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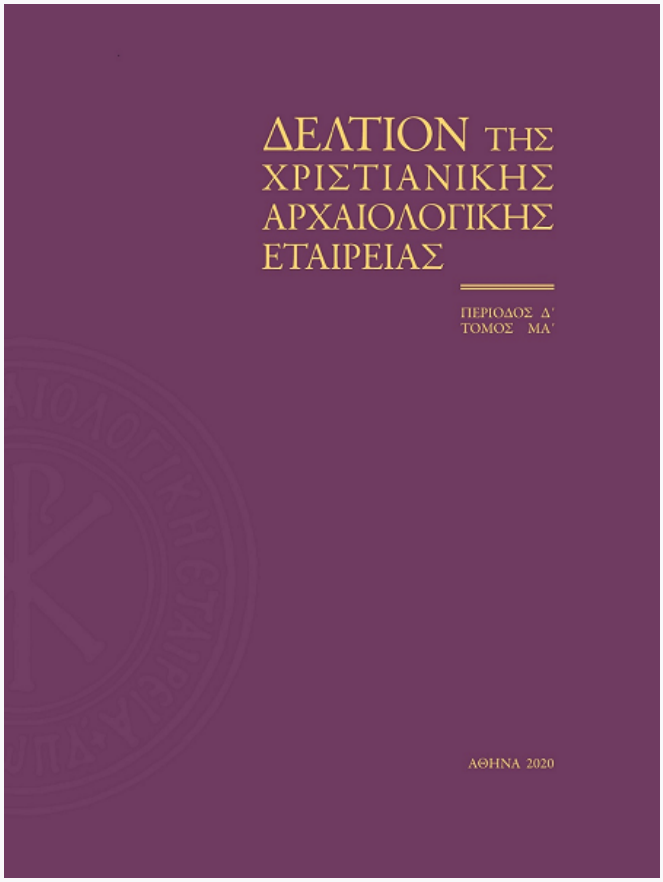

The cross-cultural context of the Benaki chasuble: a safavid-renaissance velvet encounter

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THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE BENAKI CHASUBLE: A SAFAVID-RENAISSANCE VELVET ENCOUNTER

Ένα αδημοσίευτο φαιλόνιο ιερέα του καθολικού δόγματος από το Μουσείο Μπενάκη εξετάζεται ως κατάλοιπο του εμπορίου των περσικών υφασμάτων στην Ευρώπη κατά την πρώιμη μοντέρνα εποχή. Στο πλαίσιο αυτό αναλύεται το εμπόριο του μεταξιού, ως το κύριο χαρακτηριστικό της σαφαβιδικής εξωτερικής πολιτικής, καθώς και η επίδρασή του στην ευρωπαϊκή αισθητική κατά τον 17ο αιώνα. Επιπρόσθετα, η ανάλυση του φυτικού και ζωομορφικού διακόσμου των βελούδων του φαιλονίου δείχνει τη διαμόρφωση κοινής χρήσης των διακοσμητικών συμβολικών θεμάτων στα χριστιανικά άμφια στην Ευρώπη και την ανατολική Μεσόγειο.

An unpublished Catholic chasuble from the collection of the Benaki Museum is analyzed as a remnant of the Iranian textile trade in early modern Europe. Its contextualization proceeds from discussing the silk trade as a tool of Safavid diplomacy, and continues with considering the impact of Safavid silks on 17th-century European aesthetic. Moreover, the article's discussion of the floral and animal motifs adorning the chasuble's velvets points out to the formation of a common visual language in Christian vestments throughout Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

17ος αιώνας, λειτουργικά άμφια, φαιλόνιο, ώσμωση, υλικός πολιτισμός κατά την Αναγέννηση, ισλαμική τέχνη σε χριστιανικό περιβάλλον.

Keywords

17th century; catholic vestments; chasuble; osmosis; intercultural interaction; Renaissance material culture; Islamic art in Europe.

The Benaki chasuble is the product of intercultural interaction between Safavid Iran and Renaissance Europe[1], a phenomenon that was intensified during the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) (see below Fig. 6). In order to contextualize the object I will refer first to the impact the Shah's 'silken diplomacy' had in Europe[2]. I will then discuss the characteristics of the chasuble's idiosyncratic tailoring in detail, and the meaning it possibly conveyed.

The Shah's seven recorded embassies to Venice between 1600 and 1622 are of great interest to textile historians

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** *I am indebted to Anna Ballian who brought this object to my attention when it resurfaced during the 2014-2015 El Greco exhibition at the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens. I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to Mara Verykokou of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art Department, Benaki Museum, for accommodating my research; and Daniella Degl'Innocenti of the Museo del Tessuto, Prato for reading the article's first draft.*

[1] On the circulation of Islamic objects in late medieval and Renaissance Italy read R. E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*, Berkley, Los Angeles – London 2002.

[2] *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (exhibition catalogue), ed. S. N. Canby, London 2009, cat. no. 22 p. 64. G. Riota, "Safavid Persia and Western Europe, 1500-1722", *Arts as a Message: Asia and Europe, 1500-1700* (exhibition catalogue), ed. P. Noever, Ostfildern 2009, cat. nos 143-158 p. 206-207, and 208-219 (B. Moser – E. Schmuttermeier – A. Völker – J. Wieninger – M. Neuwirth). R. P. Matthee, "Iran's Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period: Diplomats, Missionaries, Merchants, and Travel", *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art & Contemporary Art of Teheran* (exhibition catalogue), ed. A. Langer, Zurich 2012, 4-25.

as they provide a historical link between the distribution of Safavid fabrics and carpets in Italy and the absorption of Iranian aesthetic by local weavers. The ethnically and religiously heterogeneous envoys were Jewish converts to Catholicism, Armenians and Muslim tradesmen, all of whom acted as diplomats carrying the Shah's official letters[3]. This certainly indicates that Iran's desire to promote its weaving industry permeated Venetian-Safavid relations. Out of all the embassies, the most relevant to our discussion was that headed by Fathi Beyg in 1603. This merchant envoy arrived with a following of six Muslim Iranians and three Armenians, all of them carrying presents for the Doge, namely precious textiles and a carpet. Venice's Senate paid great honor to the envoy's gifts, ordering the cloth and robes to be turned into chasubles and other ecclesiastical vestments, while the carpet was used to cover the Doge's stool in St. Mark's basilica.[4].

