

ANGKOR VOGUE:
SCULPTED EVIDENCE OF IMPORTED LUXURY TEXTILES IN
THE COURTS OF KINGS AND TEMPLES

BY

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Abstract

Comparison of bas relief medallions at Angkor with medallion patterns on Chinese silk and Indian cotton textiles provides compelling evidence that fabrics from these regions were actually in use in the courts of Khmer kings. They served two purposes. One was as items of opulent palace decoration; this role transferred to stone temples, homes of the gods. Second, they represented a canopy or ceiling above a sacred space. Another group, here termed “pseudomedallions,” is described and their function speculated on. While the original textiles at Angkor have long since disappeared, their representations in stone survive as a memorial to these practices.

En comparant les médaillons des bas-reliefs d'Angkor avec les motifs de médaillon sur les soieries de Chine et les cotonnades d'Inde, il ressort clairement que ces textiles ont été en usage à la cour des rois khmers. Cette utilisation fut double: pour la décoration luxueuse des palais, étendue à celle des sanctuaires de pierre, maisons des dieux; pour confectionner un dais ou couvrir un espace sacré. Un autre groupe de 'pseudo-médailles', est également décrit et sa fonction envisagée. Alors que les textiles originaux présents à Angkor ont depuis longtemps disparu, leurs représentations lapidaires ont survécu, témoignant de leur utilisation passée.

Keywords: Angkor, material culture, textiles

Repeat patterns executed in bas relief arranged in panels appear at a number of temples in the Angkor complex. Their locations—on spaces such as door jambs, sills, and ceilings—and their subjects—ostensibly non-narrative motifs—distinguish them from the famous large scale narrative reliefs that adorn the long galleries of Angkor Wat and the Bayon in particular. Part 1 of this paper examines one major group of these pattern elements, here termed “true” medallions, from the point of view that they represent textiles actually in use at the time or, at least, portray textile inspired motifs. Part 2 examines another form of bas relief wall decorations, here termed “pseudomedallions,” which are particularly com-

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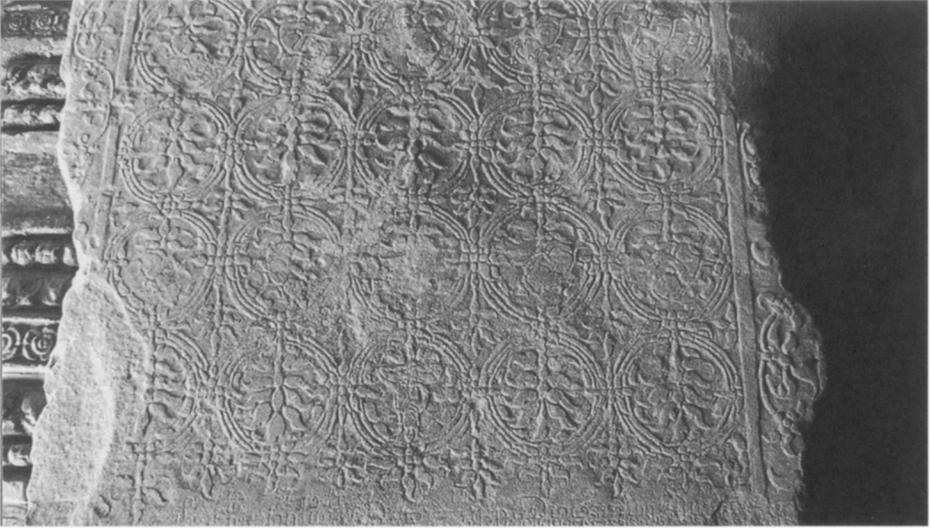


Figure 1: True medallions. Preah Khan 2006

mon at Angkor Wat. These differ from true medallions in that they are incomplete circles that consist of leaf-like extensions alternating either side along the length of an undulating, arabesque form.¹ Although pseudomedallions are similar to true medallions in that they enclose motifs, the iconography that is used for these two types derives from a completely different origin. (fig. 1) & (fig. 2).

PART 1

The dictionary definition of a medallion is an “. . . oval or circular decorative device resembling a medal, usually bearing a portrait or relief moulding used in architecture and textile design” (Collins English Dictionary 1979). In this paper those circular forms that contact each other at their cardinal points are termed “true” medallions. This category can be divided into two groups which are differentiated by their enclosed motifs. One group depicts a variety of floral, geometric, animal, and human shaped patterns and panels of these are situated on vertical surfaces. The second group encloses a fully open lotus bloom as viewed from above and appears on the underside of ceilings or door lintels.

¹ In modern Khmer language this form is called *vong hien* “snail shape.” Chan Vitharin, *Kbach: A Study of Khmer Ornament* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2005): 223.

