive trade goods, including, along with silk, plants, fruits, and animals, such things as musk from the musk-deer of India (Fig. 5.27) and pepper from the pepper trees of Mali (Fig. 5.28). This imagery presents an essential aspect of Cosmas' worldview, which was permeated by commerce. Goods, according to Cosmas, were also God's blessings, and there must have been merchants to bring the necessary supplies to the Israelites as Moses led them through the desert (V, 205).

Cosmas mentions many of the same places and products as the author of *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a first-century

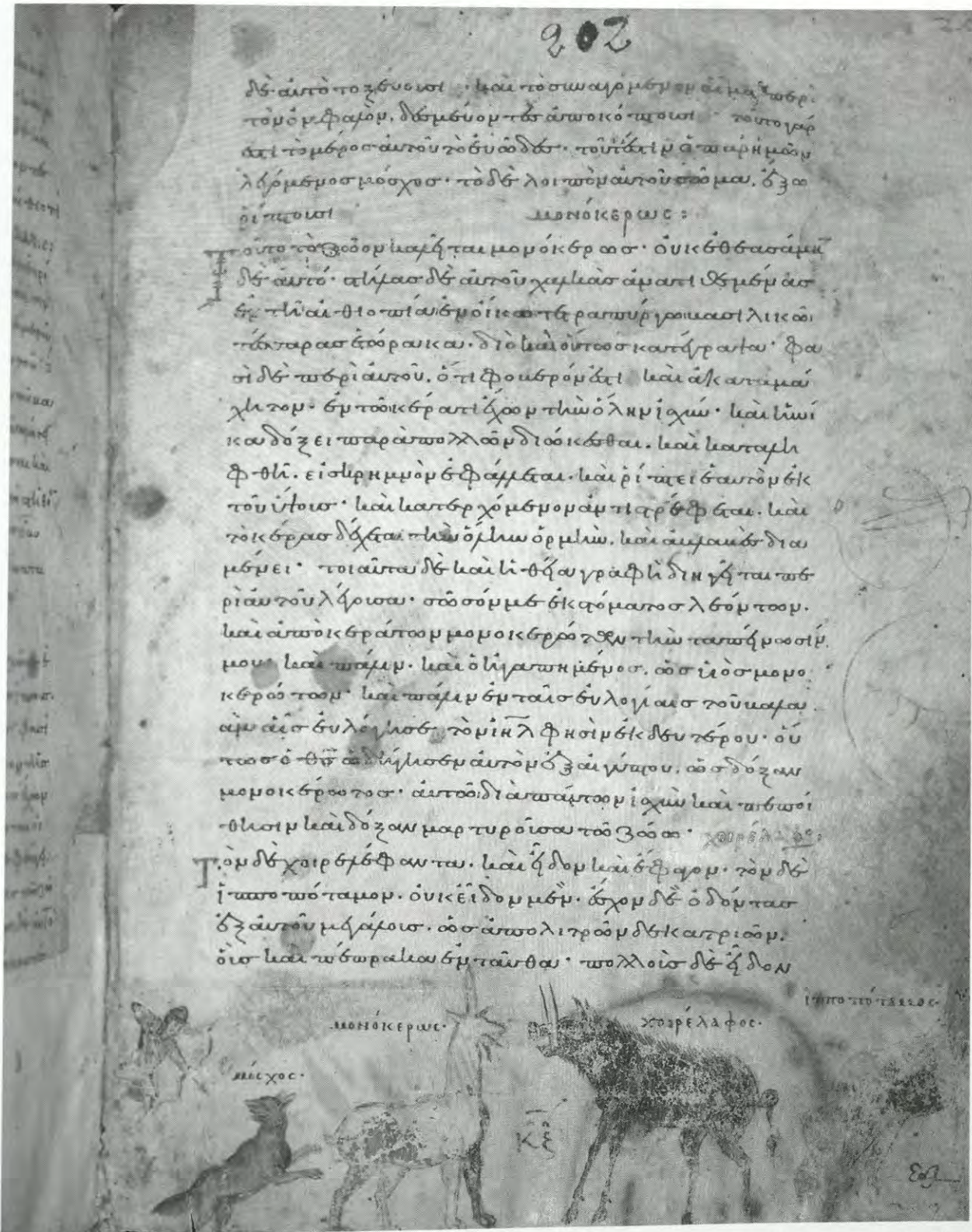


Fig. 5.27: Page with miniature paintings, with an armed man preparing to shoot an arrow at a musk-ox, other exotic animals, folio 202r, in The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes. Place of origin unknown, early eleventh-century copy of sixth-century manuscript (The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Inv. No. Codex 1186; photo: ©The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, by kind permission of Father Justin).

