Winters are cold and summers brief at the site of Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains of Siberia. Here, in a high valley of their summer pastures, a group of horse-riding nomads once buried their dead, and with them, a rich assortment of local and imported goods that reflected the wealth and status of the deceased.

These burials took place more than 2300 years ago. Yet by a fortuitous combination of circumstances, some of the most fragile materials survived the passage of time remarkably untouched by ordinary processes of disintegration and decay. These circumstances were both natural and man-made. The tombs were broken into shortly after the burials took place. Ground water flowing into the broken wooden chambers beneath mounds of stone formed ice that preserved the organic riches of the tombs until archaeological excavation in this century. Left behind as

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This felt shabrak from kurgan 5 illustrates one type of local geometric ornament. Every other row is made of the same two colors of felt. However, the positions of the colors are alternated, creating an extremely lively pattern.

Charrière 1979: Pl. 115
worthless by the robbers, these remains included the bodies of humans and horses, fabrics, fur, leather, wood, and other often fugitive materials.

Among the frozen finds were a large number of superbly preserved textiles that have enriched scholarly discussion ever since their excavation. Ancient textiles are rarely preserved, and archaeologists seldom have the opportunity to excavate and study actual fabrics. They are usually known to us through artistic representations in less fragile materials, if they are known at all. The splendid fabrics from Pazyryk tell us much about the artistic preferences and cultural characteristics of those buried there. From them we can learn both about the origins of the imported fabrics and about local nomadic products. In addition, we can observe the elusive process of

“The Textiles from Pazyryk”

influence,” that is, the transfer and transformation of artistic motifs, a fundamental component of art historical analysis.

Pazyryk is situated in what is today the Soviet Union, near the Chinese and Mongolian borders (Fig. 2). Eight burial mounds, called kurgans (Fig. 3), have been excavated by Soviet archaeologists, seven in 1947-49 by S.I. Rudenko, and one in 1928 by M.P. Gryaznov. That those buried here were nomadic is clear from the types of burial goods: horses furnished with harnesses, saddles and saddle blankets, whips, structural parts of tents, felt hangings and carpets, portable wooden tables with removable legs, woven pillows, fabric and leather containers, and usually only a single clay vessel. The felt and woven clothing of the males included long stockings and short tunics (Fig. 4), typical of horse-riding nomads. The trousers and boots which were worn with such tunics were not identified at Pazyryk, although they have been found at other similar sites in the area.

Although the date of the Pazyryk burials has been a matter of debate, recent collaborative work by the members of the Trans-Asian Seminar of the Institute of Asian Research, City University of New York, has established, that they should be placed in the second half of the 4th through the beginning of the 3rd century B.C. (see box on The Tombs). At that time, the state of Qin on the western border of China was becoming increasingly powerful. It may have been the demand for luxury goods by the aristocracy of this state that stimulated international trade, resulting in the deposition in the Pazyryk tombs of goods from China as well

The Tombs at Pazyryk

There are several kurgans in the Pazyryk group, of which five large and three small ones have been excavated. The tombs were log-cabin-like structures placed in a pit in the ground. On top of each tomb the soil from the pit was raised in a mound, over which stones were piled up. The tombs sheltered the ground below from the heat of the sun, causing lesions of permafrost that retarded the decay of the organic materials.

The annular rings of the wooden grave structures of the five largest kurgans yielded a relative chronology that spanned 45 years. Kurgans 1 and 2 were both built in year 0. Kurgan 4 was built in year 7, kurgan 3 was built in year 37, and kurgan 5 in year 45 (Rudenko 1970). A presence/absence criterion by the author places the smaller kurgan 6 at or near the end of the relative sequence. Kurgans 7 and 8 contained no material to support a relative or absolute date.
The Chorasmians are one of the several horse-riding peoples represented sitting beside their mounts on the Peshcaspula reliefs. The bobbed tail and tied-up forelock on this horse recall the treatment of the horses illustrated on the carpet found at Pazyryk.

(Courtesy of The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago)

The Textiles from Pazyryk

This shabruk from kurgan 5 combines three imported textiles. Note how the fabric in the central panel has been pieced so that the squares containing stylized towers are oriented in several directions.

(Also by artist, taken at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg)

The archer on this glazed tile relief from the Palace of Darius at Susa wears a garment made from a textile decorated with crenellated towers stylized into a flat repetitive pattern. Compare the fabric found on the shabruk illustrated in Figure 8.

(Courtesy of Broom & Luccio Ltd.)

8.

9.