Among these gifts, probably the most famous is the Madonna and the Child velvet panel, which was possibly sent as an advertisement of the industry's capacity to produce designs specifically made for the Christian market (Fig. 1)[5]. Unfortunately, this is perhaps the only Christian-themed figural textile produced for the European market we know; the impressive Isfahan cope in the Victoria and Albert Museum is now generally attributed to Armenian patronage[6]. Nonetheless, it can still be argued the Shah was trying to create a new Christian market for his figural silks in Europe[7]. After all, this was also the practice of his major political rival, the Ottomans[8], who benefited from the production of Christian-themed silks for a Greek and Eastern European clientele[9]. The Safavids exploited the Armenian Diaspora

[3] Interestingly, most of the official letters did not raise any political matters but merely expressed the Shah's friendship to the Venetians. Hence, the envoys were limited to light diplomacy and the promotion of silk trade. See G. Rota, "Safavid Envoys in Venice", R. Kauz – G. Rota – J. P. Niederkorn (eds), *Diplomatisches Zeremoniell in Europa und im Mittleren Osten in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Vienna 2009, 213-249, esp. 221-222. On Venice's contacts with central Asia and Iran read G. Bellingeri, "Altri turchi, altro Islam. Venezia, le steppe, la Persia", *Venezia e l'Islam 828-1797* (exhibition catalogue), ed. S. Carboni, Venice 2007, 51-67.

[4] See Rota, "Safavid Envoys", op.cit. (n. 3), 227-228. On September 1606, Giovanni Maffei wrote on these gifts and the use assigned to them in the inventory of the San Marco Treasury: "...un manto tessuto d'oro mandato dal persian [handwritten note: 'fatto un pivial et una pianeta']; un tapedo de seda tessuto d'oro, longo brazza quarto et braza tre alto; pano de veludo e d'oro a figure, longo brazza sette [handwritten note: 'fu fatto il fornimento della sedia del serenissimo Principe et un cusin dell'istesso con cordola d'oro intorno et suoi fiochi d'oro']; pani di seta e oro numero tre, per longheza de brazza sette l'uno [handwritten note: 'fatti tre piviali']; panni de seta senza oro de piu colori numero tre, longhi ut supra"; see A. Schiavon, "La Serenissima e Abbas: una recherche negli archive Veneziani", *I Doni di Shah Abbas: Relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica di Venezie e la Persia Safavide* (exhibition catalogue), ed. E. Galiardi Mangilli, Venice 2013, 71-75, esp. 73-74.

[5] The detailed description of Fathi Beyg's presents to the Doge can be found in at least two documents from the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* (ASV, Secreta, Commemoriali, registro 26, fol. 179b.; ASV, Collegio, Esposizioni principi, filza 14, fols. unnumbered): "Un manto tessuto con oro. Un tapedo di veluto tessuto con oro, et argento. Un panno di veluto tessuto con oro, con figure di Christo, et di sua Madre Maria. Trè cavezzi tessuti con oro. Trè schietti tessuti con seda". See E. Galiardi Mangilli, "Mai a mani nude! Il traffico delle regalie. Itinerari", *I Doni di Shah Abbas*, op.cit (n. 4), 57-69, esp. 57-58. Rota, "Safavid Envoys", op.cit. (n. 3), 247. On the Safavids' effort to compete with the Ottoman textile industry by producing such silks read S. Arcak Casale, "The Persian Madonna and Child: commodified gifts between diplomacy and armed struggle", *Art History* 38/4 (2015), 636-650.

[6] See M. Kite, "A seventeenth-century Safavid cope (V&A: T.477-1894)", T. Stanley – R. Crill (eds), *The Making of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum* London 2006, 121-123. V. Nersessian, "The Marcy-Indjoudjian Cope", *Ars Orientalis* 40 (2011), 204-241.

[7] See I. N. Ukhanova, "Trade Connections between the Islamic World and Russia", *Beyond the Palace Walls: Islamic Art from the State Hermitage Museum, Islamic Art in a World Context* (exhibition catalogue), eds. M. B. Piotrovsky – A. D. Priturla, Edinburgh 2006, 188-191, especially189.

[8] On the Ottoman and the Safavid participation in the global textile trade read M. Sardar, "Silk along the Seas: Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran in the Global Textile Trade", *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade 1500-1800* (exhibition catalogue), ed. A. Peck, London 2013, 66-81. On the distinctiveness of the Ottoman and the Safavid visual canons read G. Necipoğlu, "Early Modern Floral: The Agency of Ornament in Ottoman and Safavid Visual Cultures", G. Necipoğlu – A. Payne (eds), *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, Princeton 2016, 132-155.