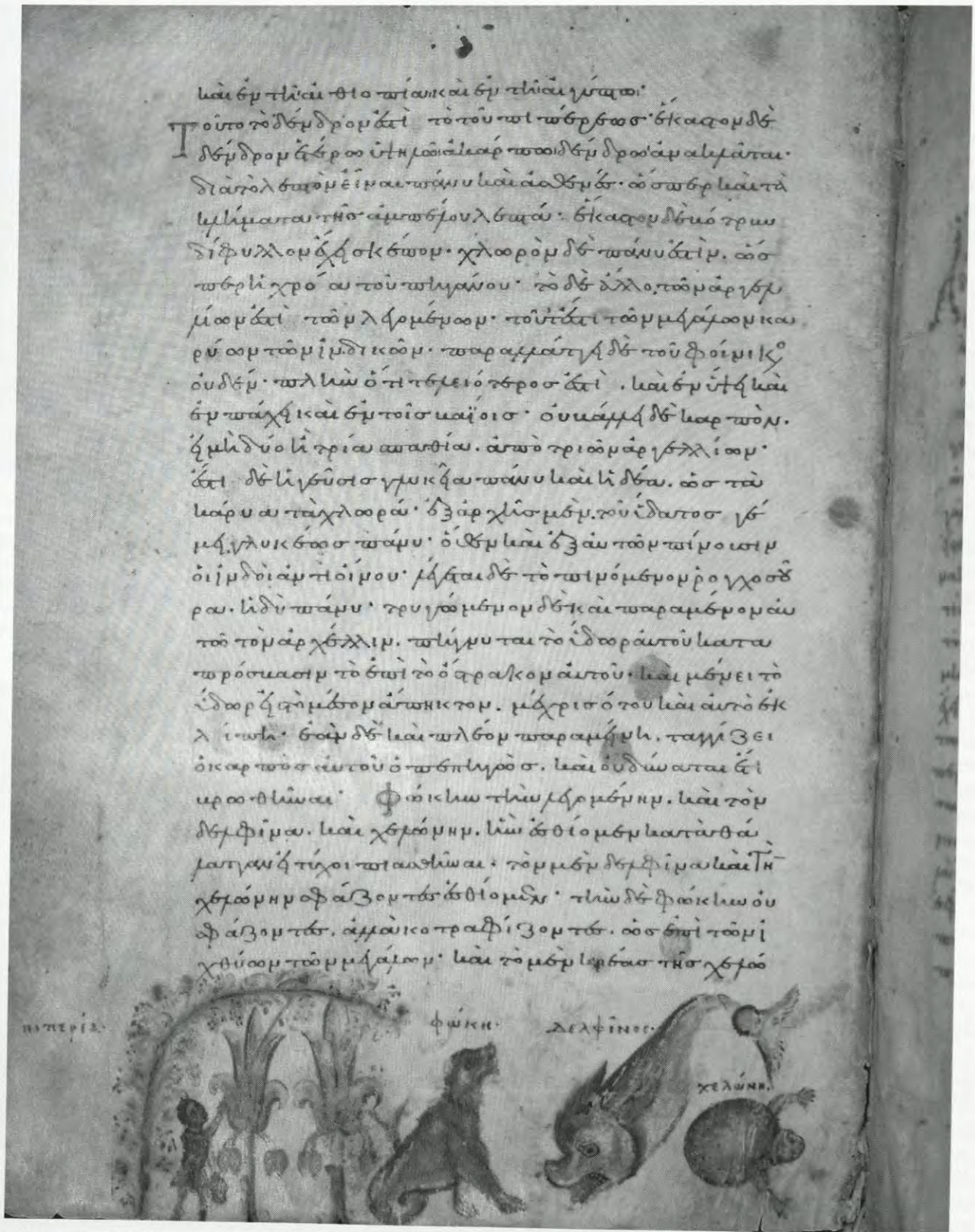


Fig. 5.28: Page with miniature paintings of exotic plants and sea creatures, folio 202v, in *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*. Place of origin unknown, early eleventh-century copy of sixth-century manuscript (*The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai*, Inv. No. Codex 1186; photo: ©The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, by kind permission of Father Justin).