This detail of a saddle blanket, or shabruk, from kurgan 5 shows the delicate Chinese embroidery of the imported fabric. The silk is faded, but the original colors, in limited areas against a broad pale ground, would still have been subtle. The Pazyryk nomads added strips of blue and red felt ornamented with foil cut-outs to form the border of the shabruk.

(Courtesy of Carlsberg Foundation; after unpublished photographs by E. M. Wright)
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asian textiles: one is chinese silks and the other is woolen fabrics, including the pile carpet illustrating motifs inspired by the art of achaemenid iran (6th-4th century bc; see fig. 5a, b).

chinese silks
the silks were both plain and decorated. one fine, plain woven fabric was made into a simple pouch, found in kurgan 3. another silk fragment, also from kurgan 3, was covered with a geometric pattern created by brocade weave: the pattern consisted primarily of rhombus and triangles preserved as grey and green. the largest and most elaborate of the chinese silks, from kurgan 5, was a piece of undyed raw silk on which an elegant embroidery of birds and floral elements was chain stitched (fig. 7). similar brocade and embroidered silks, dating to the late warring states period (4th-3rd century bc; li 1983), have been excavated at mashaan, in the ancient chinese state of chu. in fact, the similarity of the silks from paisyry and mashaan is one element in the argument for a late 4th century date for paisyry.

what is particularly interesting about the embroidered silk is how the people at paisyry used this imported fabric. it has been incorporated into a shabrack, or saddle blanket, cut and stitched together without regard to the pattern in order to fit the felt base. the multi-colored embroidery was enhanced by a border consisting of two strips of blue felt outlining a wider center strip of reddish-brown felt. this bright, vibrant enhancement of the delicate chinese silk is in keeping with the aesthetic apparent in the art of paisyry, an aesthetic that can often be seen today among nomadic peoples in asia.

imported pictorial woollens
there were several textiles that probably came to paisyry from somewhere in western or central

asia. in the past, scholars have generally identified these textiles as achaemenid, and on this basis, some dated paisyry to the 5th century bc. however, most of these figured woolen fabrics, although showing achaemenid influence, differ in significant ways from the art of the achaemenid period. they are probably remodeled, in both time and space from the royal achaemenid centers of production.

three different west-central asian textiles were combined in a shabrack that came from kurgan 5 (fig. 8). the central part of the shabrack is made up of several sections of a single piece of fabric decorated with squares containing stylized towers. this motif is derived from that seen on the tombs of archers decorating a glazed brick frieze from a palace complex of the achaemenid court at tepe sialk (fig. 9). the pieces of the tower fabric are laid in various directions, indicating that the decorative motif itself was not of particular meaning to the person who made the shabrack.

the borders of this shabrack consist of a second piece of imported woven wool (fig. 10). according to the published reconstruction, the original fabric showed pairs of women on either side of a center figure (fig. 11). both women were crowned, although the second figure on each side is smaller than the first, which would indicate a subservient status in achaemenid iconography. the larger woman holds a flower and raises her hand in an attitude of respect. the smaller holds a bowl, a common attribute of a servant, as can be seen for example in the treasury relief from persepolis. another royal achaemenid building complex (see girshman 1964).

the complex imagery of this textile is clearly derived from achaemenid iconography (fig. 12), although it is not canonically achaemenid. however, the treatment of this textile as it was incorporated into the ornament of the shabrack indicates that the imagery as a whole had no intrinsic meaning to the nomads. although the fabric is cut along the vertical axis and the forms of the human figures are generally preserved, the censer is usually destroyed and the women sometimes separated. in the section of the border along the rear of the shabrack, the larger figure is often partially obliterated by the black cloth that frames the border.

just as the shabrack made from the chinese silk was heightened by embellishment, this shabrack made with the pictorial fabrics is also trimmed with gold leaf and fine silver, here applied as squares on the black fur. the five tassels at the back are made from red wool held in wooden ovoid caps which were apparently painted blue. the broad motif for this shabrack was made of felt covered by a third imported pictorial fabric, a strip of walking lions with open mouths and upraised tails (fig. 13). this fabric is closer to achaemenid prototypes than the others discussed above. however, it shares the same dentate border and is technically similar, thus presumably originating in the same location as the other figural woolens. like the shabrack itself, the lion frieze is edged with celt fur and metal foil squares, thus further emphasizing and enriching the effect of the horse trapping.