[9] See N. Atasoy – L. W. Mackie – W. B. Denny – H. Tezcan, *İpek, the Crescent & the Rose: Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets*, London 2001, 178. N. Atasoy – L. Uluç, *Impressions of Ottoman culture in Europe: 1453-1699*, Istanbul 2012, 103. W. Woodfin, "Orthodox Liturgical Textiles and Clerical Self-Referentiality", K. Dimitrova – M. Goehring (eds), *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2014, 31-51. N. Vryzidis,

Fig. 1. Venice, Museo Civico Correr. Safavid cut velvet, brocaded and weft-patterned (136×136 cm), late 16th – early 17th century.

as a quasi-institutionalized intermediary, effectively penetrating the textiles trade[10]. The success of this de facto partnership can be traced, thanks to the many Iranian textiles used by Christian Churches in Europe. These have been brought into the art historical spotlight during the last decades. A very interesting ecclesiastical piece is the *piviale* (cope) of the *Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale – Giuseppe Tucci* (Rome), made of Safavid velvet and depicting a hunting scene[11]. Venetian documents again are very revealing when compared to such pieces. As already

"Threads of Symbiosis: Ottoman Silks for the Christian Market", *OCP* 84/1 (2018), 133-166. Id., "Ottoman textiles and Greek clerical vestments: prolegomena on a neglected aspect of ecclesiastical material culture", *BMGS* 42/1 (2018), 92-114, especially 106-109.

[10] See E. Herzig, *The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan: A study in pre-modern Asian trade* (PhD dissertation), University of Oxford, 1991. R. Bekius, "A Global Enterprise: Armenian merchants in the textile trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", *Carpets and Textiles in the Iranian World, 1400-1700: Proceedings of the Conference held at the Ashmolean Museum on 30-31 August 2003*, eds J. Thompson – D. Shaffer – P. Mildh, Oxford – Genoa 2010, 208-235. S. D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Oakland 2011.

[11] See P. Torre, "Arte Tessile", P. Torre – G. di Flumeri Vatielli – M. Jung (eds), *Arte dell'Islam*, Rome 2010, 55-58, esp. 55-56. For a Russian *phelonion* made of a figural velvet depicting wild animals and a human figure see L. W. Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands: 7th-21st Century*, New Haven – London 2015, fig. 9.2.

discussed, Shah Abbas I presented different types of textiles to the Doge which were converted to Catholic vestments. Most of them were "à figure", meaning figural[12]. The Rome *piviale* actually recalls the relevant hypothesis that figural textiles depicting human representations may have catered to the European desire for the exotic[13]. Indeed, many figural velvets and silks were used as robes of honour, ceremonial garments, and diplomatic gifts by the Shahs[14]. Another hypothesis could be that the exotic aesthetic of Iranian textiles enhanced their desirability, especially when they rendered narrative familiar to their European audience. The Madonna and the Child velvet panel exemplifies this, as the flaming halo motif it uses comes directly from Middle Eastern traditions of visually conveying a figure's importance[15]. The same could be said for scenes of falconry or court life on Iranian textiles: they presented iconography familiar to the European aristocracy, yet their aesthetic was exotic[16].

Another Catholic vestment relevant to our discussion is a cope at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 2). While the style and floral motifs are typically Safavid, the flaming halo that frames the repeated vase design is not very common (Fig. 3). Such devices were normally reserved for figural representations in Iranian art, especially manuscripts. Nonetheless, it strongly recalls the Madonna's halo in the velvet presented to the Venetian Doge by Shah Abbas I. While the similarity is intriguing, it remains debatable whether such visual devices were consciously used. To continue, the emergence of Italian designs inspired by the Safavid repertoire further attests to the popularity of Iranian floral silks. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art there is another chasuble embroidered with the coat of arms of the Gradenigos, an aristocratic Venetian family. It is made of Italian silk clearly inspired by Safavid floral compositions (Fig. 4)[17]. Dated to the mid-17th century, this piece seems to adapt the Safavid floral style, in which the motifs generally alternate directions in successive rows[18]. The embroidered coat of arms and the textile's weave strongly suggest an

[12] "... Et da mò sia commesso alli Procuratori di detta Chiesa, che debbano far convertir le Vesti in tante Pianette, et paramenti, come loro meglio parerà... Un Panno di seta, et d'oro à Figure di braza 7. Tre Vesti di seta, et d'oro à Figure. Tre altre Vesti di tela di seta senza oro à figure...". See ASV, Secreta, Commemoriali, registro 26, fols 179b-180a, in Rota, "Safavid Envoys", op.cit. (n. 3), 248.

[13] See J. Scarse, "The Court dress of Safavid Iran in the sixteenth century", *Carpets and Textiles*, op.cit. (n. 10), 143-157, especially 157.

[14] On Iranian honorific garments read Patricia L. Baker, "Wrought of Gold or Silver: Honorific garments in seventeenth century Iran", Ibid., 158-167. On the impact of Safavid dress and textiles on European taste read J. M. Scarse, "Safavid Dress and Europe", *The Fascination of Persia*, op.cit. (n. 2), 58-77. P. Banas, "Persian Art and the Crafting of Polish Identity", Ibid., 118-135. B. Borkopp-Restle, "Persian and Polish Sashes: Symbols of National Identity and Luxury Textiles in an International Market", Ibid., 136-151. B. Frischmuth, "The Vienna Jacket. A Fantasy", *Art as a Message*, op.cit. (n. 2), 276-279. Ibid., cat. no. 205 p. 280-281 (A. Völker). Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, op.cit. (n. 11), 370-375. C. Biel, *The Persian Velvets at Roseborg*, Copenhagen 1995.