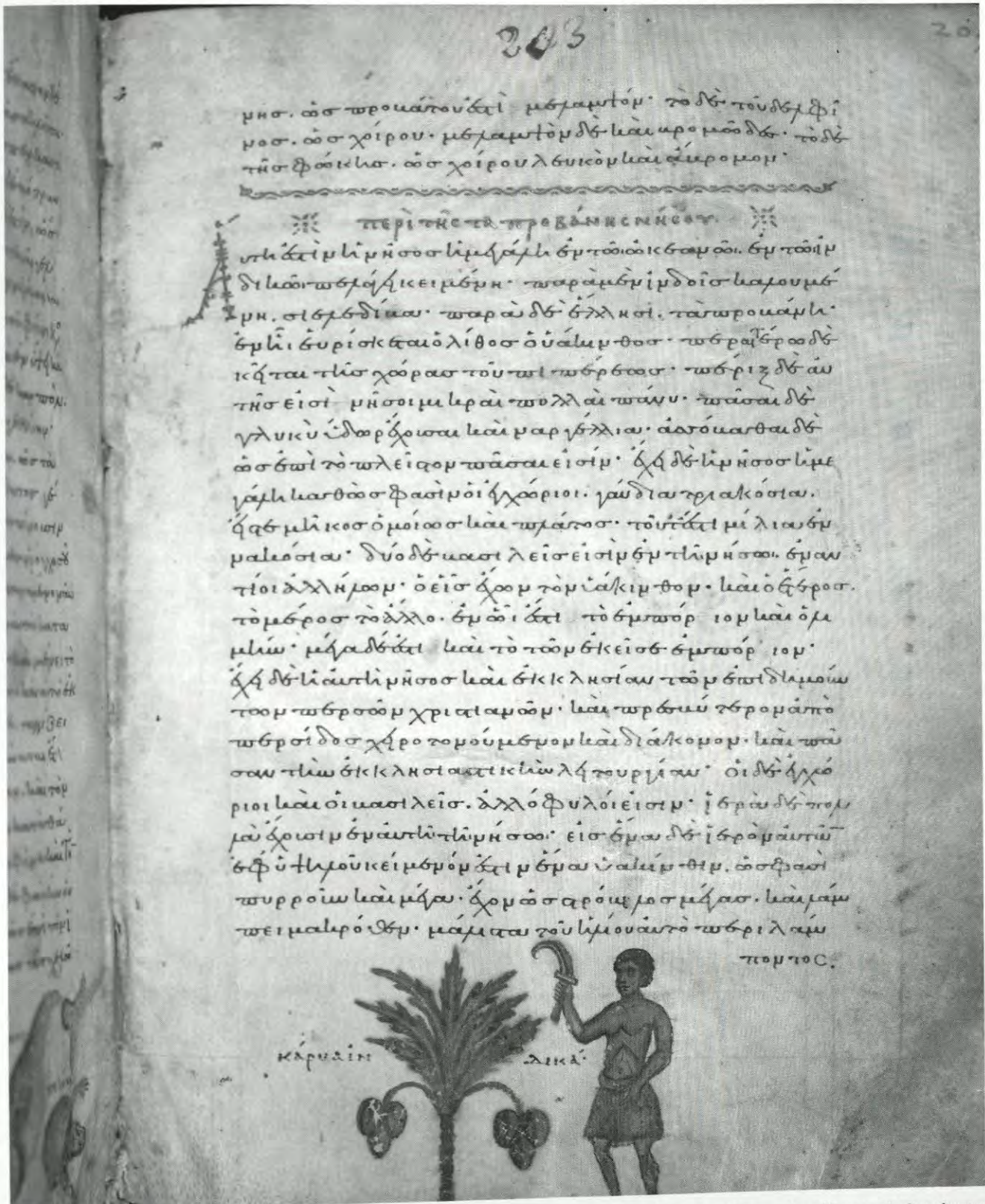


Fig. 5.29: Page with miniature painting of a man about to harvest coconuts, folio 203r, in The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes. Place of origin unknown, early eleventh-century copy of sixth-century manuscript (The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Inv. No. Codex 1186; photo: ©The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, by kind permission of Father Justin).

sailing itinerary for the Red Sea, characterizing foreign lands as the places where characteristic luxury commodities and goods originated. As Grant Parker noted, “The underlying thought, we might say, is that an object is known by knowing its origin, whether topographical or personal” (2002, 86). The images in the Sinai manuscript of *The Christian Topography* include initial acts of acquisition, such as the hunting of the musk-deer and the harvesting of pepper (Figs. 5.27–5.28), and the harvesting of coconuts (Fig. 5.29) that preceded trade in these aromatics, spices, and exotica. Silk, one of the most frequently mentioned exotic goods in Cosmas’ text, traveled along the same routes.

