

The ornamental trousers from Sampula (Xinjiang, China): their origins and Biography

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A decorated pair of trousers excavated from a well-preserved tomb in the Tarim Basin proved to have a highly informative life history, teased out by the authors – with archaeological, historical and art historical dexterity. Probably created under Greek influence in a Bactrian palace, the textile started life in the third/second century BC as an ornamental wall hanging, showing a centaur blowing a war-trumpet and a nearly life-size warrior of the steppe with his spear. The palace was raided by nomads, one of whom worked a piece of the tapestry into a pair of trousers. They brought no great luck to the wearer who ended his days in a massacre by the Xiongnu, probably in the first century BC. The biography of this garment gives a vivid glimpse of the dynamic life of Central Asia at the end of the first millennium.

Keywords: China, Tarim, Xinjiang, Iron Age, Greek, Macedonian, textiles, wall hanging, trousers, centaur, Xiongnu

(1065) Introduction

Since the discovery of mummies in the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang (e.g. Wang 1999; Figure 1), cultural contacts and migrations of the early inhabitants of eastern Central Asia have become intensely debated issues (e.g. Posch 1995; Mair 1998; Parzinger 2008). Information about this area appears in Chinese historical records only after 126 BC, when Zhang Qian returned to the Imperial court in Chang'an from his first voyage to the West (Hulsewé 1979). In the southern Tarim Basin, writing (the Kharoshthi script) was first adopted with the spread of Buddhism. The oldest known Kharoshthi documents found in Loulan (Kroraina) and the mention of Khotan kings are dated to c. AD 300 (Bailey 1982). Hence, our knowledge (1066) about earlier times in Xinjiang, in the western part of modern China, is based exclusively upon archaeological data.

The region of the Tarim Basin is particularly rich in pre- and early historic textiles and other organic remains, owing to the fact that they are extraordinarily well preserved in the dry environment (e.g. Sylwan 1941; Wang 1999). In 1984 a pair of ancient woollen trouserlegs with pictorial weaving were excavated from a 2000 year-old tomb near the village of Sampula, 25km east of modern Khotan. Since its discovery, the find has been described and discussed in several national and international publications and exhibition catalogues (e.g. Rexiti 1986; Knauer 1998; Bunker 2001; Sampula 2001; Schorta 2001; Wiczorek & Lind 2007).

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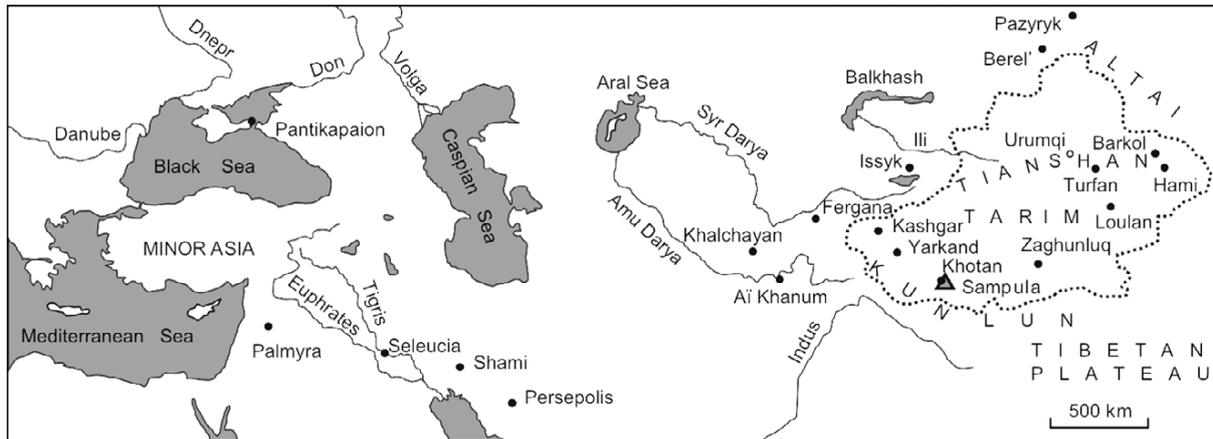
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Although the woollen tapestry fragments were tailored into trousers, the investigators agree that these fragments originally belonged to a larger wall hanging. Aside from this general agreement on its secondary use, other important questions concerning the textile's lifespan, such as the place and time of manufacture and its path to Khotan, have not been adequately addressed – until now. In this paper we attempt to answer these questions and to present our interpretation of the warrior-and-centaur textile of Sampula in the context of the regional history of eastern Central Asia.