[15] On the Prophet's representations in relation to the notions of Logos and Light, and the device of the flaming halo (or nimbus) read C. Gruber, "Between Logos (Kalima) and Light (Nūr): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting", *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* 26 (2009), 229-262, especially figs 1, 5-10 and 12-14. The use of the flame-halo for the Virgin and the Child probably indicates an understanding of their importance within the Christian context and an attempt to visualize this in the Safavid style, specifically in the style of the artist Riza-i Abbasi, *Eredità dell'Islam. Arte Islamica in Italia* (exhibition catalogue), ed. G. Curatola, Venice 1993, cat. no. 275 p. 429-430 (G. Curatola). Interestingly, one of the conventions we see in Islamic representations of the Virgin and infant Jesus is the flame-halo, L. Bressan, *Maria nella Devozione e nella pittura dell'Islam*, Milan 2011, pls 2, 3, 6, 9, 10 and 15.

[16] Relevant example is an early 18th-century sash at the National Museum of Kraków, which features falconers in the border. See *The Fascination of Persia*, op.cit. (n. 2), 142, cat. no. 53 (B. Borkopp-Restle). Furthermore, the famous 16th-century Esterházy appliqué panel is a prime example of Safavid court narrative, exotic yet recognizable to the European eye. Read the monograph by I. Szántó, *Safavid Art and Hungary: The Esterházy Appliqué in Context*, Piliscsaba 2010.

[17] Cultural interaction between Islam and the West presented various dynamics. The most relevant to this chasuble seems to be "the exotic object as a prototype to be imitated", A. Contadini, "Artistic contacts: Current Scholarship and Future Tasks", C. Burnett – A. Contadini (eds), *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, London 1999, 1-60, esp. 9-11. On ornament transmitted from the Middle East to Renaissance Italy, but with a focus on Ottoman artefacts, read eadem, "Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", *Histories of Ornament*, op.cit. (n. 8), 290-305.

[18] *Interwoven Globe*, op.cit. (n. 9), cat. no. 73 p. 229 (M. Watt). Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, op.cit. (n. 11), 426.

Fig. 2. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Catholic cope of early 17th-century Safavid silk adorned with metal threads (L.152.4 cm, W 321.3 cm).

Italian provenance. Safavid floral twill-weave silks provided inspiration for these Italian designs, which can be seen more as a creative response and engagement with the foreign (Fig. 5)[19].

Despite the wide dispersal of many of these remnants outside of their original context, the previous discussion makes it clear that it is still possible to trace the success of Safavid textiles in Italy and Europe, as well as their impact on local taste. Although both floral and figural textiles were popular, the figural production might have enjoyed more popularity because of its exotic, yet recognizable, and therefore culturally translatable iconography. This is regardless of whether it had attractive secular designs or was meaningful within a religious context.

To continue, while the use of Safavid textiles within an ecclesiastical context during the Renaissance comes as no surprise, the Benaki chasuble presents certain peculiarities. A first observation on the vestment would be that its orphrey's shape does not follow the dominant tendency of the so-called "Latin" chasuble (Fig. 6)[20].

Fig. 3. Catholic cope of early 17th-century Safavid silk adorned with metal threads, flame-haloed bouquet coming out of a vase (detail of Fig. 2).

[19] According to documentation provided by the David Collection, the chasuble in Fig. 5 was bought from Isfahan, and perhaps belonged to a Christian community in Iran, K. von Folsach – A.-M. Keblow Bernsted, *Woven Treasures-Textiles from the World of Islam*, Copenhagen 1993, cat. no. 40 p. 116-117.

[20] Pauline Johnstone noted the usual form of the straight Latin chasuble and the pillar orphey on both the back and front of the vestment. As only one side of the vestment remains we can only discuss the cruciform orphey in the back. See P. Johnstone, *High fashion in the Church, the place of Church vestments in the History*

Fig. 4. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Chasuble (pianeta), mid-17th century Italian silk, brocaded plain weave, probably Venice (119.4×77.5 cm).

Fig. 5. Copenhagen, The David Collection. Chasuble, first half of the 17th century, Safavid silk, twill weave with metal thread (110x74.5 cm).

However, cruciform orphreys were not unusual at that time in Italy, especially in the north[21]. Then, the choice of the Safavid velvet seems atypical, since decorated orphreys usually featured religious iconography, either embroidered or woven (e.g. a *bordo figurato*) (Fig. 7)[22]. The velvet's composition consists of lobed medallions, which are quite typical of contemporary Safavid style, as well as various floral and bird motifs (Figs 8-10). It is a well-known design recalling the composition of 16th- and early 17th-century Iranian carpets, and dateable to the era of Shah Abbas I. At least three museums have the same velvet in their collection: the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, the Museum Calouste Gulbenkian, and the

of Art from the ninth to the nineteenth century, Leeds 2002, 141 and 143.

[21] *Seta & Oro: La Collezione Tessile di Mariano Fortuny* (exhibition catalogue), ed. D. Davanzo Poli, Venice 1997, cat. no. 5 p. 9-10 (P. Margarito – M. Mariutti Carboni – R. Zucco). N. Bavoux, *Sacralité, pouvoir, identité: Une histoire du vêtement d'autel: (XIIIe – XVIe siècles)* (PhD dissertation), Université de Grenoble, 2012, cat. nos 24, 93, 218 and 280 p. 719, 733-734, 743-746.

[22] For examples of woven *bordi figurati* with religious iconography read D. Degl'Innocenti (ed.), *I tessuti della fede: Bordi figurati del XV e XVI secolo dalle collezioni del Museo del Tessuto* (I quaderni del museo del tessuto, 1), Florence 2000. M. Cuoghi Costantini – I. Silvestri (eds), *La Collezione Gandini: Tessuti del Medioevo e del Rinascimento*, Bologna 2010, cat. nos 61-78 p. 149-157 (M. Cuoghi Costantini).