Animals as well as fruits and plants – all the wonders of God’s creation, the bounty of paradise, and the good life on this earth – are also represented in mosaic pavements of some Early Christian churches in conceptual depictions of the world (Figs. 5.30–5.31). These seem to have been particularly popular in the eastern Roman provinces of Greece, Palestine, and Syria, where they developed traditional Graeco-Roman compositions, some of which, as scholars have long pointed out, are also related to textiles, especially silks (Maguire 1987b, esp. 228; Dunbabin 1999; 2006, 327–329 and *passim*; Gonosová 1987; Hachlili 2009, 179–182). Indeed, a tradition of representing the bountiful earth in woven textiles seems to have continued from the Roman period, as attested in a Greek epigram by the first-century poet, Philippus of Thessalonica, and by numerous tapestry-woven textiles found in Egypt, throughout the long Late Antiquity into the Fatimid period – again by a textual attestation (Paton 1917, 418–419, no. 778; Bloom 1985, 31 and 33; Maguire 1987b, 221; and Bierman 1998, 12).

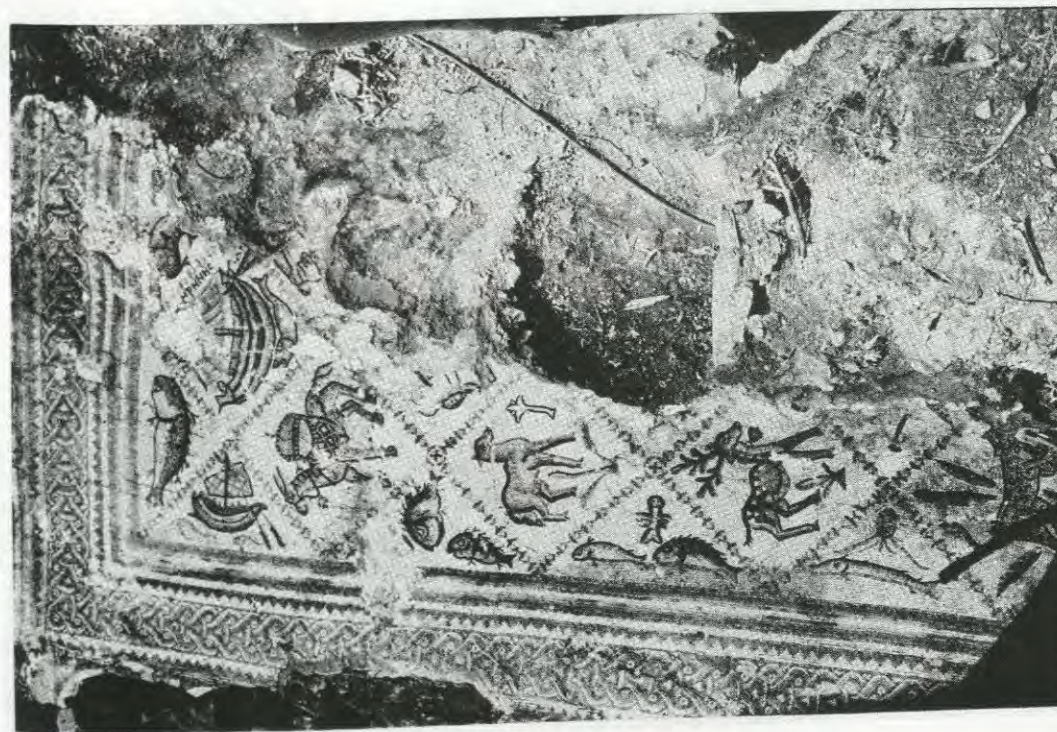
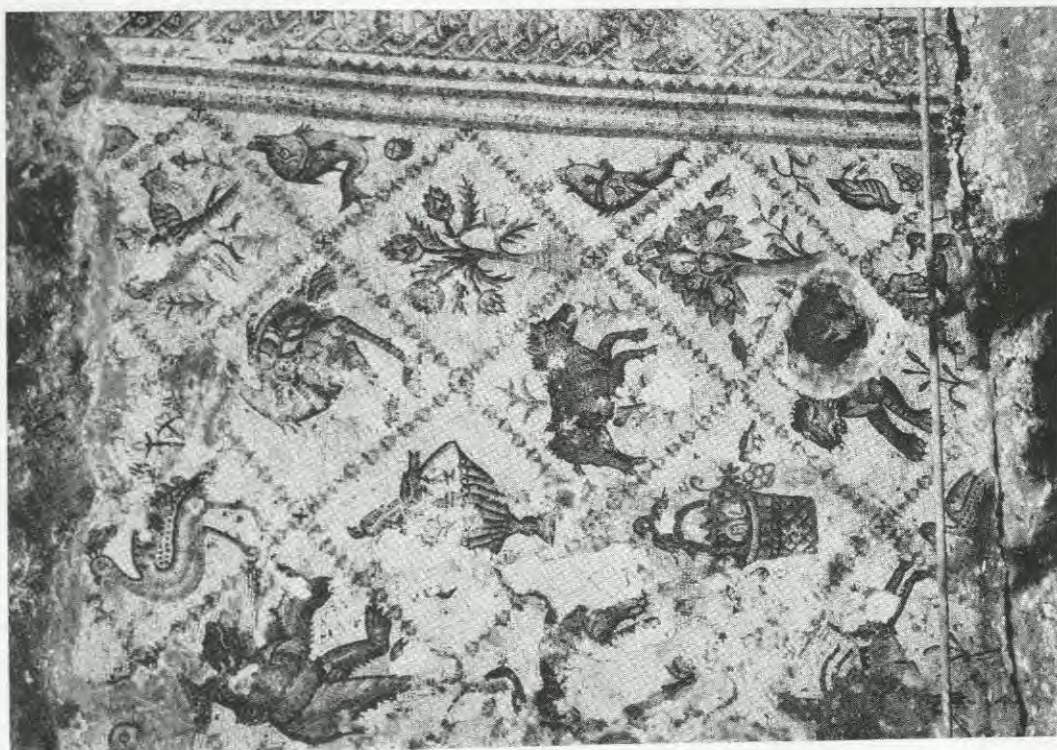
In the Late Antique mosaics, compositions representing the bounty of Earth may be organized within a lattice pattern, as at the sixth-century pavement at the Khalde basilica in present-day Lebanon (Fig. 5.30). In most of the diamond-shaped cells of this design, animals and plants represent Earth’s bounty, the lattice framing each item in a separate space as if in a distinct place. In two adjacent diamonds along the edge of the mosaic are ships suggesting travel between places. As the art historian Henry Maguire has shown, ships of a special kind sail Ocean and the rivers of Paradise to ferry the blessed soul’s transition from this world to the next in both ancient pagan and Christian Graeco-Roman traditions (Maguire 1987a, 34). In a lattice cell near the boats, a beast of burden transports not weightless souls, but the weighty material things of actual commerce. A basket full of fruit in another cell suggests both the collection of Earth’s bounty and the generative nature of Ocean. The lattice, an ordering grid composed of flower blossoms, seems to conflate the rivers of Paradise and Earth with their bounty and all the animals of God’s creation, thereby offering an allusive and symbolic alternative to diagrammatic or more straightforward symbolic representations of Earth and Ocean like those in the Cosmas

manuscripts. Although studies of Greek, Roman, and Late Antique ornament rarely attribute meaning to design structure, in this reading the message and the conceptual relationship between the lattice grid and the motifs inside are incomplete if either grid or interior cells are ignored.