(1066) Figure 1. Map of Central Asia showing sites and regions mentioned in the text. Dotted baseline shows modern Xinjiang.

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Characteristics of the warrior-and-centaur textile

The final use of the textile was certainly as trousers since it was excavated with human leg bones still present inside. The earliest photographs show two lower legs of a pair of trousers (Rexiti 1986: Figures 6 and 7), each leg gathered at the ankle and bound with a narrow strip of blue fabric. The right leg displays a centaur framed in flowers, and the left leg depicts the head of the warrior (Figure 2a).

During the process of the textile's conservation, the pleated and piped parts were opened and the different textile patches were separated and re-adjusted in order to reconstruct the original picture. In doing so the form of the trousers was lost, but the form of a wall hanging could be recognised (Figure 2b). The reconstructed tapestry measured $2.31 \times 4.8\text{m}$ and showed a taller-than-life-size warrior (Schorta 2001: 108). Taking into account the traces (1068) of joins along the left edge, it was assumed that the strip once belonged to something larger still. Some of the woollen yarns used for the tapestry are mottled, giving the tapestry the appearance of a painting (Schorta 2001: 108).

The relocation of the tapestry patches to their later position in the trousers revealed that the tailor who made up the trousers very likely had one large fragment of the hanging in his/her hands, which he/she cut into four parts. Currently on exhibit is the upper half of the tapestry strip (Wieczorek & Lind 2007: cat. 113), which was stabilised for transport by closing slits and holes. The published photographs altogether corroborate three states of preservation and



(1067) Figure 2. a) Sampula tomb 84LS I M01:c162, lower legs of a pair of trousers; b) condition of the trousers after all the pleated parts were dismantled and the different textile patches were re-adjusted (a & b courtesy of the Museum Xinjiang); c) Villa Hadriana, Tivoli, centaurs fighting with predatory cats (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

1992: 229 cat. 116); d) salpinx-blowing Scythian (Wegner 1949: 61, Figure 26a); e) Issyk kurgan, reconstructed Saka attire (Samašev 2007b: 166, Figure 9); f) Gajmanova Mogila, Scythian apparel (Schiltz 1994: 176, Figure 128A); g) Shami, Parthian costume (Invernizzi 2001: 230, Figure 1).

conservation of one and the same archaeological object: 1) the state of discovery – two lower legs of trousers consisting of tapestry fragments and other textile patches; 2) the reconstructed state – the pictorial tapestry fragment after removing all nonpictorial textiles and old repairs; and 3) the current state – part of the pictorial tapestry fragment including new repairs.

Archaeological context of the Sampula textile

The trousers were found in the first tomb excavated by the Archaeological Institute of Xinjiang in Sampula (Sampula 2001; Wang & Xiao 2001). The single, roughly square tomb chamber (5.95 × 5.0m and 2.60m deep) contained skeletal remains of at least 133 individuals. Collective burials are known from many cemeteries in Xinjiang that date to the first millennium BC (e.g. Wu *et al.* 2007). Typically, these either comprise corpses that have been added successively over the years or were gathered from previous burials and re-deposited together. But the tomb at Sampula had nothing in common with this type of collective burial. It contained skeletons of male and female adults, of which only two were found in nearly complete condition and lying upon wooden beds at the bottom of the tomb chamber. All the other skeletons were incomplete and piled on top of one another. Dress fragments, a few small items of daily use, tools and vessels were found, but in most cases they could not be assigned to specific individuals. In Sampula winter temperatures are well below zero. Yet, instead of clothes made of felt, leather or fur, there was a wide range of light-weight wool textiles, wool gauze, knee-length trousers and short-sleeved shirts, thus indicating that death occurred during the hot summer season.

Subsequent excavations in Sampula revealed three more mass graves, including tomb 84LS I M02 (146 individuals) and tomb 92LS II M2 (215 individuals). In the latter, numerous traces of injuries caused by beating and cutting were observed; in many cases the skulls were missing, pointing to a violent death (Sampula 2001: 9). The other 64 excavated tombs contained single or group burials (up to 16 individuals), in which the deceased had been carefully dressed, placed upon wooden beds, plant-fibre carpets or in wooden coffins, and bestowed a great variety of selected goods. These burials are regarded as the more normal practice in the Sampula cemetery.

Consequently, we can imagine that the last owner of the warrior-and-centaur textile possibly lost his/her life during a mass assassination and was hastily buried with other victims in an already existing vault.