Fig. 6. Athens, Benaki Museum. Chasuble, 15th-century Italian crimson satin velvet, voided; late 16th – early 17th-century Safavid polychrome velvet with gilded silver-thread ground, voided and brocaded (114×68 cm).

Fig. 7. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. The Annunciation in a figured silk (bordo figurato), second half of the 15th century, Florentine (?) lampas weave with gilt thread.

Fine Arts De Young Museum[23]. However, no matter how typical the composition may be, I would argue that its use on the chasuble was no mere coincidence, but probably was meant to convey a very specific meaning.

First of all, its juxtaposition with the earlier Renaissance velvet used for the vestment's main body gives a hint as to how the Safavid velvet could have been interpreted. Red silk velvets with pomegranate motifs, just like the one under discussion, were standard artefacts for ecclesiastical use in Renaissance Italy (Fig. 11). Red replaced porphyry purple in church vestments after a 1464 Papal decree[24]. While red replaced purple for practical reasons, it was the use of the pomegranate motif as a religious symbol that made such silks suitable for liturgical vestments[25]. The contrast between the cruciform, multi-coloured Safavid velvet and the bright monochromatic Italian velvet has the effect of putting a big frame on a small painting. The preciousness of the Safavid velvet is underlined by the "mounting" and it almost appears to be on exhibit[26]. The way the Safavid velvet was cut and manipulated also betrays the tailor's intention to keep the paired birds (and at least one of the lobed medallions) complete and in the orphrey's centre (Figs 8-10). Furthermore, there is no doubt that while both velvets were elite artefacts, the Safavid was rarer in Europe and, therefore, carried the prestige of its exoticism.

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[23] *2000 Years of Silk Weaving: An Exhibition Sponsored by the Los Angeles County Museum in Collaboration with The Cleveland Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts* (exhibition catalogue), New York 1944, cat. no. 251 p. 34, pl. 60 (G. Lowei). Such textiles continue to fascinate collectors even today: a panel of the exact same velvet was sold for the astronomical sum of £1,609,250 by London Sotheby's in 2011. See https://sothebys.gcs-web.com/static-files/f375fa98-537a-4101-9718-3aa06c2b8590 [Accessed 25th of September 2019].

[24] M. Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Revue d'études latines – Collection Latomus, 116), Brussels 1970, 70.

[25] R. Bonito Fanelli, "The Pomegranate Motif in Italian Renaissance Silks: A Semiological Interpretation of Patterns and Colors", *La seta in Europea, sec. XIII-XX. Atti della Ventiquattresima Settimana di studi, 4-9 mai 1992, Prato, Instituto internazionale di storia economica "F. Datini"*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi, Florence 1993, 507-530.

[26] On the different ways Islamic objects were 'Christianized' in Western European context, including mounts, read A. Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1998, 129-132.

Fig. 8. Chasuble, cruciform orphey, central medallion (detail of Fig. 6).

It is not known if this was the second use of any of the textiles, although the Italian most probably predates the Safavid velvet[27].

To continue, the combination of textiles dating to different periods is far from unusual in Western European vestments. The Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna (MAK) holds a chasuble that follows the exact same pattern of a radiant 16th-century Ottoman floral silk used for the cruciform orphrey, while the main body used an earlier red Italian velvet[28]. Another relevant example is a chasuble from the Museu do Abade de Baçal (Bragança): the main body consists of 16th-century Safavid silk, and its orphrey of an earlier, perhaps European, silk (Fig. 12). The way the silks were manipulated points to a 17th-century tailoring[29]. An important question which

[27] The emergence of these designs came sometime in the first half of the 15th century but their production continued well after the 1460s., D. Davanzo Poli – S. Moronato, *Le stoffe dei Veneziani*, Venice 1994, fig. on p. 38. *Tessuti del Rinascimento nei repertori ornamentali* (exhibition catalogue) (Mostre del Museo Nazionale del Bargello, 23), ed. P. Peri, Florence 1994, unnumbered pages, cat. no. 19. *La Collezione Gandini*, op.cit. (n. 21), cat. nos 33, 34 and 37 p. 134-136 (E. Bazzani). L. Monnas, *Renaissance Velvets*, London 2012, cat. no. 19 p. 88-89.

[28] *Art as a Message*, op.cit. (n. 2), cat. no. 178 p. 242 (A. Völker).

[29] *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendor* (exhibition catalogue), ed. A. Chong, Singapore 2016, cat. no. 2 p. 22-23

Fig. 9. Chasuble, cruciform orphey, paired peacocks (detail of Fig. 6).

Fig. 10. Chasuble, cruciform orphey, paired pheasants (detail of Fig. 6).

remains unanswered is whether the velvet of the Benaki chasuble's orphrey was among the designs the Venetians called "à figure". From the remaining evidence no safe conclusions can be drawn. However, there is room for speculation regarding how the Safavid velvet was interpreted in this composition.

First of all, the contrast created by the juxtaposition of the two velvets leads us to think that the orphrey had a supplementary meaning attached to it, apart from the prestige of its relative rarity. The orphreys of Catholic chasubles were strips with either aniconic or figural designs with Christian imagery; sometimes they were plain and cruciform, but could also have representations ex. of Christ on the cross[30]. The Safavid velvet bears figural iconography with its paired peacocks and pheasants, but their association to Christian iconography is neither certain nor straightforward (Figs 9, 10). When it comes to Iranian textiles, art historians have interpreted the pairing of bird and flower motifs (e.g. rose and nightingale designs) as symbolism related to Sufi poetry and notions of unfulfilled, chaste or pure love, or the love for God[31]. Many of these designs come straight from miniature paintings that illustrate relevant poems or narratives[32]. However, these narratives were probably not widely known in Europe. The popularity of these designs was certainly unrelated to knowledge of Iranian culture. Therefore, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that the orphrey's velvet was originally destined for export to Europe. As a result, this leads us to examine the possibility of cultural translation.