In other instances, the organizing lattice framework may be irregular and organic, leafy and lush, as in a late sixth-century mosaic pavement of the Church of the Priest John near Mount Nebo (Fig. 5.31), in which a personification of Earth carrying her fruits in a cloth held in front of her chest holds the center of the composition. Below Earth is the figure of a youthful hunter who will acquire bounty with his slingshot; another hunting youth may have been represented above and, to either side, youths approach Earth to present baskets of fruit. (Interestingly, part of the meander frame around this composition is composed of shaded bands of colors.) Conceptually, this bounty of earth, air, and ocean, symbolizing God’s gifts and blessings over all the world, was presented as well to those who were assembled in the church. Henry Maguire has clarified how such mosaic pavements locate the church congregation within cosmic space (Maguire 1999b; for seasonal and astral associations, see Tomašević 1967 and Kolarik 2012). These compositions, however, were “multivalent, ambivalent, and ambiguous” (Maguire 1987a, 10) in reference to spiritual and ecclesiastical economies (Caner 2006); these compositions echo similarly themed Late Antique textile hangings from domestic settings, which Maguire and Laszlo Török have shown to auspiciously characterize the providence of elite householders and their homes (Maguire 1999a; Török 2005, 231; Fluck 2012, 167, n. 1). Similarly, Ellen Swift has considered how Roman domestic mosaics, display silver, and items of personal adornment all worked together so that a person adorned by his or her possessions was also socially constituted by them (Swift 2010; Thomas 2012, 132–133). Notably, the lattice pattern also carries connotations both of a physical barrier and of transparency, that is, visual access: one sees through the compositional grid to what lies within and behind it (Branham 1992, 75; Paton 1917, 420–421, no. 781); as a result, the motifs have a characterizing function.

One final composition may help illuminate the network of associations linking exoticism of material and technique, motif and design to prosperity and luxury, cosmos and commerce in Late Antique conceptual world construction. The very fragmentary ninth-century compound-woven Byzantine silk (with Greek inscriptions) used to wrap the relics of St. Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral in Britain employs similar referential strategies to express what were, by the ninth century, venerable associations between the Wonders of Creation, the bounty of Earth, and silk cloth, a man-made wonder and traded luxury good (Granger-Taylor 1994, 126–128; 1998). This piece has suffered such ruinous damage that only in a reconstruction drawing (Fig. 5.32) is the repeating design discernible: a roundel containing a





Pl. LXVI

2

Nef (mosaïque terminale) : 1. — Partie Nord. 2. — Partie Sud.

Église de Khaldé.

1

Fig. 5.30: Detail of a mosaic pavement with motifs of bounty, placed into a lattice-work frame of floral motifs. Basilica church at Khaldé, Lebanon, sixth century (from Chehab 1959).

