

Threads, Tropes, Technologies, and Terminologies - Tracing the Mobility of Central Asian Silks

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Abstract

The mobility of textiles across Central Asia in the late antique and early medieval periods is a phenomenon that can be studied under many different angles. One can focus on the movement of materials, specifically silk and the numerous legends that outline the different ways in which this precious commodity has been transmitted westward out of China. One can follow the movement of technologies and terminologies that travel along with the materials, passed on by both textile objects and craftspeople. Another point of investigation is the imagery that textile objects carry on their surface — motifs and patterns do not just cross spatial distances, they also transfer from textiles onto other media such as painting, architectural decor, wood carving etc. The methodologies in Central Asian textile studies range from microscopic fibre and pigment analyses to the construction of global models of silk trade as well as its use in other forms of economic and diplomatic exchange. Disciplinary, historical and political boundaries of the 20th century have created gaps and discontinuities within this methodological scope. The proposed paper will trace historiographical (mis-)conceptions on the mobility of the so-called Sogdian silks from their representations in 7th-8th century wall paintings in Samarkand to Panjikent to fabric fragments preserved in the Abegg Stiftung in Riggisberg based on latest research results and propose alternative lines of inquiry.