Returning to the chasuble's tailoring, it is evident that its velvet was converted into an orphrey in such a way that the paired birds would be in the centre of the vestment, increasing their visibility. Undoubtedly its exotic aesthetic was important for its appreciation. However, the standard practice of placing religious iconography on that part of a chasuble reinforces the possibility of the projection of

(P. Moura Carvalho). Also, on the import of Iranian textiles to Portugal read J. Hallett, «From the looms of Yazd and Isfahan: Persian carpets and textiles in Portugal», *Carpets and Textiles*, op.cit. (n. 10), 90-123.

[30] For various examples of cruciform orphreys in Renaissance-period European chasubles see Johnstone, *High Fashion*, op.cit. (n. 19), figs 66, 77, 79, 85, 86 and 92.

[31] *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran 16th-19th Centuries* (exhibition catalogue), ed. C. Bier, Washington, D.C. 1987, cat. no. 20 p. 176-177 (M. Anderson McWilliams). R. Neumann – G. Murza, *Persische Seiden: Die Gewebekunst der Safawiden und ihrer Nachfolger*, Leipzig 1988, 111.

[32] For example, Farid al-Din Attar's 1177 influential *Mantiq-ut-Tayr* (The Conference of Birds) featured Sufi ideas about the pure love of God, which can be associated with bird motifs in Iranian art [T. H. Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the stories of Farid al-Din Attar*, Leiden 2003. Neumann – Murza, *Persische Seiden*, op.cit. (n. 31), 234, figs 211-230].

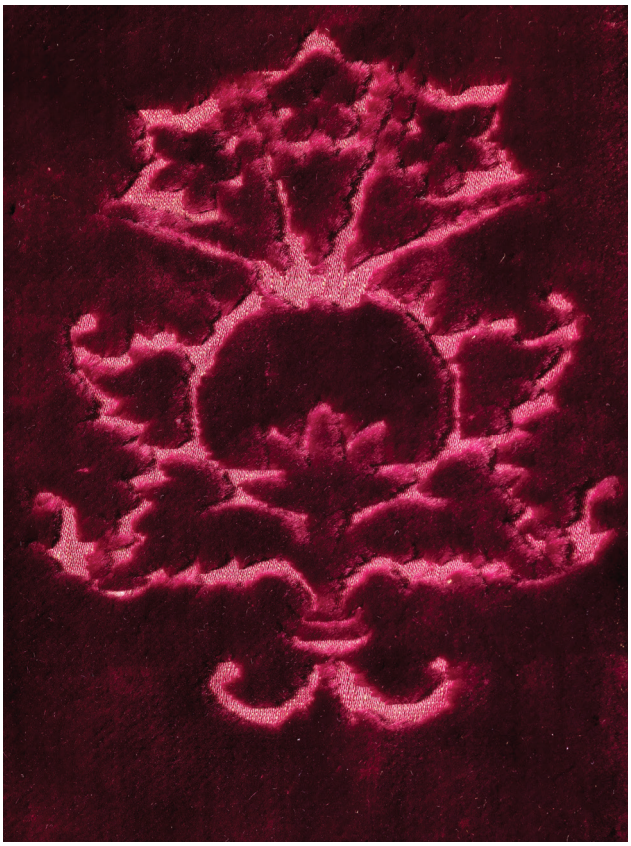

Fig. 11. Chasuble, main body is 15th-century Italian crimson satin velvet, voided, pomegranate motif (detail of Fig. 6).

religious meaning onto the velvet's bird motifs. In order to clarify this, one should consider the cultural context within which the vestment was used. Art historians of the Italian Renaissance, like Simona Cohen, have studied the role of animals in religious iconography as hidden symbols. If the chasuble came from a Venetian collection, like many textiles sold by Adolph Loewi (1888-1977) were[33], it would be relevant to mention that the Venetians were fonder of these devices than other contemporary Italians. Animals and birds played an especially important role in visual metaphors and allegories. Furthermore, the pairing of a specific bird with a human figure was a common device used to signify characteristics of the person through the qualities of the chosen bird[34]. While textiles are a different medium from painting, it should be noted that birds (like the pheasants and peacocks that appear on the velvet) were employed in Western European ecclesiastical embroidery since the Middle Ages as universal symbols of Christianity[35]. They both conveyed similar connotations related to immortality, and were used as sepulchral decorations already in early Christian art[36]. Therefore, the possibility of cultural translation cannot be ruled out given the importance of birds in Renaissance visual narrative, the position of these specific birds in Christian symbolism, and the juxtaposition of the Safavid cruciform orphrey against the Renaissance pomegranate-patterned velvet. Within this framework it is also relevant to refer to the use of textiles featuring bird motifs by other Christian communities. Paintings in St. Stephen's Church of New Julfa show Armenian clergymen dressed in copes of silks that feature birds and flowers[37]. The contemporary popularity of animal motifs in Greek vestments probably indicates that a process of cultural translation may have taken place elsewhere in the Mediterranean as well. The Greek case is easier to prove, however, as Ottoman weaving workshops associated with the Orthodox Church produced textiles patterned with birds and fishes. This suggests that the Iranian textiles with the same motifs could have been substitutes[38]. Therefore, despite the expected local variations, it seems possible that one could talk of a widespread trend both in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean in the presence of animal and especially bird motifs on Christian vestments.