a pile carpet
another textile of west-central asian origin is the famous pile carpet, also from kurgan 5 (fig. 5a). like the pictorial textiles, this carpet has often been called achaemenid; like the woven fabrics, the carpet is made with some achaemenid inspiration, which can be seen in the row of horses and men on horseback along the outer frieze (fig. 5b). however, the horsemen alternately walk and ride. in contrast, the reliefs at persepolis (an achaemenid royal capital), the horsemen always walk alongside their mounts in the standard court presentation of this motif (fig. 6). in addition, the spotted fawn deer, which appears on the inner frieze of the carpet, is an animal characteristic of transcaucasia and siberia, suggesting that the carpet was manufactured somewhere beyond the achaemenid court.
headgear, shabraks, saddle covers, wall hangings, and rugs (Fig. 1). Felt is made by subjecting sheared, carded wool to a warm wet alkaline solution and applying pressure. This causes the wool fibers to interlock, creating a warm, strong, waterproof textile which can be made in a range of thicknesses. The felt from Pazyryk was apparently all made from sheep’s wool.

Wool was also used in some locally woven fabrics, found in fragments in several of the tombs. This wool cloth was usually red, although there are coverlets made of dark brown fabrics with whole and cut loops. Shirks were made of woven vegetable fibers, either hemp or Kendyr (a strong fiber similar to hemp); however, most of the preserved clothing was of leather and fur (Fig. 15). But it is the artifacts made of felt, together with the woolen objects, that yield the richest inventory of local imagery.

**Local Style**

The local artistic vocabulary consisted primarily of animals and animal elements belonging to a bone and woodcarving tradition that extended back hundreds of years in the Siberian region (see box on Local Style). The roots of the tradition can be seen in carved horns and bone animals of the 3rd to 2nd millennium B.C. excavated in the region. In nomadic burials slightly earlier than Pazyryk, such as Bashadar, also in the Altai, an abundance of carved wooden animal ornaments was preserved (Ietman 1967).

Textiles made locally at Pazyryk were for the most part not woven but made of felt. The foreign luxury goods at Pazyryk were certainly prized for their inherent value as well as their exoticism. As we have seen, some ornamented items were certainly imported from central Asia, presumably for the functions for which they were originally crafted. But some imported objects had a further effect on the people buried at Pazyryk; they influenced their art. Scholars have noted that artistic “influence” has two components. It is not only the images available from the so-called sending cultures but also the selection or choice among them by the receiving culture that together make up “influence.” That process of selection is clear at Pazyryk, where only a limited number of the many foreign objects seen by the nomads inspired local imitation.

**The Impact of Imported Objects**

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15 This man’s caftan from kurgan 2 is made of silk, reinforced by rows of sinew stitches. The fur on the inner side and the outside is decorated with leather cut-outs of deer with elaborate antlers that branch into birds’ heads. The leather applique is embellished with disks of gold foil.
There are many examples at Pazyryk of imported images or formal elements appearing on locally made objects. Sometimes the borrowing appears to have been an isolated event, occurring only once in the Pazyryk inventory. Other originally foreign images were incorporated into the local artistic vocabulary and are found on many different objects.

Although in some cases the local artist copied the foreign elements quite closely, in many cases the borrowed images were transformed under the influence of local style and iconography. Four cases, three of them occurring in textiles, will illustrate these processes of transfer and transformation.

**Bess Head**

Animals dominated local imagery, and human figures were not usually portrayed. As we have seen, the people at Pazyryk were exposed to at least one example of imported human imagery, that of the standing women on the pictorial wooden fabric. As far as we know, based on the materials preserved in the tombs, there was no effort on the part of the Pazyryk people to copy such standing human figures. However, in one instance, they did copy another quasi-human image, that of the head of Bess, a genius of Egyptian origin who was also popular in Achaemenid art (Fig. 16).

Although no figures of Bess were found in the Pazyryk tombs, some of the five heads on a bridle from kurgan 1 (Fig. 17) were clearly copied from a Bess image that must have been imported into the area. The round cheeks, prominent eyes, rounded tab-like ears, and hair and beard locks seen on Bess heads are also seen on four of the wooden heads on the Pazyryk bridle. The fifth head, on the nose band of the bridle, is longer and narrower than the other four, and is a less exaggerated, more human face; it appears to be an experiment in portrait art unique at Pazyryk and in all of the Altai in this period.