(1069) *Dating of the mass burials at Sampula*

Two different approaches were taken in order to date the mass graves at Sampula, including radiocarbon dating and typological dating methods (Sampula 2001). A sample of a reed obtained from tomb 84LS I M01 provided a radiocarbon date of 2105 ± 65 BP (WB84-14) (Sampula 2001: 43). Being calibrated (Danzeglocke *et al.* 2008), this date suggests, with 95% probability, that the age of the reed sample falls within the interval from 360 BC to AD 40. The following radiocarbon dates were obtained from the second tomb 84LS I M02: 440-80 BC (WB84-17: wood, 2205 ± 75 BP), 510-150 BC (WB84-19: charcoal, 2290 ± 65 BP), 220 BC to AD 100 (XZ-424: human hair, 2038 ± 62 BP), 1330-810 BC (WB84-11: reed, 2865 ± 90 BP). The date of the reed from the second tomb showed a seemingly older age than that from the first tomb, which could not be explained. However, the dates for human hair from tomb 84LS I M02 and the reed from tomb 84LS I M01 were closer and covered the time interval

from the third century BC to the first century AD. The dates for wood and charcoal demonstrated slightly older ages (sixth/fifth century to second/first century BC), which could be associated with the older age of the buried wood.

The excavators of Sampula attributed the mass burials to a time span between the first century BC and the mid-third century AD (Sampula 2001: 43), based upon typological considerations of the archaeological material, thus making the upper dating limit of the burials 150-200 years younger than suggested by the youngest radiocarbon dates. However, the architecture of the vaults in Sampula undoubtedly shares basic constructional features with tomb chambers of phase II at the site of Zaghunluq, located farther east at the southern rim of the Tarim Basin (Figure 1), and dated through radiocarbon dating and typology to 800 BC to 0 (XUZB *et al.* 2003). The date of the Sampula mass burial should therefore fall before 0 BC, and this supports our conclusion that the tomb that yielded the warrior-and-centaur textile can be dated most confidently between the third and first centuries BC.

The origin of the warrior-and-centaur tapestry

The pictorial composition of the tapestry (Figure 2b) follows classical Greek traditions. The upper decorative zone, into which the spearhead of the warrior penetrates, is dominated by a galloping centaur with an animal skin fluttering about his shoulders (Figure 2a&b). Similar depictions of centaurs are known, for example, in mosaics in the Villa Hadriana, Tivoli (Figure 2c). The horn that the centaur blows closely resembles a *salpinx*, a war trumpet used to signal an attack, the beginning of games, sacrifices and celebratory processions (Wegner 1949: 60-61, 224-5, Figure 26a & b). Given that the *salpinx* is reported as being used by the Amazons and Persians, but is not mentioned in the oldest Greek sources, it is assumed that this instrument has an Oriental origin (Wissowa *et al.* 1920: 2010). One black-figured plate of Hischylos (550-500 BC) shows a Scythian archer blowing a *salpinx* (Figure 2d).

The floral ornaments surrounding the centaur find their closest stylistic parallels in Greco-Scythian metal art (Schiltz 1994: 195, Figure 144; Dally 2007: 294, Figure 2). Another analogy with Greco-Scythian objects is provided by the feather tips visible above the centaur. **(1070)** Although the winged creature itself is not preserved, the aforementioned metal artworks imply that it could be a bird, winged horse or griffin.

The face of the warrior is depicted in three-quarter profile, his full cheeks, double chin, four-petalled mouth, straight nose and bags beneath the large eyes, features that correspond well with Greco-Roman mosaics in North Africa, Turkey, Jordan, Syria and other areas under Greek or Roman influence (Balty 1977: 66-7, Figures 28, 29; 24-5, Figure 7). Although their dates are rather later (second–fourth century AD), they copy Greek art of the fourth to first century BC. Roman villas of the first century BC/first century AD are decorated with wall paintings and mosaics, which share the dominance of blue and dark red as a ground colour with the Sampula textile (e.g. De Franciscis *et al.* 1993: nos. 351-356c, nos. 210-222, nos. 405-415).