[33] According to the Museum's documentation the chasuble was bought in 1929 from Adolph Lowei's Venice gallery. On Lowei read D. Cecutti, "Adolph Loewi e il commercio di tappeti orientali a Venezia fra Otto e Novecento", *MDCCC 1800* 1 (2012), 33-42.

[34] See S. Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, Leiden – Boston 2008, 60, 62 and 67-80.

[35] For examples of peacocks and peasants on medieval religious embroidery see *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum* (exhibition catalogue), eds C. Browne – G. Davies – M. A. Michael, New Haven – London, cat. no 45 p. 211 (Z. Boden), cat. no 50 p. 225 (M. A. Michael), cat. nos 57, 69 p. 246-248 (C. Browne – M. Zoesch).

[36] On the peacock's symbolism in Christian art see *DACL*, 13/1, entry "Paon" (H. Leclercq). On the pheasant's symbolism in Christian art see *DACL*, 5/1, entry "Faisan" (H. Leclercq).

[37] *Woven from the Soul*, op.cit. (n. 31), cat. no. 18 p. 172-173 (M. Anderson McWilliams).

[38] N. Vryzidis, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire: Evidence from Greek Sacristies", *Iran* 56/2 (2018), 228-236, esp. 232-233. Id., "Threads of Symbiosis", op.cit (n. 9), 148, 160 and 161.

Fig. 12. Bragança, Museu do Abade de Baçal. Chasuble made of 16th-century Safavid silk lampas, and 15th-century European (?) silk lampas (106×63-77 cm).

Finally, the Benaki chasuble's peculiarity could be compared to the Portuguese chasuble previously mentioned (Fig. 12). The latter's Safavid silk features a hunting scene that is quite typical of the Iranian figural tradition, yet is easily recognizable to European eyes[39].

On the other hand, the orphrey's silk features various animal motifs, many of which are mythical: phoenixes, dragons, fishes, crowned creatures, and harpies[40]. The way

[39] For hunting scenes in Iranian textiles see J. Algrove McDowell, "Textiles", R. W. Ferrier (ed.), *The Arts of Persia*, New Haven – London 1989, 157-169, especially figs 18 and 21. *Woven from the soul*, op.cit. (n. 28), cat. nos 30-32 and 34 p. 194-197 and 200-201 (M. Anderson McWilliams).

[40] For animal motifs in late medieval Italian silks see L. von Wilkkens, *Mittelalterliche Seidenstoffe: Seidenstoffe des 5.-14. Jahrhunderts im Berliner Kunstgewerbemuseum* (Bestandskatalog XVIII des Kunstgewerbemuseums), Berlin 1992, cat. nos 220-233, 235-237 and 240-246 p. 108-120. *Intrecci Mediterranei: Il tessuto come dizionario di rapporti economici, culturali e sociali* (exhibition catalogue), ed. D. Degl'Innocenti, Prato: Museo del Tessuto

the motifs mix corresponds to a medieval bestiary woven on silk. Some of the symbols, like the phoenix[41], could also convey Christian symbolism. Beyond distinguishing the meanings conveyed by specific animals, it is known that the bestiary was an important source for religious art in medieval Europe[42]. The mechanism of symbolic transference in the Portuguese chasuble seems less straightforward than the one traceable in the Benaki piece. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to detect certain parallels, such as the animal motifs in the orphrey, or the exotic, yet familiar hunting scenes of the Iranian silk. Both cases offer creative combinations of exoticism and familiarity, and Christian symbolism and irreligious appreciation.

To conclude, the Benaki chasuble vividly illustrates the complexities of the reception of Middle Eastern art in Europe. The Safavid velvet could have been used as a cruciform orphrey for its bird motifs and their role in the Christian narrative, its exotic aesthetic, or both. After all, the exotic depiction of the Madonna and the Child in the velvet presented by Shah Abbas I did not prevent the Venetians from recognizing and accepting it for what it was. Perhaps this duality, of something both exotic and familiar that can be appropriated, made it even more desirable. Unquestionably, the Safavids were producing textiles with the European market in mind; and consecutively, the Europeans embraced these refined imports. Within this context, the Benaki chasuble clearly underlines that apart from exoticism, there are other considerations to take into account when discussing the way Iranian artefacts were incorporated into European culture. As objects of translation and exotic imports on display, these remnants provide yet another reflection of the way Middle Eastern material culture was received in Europe.

2006, cat. no. 5 p. 62-63 (S. Saladrigas Cheng). D. Davanzo Poli, "Catalogo", D. Davanzo Poli – N. M. Riccadona (eds), *Otto secoli di arte tessile ai Frari: Sciamiti, velluti, damaschi, broccati, ricami*, Padua 2014, 35-149, especially 38-41. M. L. Rosati, "De Opere Lucano: Le produzioni seriche sentuarie a Lucca nel corso del XIV secolo. Origini e modelli, tipologie documentate e testimonianze materiali", I. del Punta – M. L. Rosati (eds), *Lucca una città di seta. Produzione, commercio e diffusione dei tessuti lucchesi nel tardo medioevo*, Lucca 2017, 19-96, especially figs 18-23, 25-35, 38-62, 64 and 65. Also, Abegg-Stiftung's 2016 exhibition (Friend and Foe – Animals in Medieval Textile Art, 24 April – 13 November 2016) was dedicated to animal motifs in medieval European textiles: https://abegg-stiftung.ch/en/exhibition/friend-and-foe-animals-in-medieval-textile-art-24-april-13-november-2016/ [Accessed 5th of October 2019].

[41] *DACL*, 14/1, entry "Phénix" (H. Leclercq).

[42] *Christianity in Asia*, op.cit. (n. 26), cat. no. 2 p. 22-23 (P. Moura Carvalho). Also read J. Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie. Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages*, New York 1992.