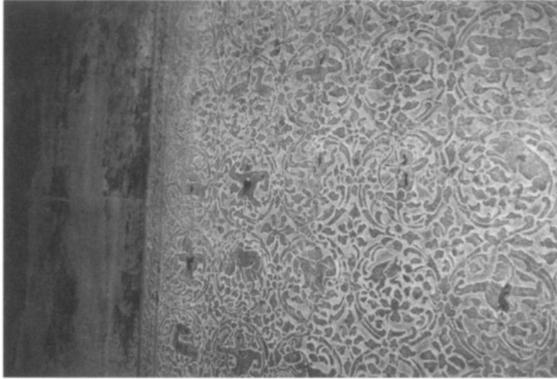


Figure 2: Pseudomedallions. Angkor Wat. 2006

In this article bas relief true medallions are first compared with extant, archaeologically recovered fragments of medallion-patterned textiles dated to the seventh to thirteenth century CE. The role of these two groups of enclosed motifs is next differentiated and an argument for their specific functions is introduced. Further evidence is derived from studying the similar patterns and the meaning of medallions that have been found in the eleventh century CE Tabo monastery, Himachal Pradesh, Northern India and twelfth century CE temples in Pagan, Burma.

Comparison of Bas Relief Medallion Patterns at Angkor with Patterns on Textile Fragments

Panels of medallions appear at the following twelfth century CE temples in the Angkor complex: Angkor Wat, Banteay Kdei, Banteay Samre, Preah Khan, Ta Phrom, and the Bayon. Some of the medallions are found on vertical surfaces—door and window jambs, though occasionally also on window sills, and on depictions of blinds partially pulled down over balustered windows. They feature four different types of motif—(1) birds; (2) “cash” patterns; (3) floral patterns; and (4) floral patterned rims with enclosed figures. These constitute one group of medallions. Type (5), the lotus medallion, can be seen sculpted on the underside of ceilings—horizontal surfaces—at Angkor Wat and at Banteay Torp (currently dated to the thirteenth century CE). This motif represents a second group of medallions.

The rim of the medallions of types 1-4 may be more or less elaborate ranging in decorative style from a band of petal-like or floral elements, to a narrow single or double circle. Floral motifs, which are usually quatrefoil, almost

always appear in the interstices between the medallions. Type 5, the lotus medallion, has what is termed a pearl rim.

1. Birds

One variety of this type of motif features two phoenixes, one facing right, one facing left; their beaks touch, their wings are outstretched and the tails are curved to fit the medallion. Conforming to the architectural-derived convention of Song period (907-1279 CE) Chinese temple decoration,² this example distinguishes a male from a female by their tail feathers; the phoenix is an image that is utterly characteristic of Chinese decoration. A prominent floral quatrefoil appears between the medallions. These are present at Angkor Wat, Bayon, and Banteay Kdei.³ (fig. 3).

A textile equivalent is found on an embroidered silk canopy dated to the mid-Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 CE) and its central motif relates closely to the aforementioned type of bas relief medallion.⁴ On the fabric two phoenixes appear in the same composition; the rim of the medallion is, however, lacking, but this feature is implied by the curvature of their tails. This particular motif made its first appearance on Tang dynasty silver and ceramics⁵ and was used to decorate a variety of artefacts. A middle Yuan dynasty period relief carving on a stone slab in a Daoist temple in Beijing depicts a four-lobed medallion containing the same phoenix pair.⁶ Another type of bird, probably the mythical hamsa, appears unpaired in a medallion at Banteay Samre. (fig. 4). A ninth—tenth century CE silk samite cloth patterned with medallions with a single phoenix corresponds to this single hamsa.⁷ An additional similar extant example of this type of motif is published in Krishña Riboud and Gabriel Vial.⁸

2. “Cash” Medallions

This set of medallions encloses a diamond form with its four points contacting the inner rim. The diamond usually has a quatrefoil floral ornament within it.

² James Watt and Anne Wardwell, *When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997): 196.

³ Vittorio Roveda, *Images of the Gods: Khmer Mythology in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos* (Bangkok: River Books, 2005): 319 fig. 8.117; 319 fig. 8.128.

⁴ Watt and Wardwell, *When Silk was Gold*: 197.

⁵ Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* (London: British Museum Press, 2004): 159.

⁶ Watt and Wardwell, *When Silk was Gold*: 196.

⁷ Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk* (Hongkong: ISAT/Costume Squad Ltd, 1999): 126, 143.

⁸ Krishña Riboud and Gabriel Vial, *Mission Paul Pelliot Documents archéologiques, vol. 13: Tissus de Touen-houang conservés au Musée Guimet et la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres, 1970): 113.