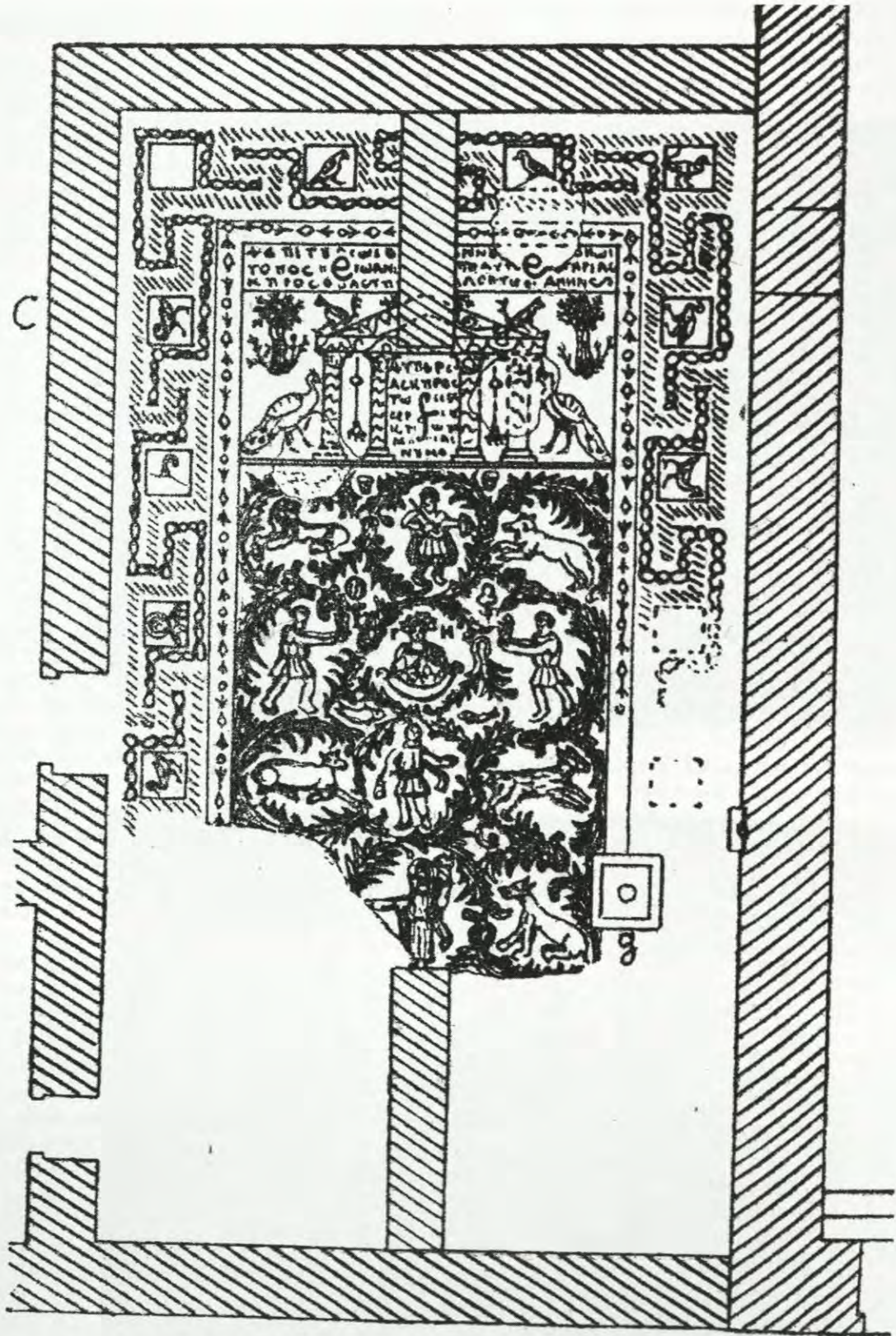


Fig. 5.31: Drawing of mosaic pavement with motifs of bounty with leafy, irregular framing. Church of the Priest John, Mount Nebo, Jordan, sixth century (after Saller 1941).



Fig. 5.32: Reconstruction drawing of silk compound-woven twill (*samite*) with the repeated motif of Earth, wearing a lattice-patterned garment, in a medallion framed with various fruits, and in the interstices fruit- and plant-filled chalices flanked by birds. Ninth century? Found in the tomb of Saint Cuthbert, Durham Cathedral. From Constantinople? (reconstruction drawing by the author, after Granger-Taylor 1994, cat.no. 139, 126, fig. 139 (design)).

personification of Earth similar to the mosaic pavement in the basilica at Mount Nebo. Earth rises from the multicolored waves of Ocean. Too little remains to reconstruct the head of the figure, but we can see that Earth carried in each hand something like a Dionysiac *thyrsus*. The motif represented within the lattice grid of her Persian-style garment is found as well on contemporaneous textiles, including compound-woven silks (Fig. 5.33). Thus, this composition combines the two most common designs for compound-woven silks in, first, the lattice pattern of Earth's fictive silk garment and, second, in the medallion grid of the actual cloth, which also organizes colorful motifs of abundance within and between medallions in the precise repetition characteristic of compound weaving. Within each medallion, the silk-clad and bejeweled figure of Earth articulates associations between natural bounty and man-made luxury, between the creation of the world and its ordering (*ktisis*), and adornment (*kosmesis*) (e.g., Maguire 1987a, 48–49). Conceptions of order and constitutive adornment may be evident as well in the Christian painted panel in the different kinds of cloth articulating the different natures of the saints, angels, Christ, and Mary, and thus their places within the heavenly hierarchy (Thomas 2012, e.g., 64–65).



Fig. 5.33: Silk textile fragment. Compound-woven twill (*samite*) with motif of fruit (?) on a pedestal in an overall repeating lattice design. (Photo: "Textile fragment. 7th–8th CE. Islamic. Silk. Fletcher Fund, 1946 (46.156.13). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A." Image copyright: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource NY).

The clothing of the soldiers in both devotional panels may be seen to resonate with trade in luxury textiles and contemporaneous economic thought. In some strands of contemporary Christian theology, the continual redistribution of surplus wealth in charitable acts was seen as essential to just behavior and the economy of salvation, developing an ancient economic theory that held commerce to be a divinely established link between people, places, and their goods (Karayiannis and Drakopoulou Dodd 1998). This is similar, I suggest, to images that allude to waterways originating in Paradise bringing blessings and bounty to the inhabited world (Maguire 1987a, 26 and 37). According to Cosmas, this redistribution, too, was divinely ordained, as on the third day of creation, God:

... collected the water into one mass and exposed to view the dry land, which he called earth and which was before hidden by the waters; and he made the seas, that is, the ocean ... and also made the four gulfs which run up into this earth of ours ... [By the four gulfs, Cosmas means the Mediterranean Sea, the Arabian Gulf, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea.] He also so prepared the gulfs that they could be navigated and afford a means of transit to different parts of the world, thus always uniting the dispersed nations in the bonds of amity through the facility with which commodities might be transported from nation

to nation. And he commanded all kinds of fruits and trees and green herbs to spring up out of the earth. (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography* III, 166)

Cosmas presents an unusual perspective, to be sure, but it was founded in current Christian discourse and economic theory and reflected in traditional textile and mosaic compositions. Might this perspective be related as well to contemporaneous pagan universalist discourses celebrating the coexistence of the many different gods associated with all the places of the inhabited world, especially those of pagan monotheistic views (Nilsson 1963; Athanassiadi and Frede 1999)?

From both perspectives, Lycurgus's garment with its distinctive pattern of bands, in contrast to the traditional Roman armor, cloak and tunic of his companion, would seem to place Lycurgus east of the Roman Mediterranean sphere, perhaps generically, if the design did not allude to a particular place, or, perhaps specifically, if intended to be recognizable to connoisseurs of the various origins of trade textiles. The soldier saints in the Sinai icon cannot be securely identified, and so the relation of their cult sites to their manner of dress is unknown. It may be enough to identify their dress as of the military elite or associate their status so closely to the contemporary imperial court that their cosmopolitanism is particularly Constantinopolitan, yet artifacts and depictions of exotic cloths offer complementary perspectives onto a wider world of luxury in later Antiquity. The silk of the Christian soldier saints' cloaks associates them not only with Persia and China, places beyond the eastern frontiers of the Empire, but also east of this earth, much as Cosmas's outlook on trade in exotics turned farther east toward a distant horizon tinged with fantastic prosperity, where trade nearly met Paradise.

### Acknowledgements

For their illuminating comments and discussion I thank Thomas F. Mathews and the participants of the 2011 workshop hosted by New York University Abu Dhabi, "A Cosmopolitan Pantheon: Panel Paintings from Roman Egypt," Sana Mirza, Jonathan Hay, Jenn Ball, the anonymous reviewers, Carole Gillis, Berit Hildebrandt and all the participants of the 2012 workshop hosted by the Mahindra Humanities Center of Harvard University, "Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity".

### Notes

- 1 Images of the brocade fragments, YUAG 1933.521 A and B, are available through the YUAG online database; Pfister and Bellinger 1945, 53–54, cat. no. 264.
- 2 University of Michigan papyri: P. Mich. inv. 5888; APIS record: Michigan.apis.2580, accessed 4/7/12.

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- Zhao Feng 2004. "The Evolution of Textiles along the Silk Road", in J. C. Y. Watt (ed.), *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 AD*, New Haven CO and New York, 67–78.

ANCIENT TEXTILES SERIES 29

# SILK

TRADE AND EXCHANGE ALONG THE SILK ROADS  
BETWEEN ROME AND CHINA IN ANTIQUITY

*Edited by*

**BERIT HILDEBRANDT**  
with **CAROLE GILLIS**

 **OXBOW | books**  
Oxford & Philadelphia



Published in the United Kingdom in 2017 by  
OXBOW BOOKS  
The Old Music Hall, 106–108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JE

and in the United States by  
OXBOW BOOKS  
1950 Lawrence Road, Havertown, PA 19083

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Hardcover Edition: ISBN 978-1-78570-279-2  
Digital Edition: ISBN 978-1-78570-280-8 (epub)

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hildebrandt, Berit, editor.

Title: Silk : trade and exchange along the silk roads between Rome and China  
in antiquity / edited by Berit Hildebrandt.

Description: Oxford ; Philadelphia : Oxbow Books, 2016. | Series: Ancient  
textiles series ; 29 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016040016 (print) | LCCN 2016052593 (ebook) | ISBN  
9781785702792 (hardback) | ISBN 9781785702808 (epub) | ISBN 9781785702815  
(mobi) | ISBN 9781785702822 ( pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Silk–China–History–To 1500. | Silk  
industry–China–History–To 1500. | Silk Road–History. |  
China–Relations–Rome. | Rome–Relations–China. |  
China–Commerce–Rome–History. | Rome–Commerce–China–History.

Classification: LCC HD9926.C62 S55 2016 (print) | LCC HD9926.C62 (ebook) |  
DDC 382/.45677390951–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016040016>

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Printed in the United Kingdom by Short Run Press  
Typeset in India by Lapiz Digital Services, Chennai

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