Since human figures were not generally part of the artistic vocabulary of these people, how might we explain the presence of the heads on the bridle? It is possible that the explanation may be found in Herodotus's *History of the Persian War*, where he describes the customs of many different nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe, all of whom shared an underlying common lifestyle. Herodotus tells us that one people, the Scythians, beheaded those whom they conquered in battle and brought the heads to their leader to prove worthy to share in the spoils. In addition, they often removed the skins from the heads, cured them, and hung them from the bridles of their horses (Herodotus IV.64). Even if those buried at Pazyryk did not follow such practices, they may have shared a belief in the power of the heads of enemies. Such a belief, combined with the common occurrence of isolated animal heads as part of their customary art, may have predisposed the Pazyryk artist to try this experiment in the representation of human heads.

**Dot-and-Comma**

In contrast, another borrowed image was widely used at Pazyryk: the body ornament called the dot-and-comma (Fig. 18). This ornamentation of the surface appealed to the Pazyryk people because their traditional style was itself highly decorated and colorful. For example, as was discussed above, wooden objects were embellished with gold foil, paint, and leather, and the imported textiles made more likely by borders of metal foil, felt, and fur. Moreover, traditional carved animals had textured surfaces and exaggerated features that were as decorative as the dot-and-comma ornament. Therefore, it seems likely that the imported materials that portrayed animals with dot-and-comma motifs—a pair of silver belt plaques from kurgan 4, the walking lion fabric (Fig. 10), the pile carpet from kurgan 5 (Fig. 5), or some other object not preserved in the tombs—provided inspiration for one more way to vary and enrichen an image, thus appealing to local taste.

**Crested Griffin**

Some borrowings cluster in one or two graves, like the crested griffin, originally an image from the 4th century B.C. Greek world. Representations of griffins were found in the earliest two Pazyryk tombs, which were built in the same year. Also exclusively in these two tombs were images of cocks. Griffins (Fig. 18) and cocks share the large head and crest of birds-of-prey favored in imagery in some earlier tombs in the Altai, such as Bashbadar, as well as in the two tombs at Pazyryk. It is likely that these physical characteristics made the griffin image appealing to the creators of the local copy.
of the beaked bird, probably shared its meaning as well in the eyes of the Pazyryk people.

**Lion Head**

An image borrowed from western Asia and transformed by the people at Pazyryk as a border on a wall hanging has as its prototype Achaemenid lion heads, such as a gold clothing appliqué (Fig. 20) which might easily have found its way to Pazyryk. Rather than being copied exactly, however, the imported lion heads become wolflike. Their elongated snouts and the size and overlap of their teeth are taken from the image of the wolf, which is found widely in the art of Siberia before the time of Pazyryk, as well as in many objects found in the Pazyryk tombs.

It is likely that the wolf, like the beaked bird, had symbolic meaning for these nomads. We know from Herodotus about the Neoroi, who once a year became wolves for a few days before returning to their original human forms (IV, 100). His report is possibly a misunderstood description of a ritual where individuals assume the costume of a tribal or clan totem.

The power of the image of the wolf, whatever its specific meaning, transformed the borrowed lion image. The image was clearly borrowed, since lions do not occur earlier in Altai art and are not native to the area. Was it borrowed because the lion resonated with the traditional Imaginational vocabulary of powerful faunae and wolves? It is striking that it is the traditional wolf we cannot invariably assume that if no foreign contact is reflected in local goods, then no such contact existed.

**Conclusion**

The Behead, dot-and-comma ornament, crested griffin, and lion head are not the only images that the Pazyryk people borrowed from among the foreign images imported into the Altai, but they are sufficient to illustrate the nature of artistic borrowing: although many foreign images found their way to Pazyryk due to external historic and economic circumstances, only a sub-set of those images was assimilated into the local art or even experimented with. There are, for example, apparently no attempts to copy the standing women or architectural towers illustrated on the pictorial textiles.

The example of Pazyryk also demonstrates that we cannot invariably assume that if no foreign contact is reflected in local goods, then no such contact existed. Choice and selections by local people can also play a role in the absence of imported images. At least one Chinese pictorial silk had reached Pazyryk, yet apparently it was not emulated. Whether this was because it had not been around long enough for local artists to borrow from or had no inherent interest for the local people cannot be determined on the evidence.

Pazyryk is unlike the ancient Near East, where associations of political power, economic strength, or military might often informed the selection of extrinsic images. In this remote area, where the imported goods were far separated from the places and peoples who created them, the exotic goods themselves apparently had power by virtue of their rarity. Thus, they enhanced the status of those who possessed them, but they came without context. Contexts were attributed to them by those at Pazyryk who saw the images and borrowed them, imbuing them with their own meanings and functions as they made them their own.

**Bibliography**


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