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Νικόλαος Βρυζίδης

ΤΟ ΔΙΑΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΙΚΟ ΠΛΑΙΣΙΟ ΕΝΟΣ ΦΑΙΛΟΝΙΟΥ ΑΠΟ ΤΗ ΣΥΛΛΟΓΗ ΤΟΥ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟΥ ΜΠΕΝΑΚΗ: ΜΙΑ «ΒΕΛΟΥΔΙΝΗ» ΣΥΝΑΝΤΗΣΗ ΑΝΑΓΕΝΝΗΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΣΑΦΑΒΙΔΙΚΗΣ ΠΕΡΣΙΑΣ

Ένα αδημοσίευτο φαιλόνιο ιερέα του καθολικού δόγματος από τη συλλογή του Μουσείου Μπενάκη (ΓΕ 3833) (Εικ. 6, 8-11), που είχε αγοραστεί στη Βενετία από τον διάσημο έμπορο αρχαιοτήτων Adolph Lowei το 1929, εξετάζεται στο πλαίσιο των διαπολιτισμικών επαφών μεταξύ Ευρώπης και Μέσης Ανατολής. Αναλύονται με λεπτομέρειες η ιστορία του εμπορίου και η χρήση των σαφαβιδικών υφασμάτων για την παραγωγή και τον διάκοσμο λειτουργικών άμφιων στην Ευρώπη του 17ου αιώνα (Εικ. 1-5, 12). Στόχος είναι να καταδειχθούν πτυχές του μηχανισμού ενεργούς πρόσληψης της περσικής τέχνης, που οδήγησε στην ένταξή της στον εκκλησιαστικό υλικό πολιτισμό της εποχής.

Μέσα στο πλαίσιο της αναδιοργάνωσης του σαφαβιδικού κράτους και την ένταση του ανταγωνισμού με την Οθωμανική αυτοκρατορία, ο σάχης Αμπάς Α΄ (1571-1629) υιοθέτησε πολιτικές που ευνόησαν την άνθηση τηςμεταξουργίας. Τα χαρακτηριστικά του εμπορίου περσικών μεταξωτών υφασμάτων στην Ευρώπη του 16ου-17ου αιώνα καταδεικνύονται ως βασικό στοιχείο της σαφαβιδικής εξωτερικής πολιτικής αλλά και του καλλιτεχνικού διαλόγου με την ευρωπαϊκή, και ιδιαίτερα ιταλική, Αναγέννηση. Πέρα από τα πολιτικά και οικονομικά οφέλη αυτής της επιλογής, η ευρεία διασπορά των σαφαβιδικών υφασμάτων άφησε τα σημάδια της πάνω στην ευρωπαϊκή αισθητική, στοιχείο που ίσως διασώζεται περισσότερο στα άμφια των καθολικών ιερέων της εποχής. Η εξωτική αλλά συνάμα αναγνωρίσιμη σαφαβιδική αισθητική, η τεχνική υπεροχή της περσικής υφαντουργίας καθώς και το εκτεταμένο αρμενικό εμπορικό δίκτυο στην υπηρεσία του σάχη είναι μερικά από τα στοιχεία που συνέβαλαν στην επιρροή που άσκησαν τα εν λόγω υφάσματα στην ευρωπαϊκή αγορά. Η δυνατότητα και διάθεση των Περσών να παράγουν σχέδια με απήχηση στην Ευρώπη φανερώνεται μέσα από διάφορα αντικείμενα που αναλύονται με κριτήρια στιλιστικά αλλά και συμβολισμού.

Το εξεταζόμενο φαιλόνιο εκφράζει τέλεια αυτό το πνεύμα ώσμωσης και καλλιτεχνικών ανταλλαγών, καθότι συνδυάζει ένα ιταλικό βελούδο του 15ου με ένα σαφαβιδικό βελούδο των αρχών του 17ου αιώνα. Το κόκκινο ιταλικό βελούδο αποτελεί τη βάση του φαιλονίου και φέρει ως κυρίαρχο μοτίβο το ρόδι, εξέχον σύμβολο της Ανάστασης στη χριστιανική τέχνη. Από την άλλη πλευρά, το πολύχρωμο σαφαβιδικό βελούδο στην πλάτη του αμφίου παίρνει τη μορφή του σταυρού. Φέρει πλούσιο φυτικό διάκοσμο καθώς και απεικονίσεις πουλιών, όπως φασιανούς και παγώνια, τα οποία συχνά εμφανίζονται στη χριστιανική τέχνη ως ταφικά σύμβολα. Ιδιαίτερα το παγώνι έχει συνδεθεί με νοήματα όπως η αιώνια ζωή και η Εκκλησία. Σε κάθε περίπτωση, η παράθεση των συγκεκριμένων δύο βελούδων στο ίδιο άμφιο δεν είναι διόλου τυχαία. Υποδεικνύει την προσπάθεια νοηματοδότησης μέσα από τους συγγενικούς συμβολισμούς που εκφράζουν τα επί μέρους μοτίβα, μέσω και της πολιτιστικής «μετάφρασης» του σαφαβιδικού βελούδου. Ταυτόχρονα, οι συγκρίσεις με παρόμοιες πρακτικές που εντοπίζονται σε άμφια άλλων δογμάτων οδηγούν στο συμπέρασμα ότι στις ορθόδοξες και τις καθολικές χριστιανικές κοινότητες της Ευρώπης και της Ανατολικής Μεσογείου είχε διαμορφωθεί μια κοινή καλλιτεχνική γλώσσα λόγω του συμβολισμού που έφεραν τα συγκεκριμένα μοτίβα.

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