The warrior's dress, however, does not resemble Greek clothes at all. Long-sleeved caftans belted at the waist were common fashion among steppe people throughout northern Eurasia already around the mid-first millennium BC, and they are known as well among the Sakas in Persepolis (Jacobs 2007: 159, Figure 2; 161, Figure 4), from the Issyk *kurgan* in Kazakhstan (Figure 2e) and the Scythians (Figure 2f). E. Knauer (1998: 110) suggested a similarity with Parthian dress (Figure 2g) and called the Sampula warrior a Parthian. But although the dress and low non-Greek circlets in both cases correspond with embroidered portraits from Noin Ula (Stawiski 1979: 74, Figures 56, 55) and clay sculptures from Khalchayan (Stawiski 1979: 98, Figure 68; Pugachenkova & Khakimov 1988: 134, Figure 104), there is one essential difference between them and the Sampula warrior: the men with Greek attire from Shami, Noin Ula and Khalchayan are Parthians, Xiongnu and Yuezhi (Kushan), respectively, as their Central Asian

bearded faces demonstrate. The man depicted in the Sampula textile, however, has the face of a Greek-Macedonian lancer in steppe nomadic apparel with golden belt buckles and an animal-head knife attached to his belt. We rather see the vivid picture of a Greek-Macedonian colonist, who was adapted to the West or Central Asian environments.

The flow of Greek civilisation eastwards throughout the Orient and the spread of mounted nomads westwards during the second half of the first millennium BC resulted in close contacts and the merging of the two cultural traditions. We can imagine the depiction of a life-size Greek-Macedonian warrior on a wall hanging in several locations of Greek influenced Asia. The Sampula textile could have been manufactured in one of the Greek colonial cities in Asia Minor, such as Seleucia and Palmyra, which were occupied by Parthians at the beginning of second century BC. Or it may have originated in the direct contact zone of Scythians and Greek colonists in the northern Black Sea area during the fifth/fourth century BC. Or it may have been made in one of the Bactrian cities shortly after Alexander the Great reached Bactria in 329 BC, or during the mid-third century BC, when the Seleucids re-founded the cities, which were plundered by nomads from the north-east in the second century BC (e.g. Bernard 2008).

The origin of other grave goods in Sampula

Cases containing a lacquer comb and a bronze mirror (Sampula 2001: 124, Figures 203, 203; 132, Figure 222), found in the tomb were worked with silk, indicating the availability (**1071**) of Chinese goods. Direct contacts with the Chinese started within the context of the second reconnaissance voyage to the West by Zhang Qian. Setting off from the Han Dynasty court in Chang'an, he reached Khotan in 121 BC (Hulsewé 1979). Zhang Qian was followed by military forces, who demonstrated their dominant power in Loulan in 108 BC (Yü 1995: 409) and in Ferghana in 101/104 BC (Posch 1995: 46; Yü 1995: 410). Shortly thereafter, Khotan, like many other local kingdoms, sent envoys with tribute to the Han court and established direct relations with the empire. From 59 BC to AD 9 Han China ruled the Tarim Basin (Yü 1995: 411; Posch 1998: 356-7) and was to revive its influence between AD 91 and 123, when the Eastern Han dynasty was at its zenith (Posch 1998: 357). If we accept that Chinese goods reached Sampula via direct contacts with the Han, then a year around 100 BC would be the earliest possible date for the burial. However, Chinese silk and bronze mirrors were already traded with the Xiongnu throughout Eurasia some time before, and Xiongnu tribes exerted rule over the Tarim Basin before the Han advanced towards the West. So it might well be plausible that the goods arrived in Sampula via contacts with Xiongnu.

The Sampula burials yielded many skirts sewn in horizontal bands of alternating colours, blue, red or yellow, and containing at the lower end between the striped part and the flounced border one tapestry band with figural ornaments (Sampula 2001: Figures 368-416). One example that accompanied the warrior-and-centaur trousers (Figure 3a & b) displays the highly stylised motif of a bird-of-prey attacking a cloven-hoofed animal. Such scenes of animal attack or combat are characteristic of steppe nomadic art during the first millennium BC. But this is the first time that it was found woven into a multicoloured tapestry. This motif was transmitted by the Sakas from the Achaemenids to the Scythians in southern Siberia; it later penetrated the decorative art of the Xiongnu (Rudenko 1969: 50, 70). Therefore, the scene of a griffin attacking an ibex in *kurgan* (burial mound) no. 1 in Pazyryk (Figure 3c) is genetically related to the griffin attacking a deer in *kurgan* no. 6 in Noin Ula (Figure 3d) and in the Sampula tapestry scene. Logically, decorative art from Saka kurgans in Kazakhstan, as for example in Berel' (Figure 3e) (Samašev 2007a: 132), shows the closest analogies to the Sampula skirt tapestry.

Chinese accounts confirm that the Sakas residing in the Upper Ili Valley moved southwards to the western corner of the Tarim Basin, when they were compelled to leave by the Yuezhi, who in turn were driven from western China by the Xiongnu at the latest from 174 BC onwards

(Posch 1995: 99; Yü 1995: 387, 388, 407; Benjamin 2003: 1). According to A.K. Narain (1990: 173), who refers to philological studies of the Khotan Saka language by H.W. Bailey (1971), city-states or kingdoms such as Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin were founded by Sakas before the end of the second century BC.

Between AD 30 and 150 six kings of Khotan issued their own coinage (Cribb 1984, 1985; Wang 2004: 37). The round bronze coins show a horse or camel facing to the right on the obverse – which is why they are called ‘Khotanese horse coins’ – and surrounded by a Prakrit inscription in Kharoshthi script naming the king who issued the coins (Wang 2004: Plate 4, nos. 43-5). The reverse features a Chinese inscription that denotes the weight of the coin. The coins are not only bilingual (‘Sino-Kharoshthi coins’), but altogether bicultural (Wang 2004: xiii, 115), because they link the weight and value systems of early Kushan coins of Bactria and north-western India with *wuzhu* coins of the Han dynasty. Both currencies must have been known in Khotan; and as they used the administrative language Prakrit/Gandhari, the Khotanese must have had close contacts with the early Kushan kingdom. During the first century AD the Khotanese kingdom was engaged in power struggles with neighbouring fellow Saka kingdoms, as well as the Kushan, Xiongnu and Chinese (Narain 1990: 173). Accepting a burial date of the warrior-and-centaur trousers during the first century AD or later would mean including Kushan, Xiongnu and Chinese into our reflections. However, (1073) neither Khotanese coins nor clear Kushan traces were found in tombs excavated in Sampula.

Taking all aforesaid arguments into consideration, the first century BC would be the most plausible date for the burial of the warrior-and-centaur trousers in Sampula.

Conclusions

Based upon the archaeological and textual data, we can suggest the life-history of the warrior-and-centaur textile from tomb 84LS I M01 in Sampula as follows. Possibly manufactured in Bactria during the third/early second century BC, the tapestry with the Greek motif of a centaur calling to advance and the idealised depiction of a Greek-Macedonian guard-of-honour in steppe nomadic apparel might have decorated the wall of a palace hall. The exact location of the palace is impossible to pinpoint without some speculation. However, Ai Khanum could be one possible address, since it was overwhelmed by nomads: *‘The end of the Greek city came suddenly around 145 B.C. Nomads from the northeast, perhaps Sakas on their way to plunder Bactria, set fire to the palace of Ai Khanum, the seat and symbol of authority, and robbed the treasury’* (Bernard 2008: 104). During this devastation and looting of the palace, the tapestry could have been removed, cut apart and used for different purposes. One piece arrived with Sakas in Khotan sometime during the second half of the second century BC. Cut into smaller pieces, the tapestry was finally used together with other patches for sewing light trousers. The person who wore the trousers died on a hot summer day during the first century BC, perhaps in an assault by the Xiongnu. Due to the summer heat all victims of the attack were buried collectively without more ado by the survivors in an already existing and nearly empty vault.

The available information is far from complete, allowing more variations in reconstruction details and opening new challenging questions for Eurasian antiquity. The Sampula site is potentially a valuable source of information not only about textile crafts of the inhabitants of eastern Central Asia, but also about the earliest history of the Khotanese kingdom, one of the Saka oasis states. It occupied a key position in transcontinental exchanges, when the Chinese first entered the world trade system. Decisive, however, for all considerations are accurate age determinations of archaeological objects, upon which hypotheses are founded. Thanks to the environmental conditions, datable material is available, so that we may expect surprising results from future archaeological endeavours in the Khotan oasis and adjacent regions.



(1072) Figure 3. a) Sampula tomb 84LS I M01:326, skirt; b) detail of tapestry band with animal combat (Sampula 2001: 214, Figures 409, 409-11); c) Pazyryk kurgan 1, felt saddlecloth with appliqué (Schiltz 1994: 358, Figure 259); d) Noin-Ula kurgan 6, detail of embroidery on felt carpet, colour reconstruction (Académie des Science de L'URSS et Musée de L'Ermitage 1937); e) Berel' kurgan 11, horse harness in the shape of two elks, griffin, cheekpiece with griffin heads (Samašev 2007a: 135, Figure 5; 137, Figure 9; 139, Figure 13).

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