Figure 3: Medallion with pair of phoenix. Bayon 2005

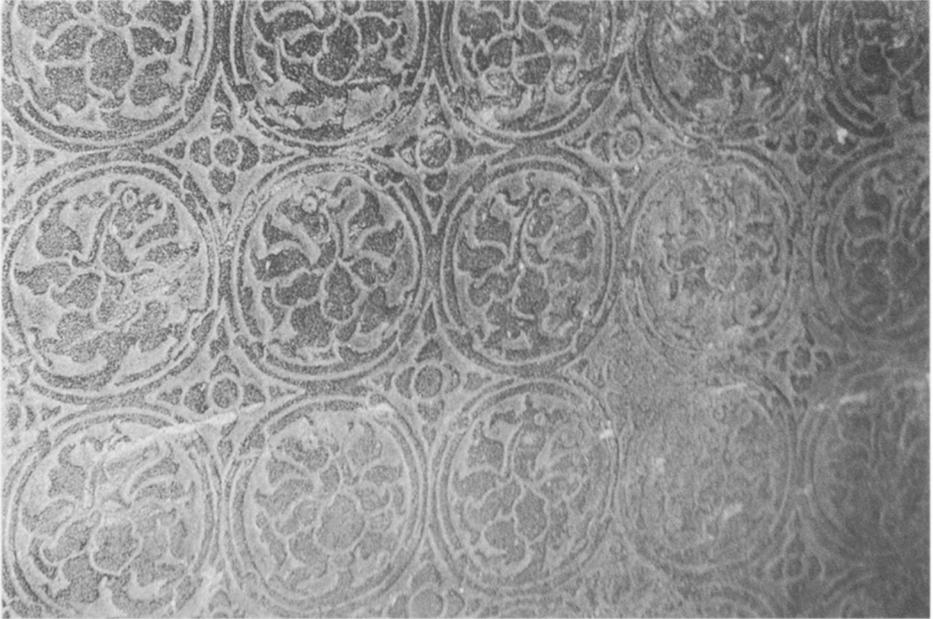


Figure 4: Medallions with hamsa. Banteay Samre 2005

In the Chinese design repertoire this pattern is known as a “cash” motif. In actual “cash” coinage the inner cut out area is square and the points do not extend to the rim. Because in the cash-style, as incorporated into ceramic and textile patterns, the diamond does contact the rim, an intriguing visual effect is created. The array can be read as though the medallions either appear to be contacting each other at the cardinal points or as a seemingly overlapping series of four petalled flowers—depending on how the eye sees and brain interprets the relationship between their curved lines. Where the medallions overlap small floral motifs may appear in the oval shaped elements thus formed. A tiny four petalled flower is located at the point where the four sweeps of the circles pass each other. (fig. 5). Quatrefoil elements almost always appear in the spaces between them. These medallions can be found at Sambor Prei Kuk (first half of the seventh century CE)⁹ twelfth century Preah Khan and the Bayon as panels on doors and window jambs and on blinds. (fig. 6).

⁹ Mireille Bénisti, *Rapports entre le premier art Khmer et l'art Indien* (Paris: Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1970): fig. 48.



Figure 5: Cash medallions. Preah Khan, 2006

A cash medallion pattern decorates a four thousand year old ceramic pot excavated in the Indus Valley.¹⁰ Shelagh Vainker notes that “The cash motif is one of the most frequently encountered designs in the Chinese ornamental repertoire, appearing on porcelains, textiles, carvings and paintings from many periods.”¹¹ A single cash medallion with floral infills that are identical to those at Angkor appears as a modelled pattern motif on the Liao Dynasty (907-1125 CE) square ceramic dish.¹² A series of underglaze cash medallions also decorate the surface of a Northern Song Dynasty (early twelfth century CE) ceramic Cizhou ware jar.¹³

The most significant surviving corresponding textile example in terms of this investigation is a set of cash pattern decorated silk garments from China that

¹⁰ Ethel-Jane W. Bunting, *Sindhi Tombs and Textiles: The Persistence of Pattern* (Albuquerque N.M.: Maxwell Museum of Anthropology: University of New Mexico Press, 1980): 66.

¹¹ Shelagh Vainker, “Silk of the Northern Song: Reconstructing the Evidence.” In *Silk and Stone*, ed. Deborah Smith (London: Hali Publications, 1996): 168.

¹² Vainker, “Silk of the Northern Song”: 166.

¹³ Vainker, “Silk of the Northern Song”: 167.



Figure 6: Blind partly pulled down over balustered windows. Bayon 1999

has been dated to the tenth to eleventh century CE.¹⁴ The fabric's gold color silk ground is patterned with cash medallions with green and blue floral elements. A cash motif also appears on a Liao dynasty fragment of silk damask.¹⁵ A painted depiction of Ksitigarbha sitting on a throne covered with a textile with red and white cash pattern medallions is further present on a mid-tenth century CE painting in Cave 17 Dunhuang.¹⁶

3. Floral Medallions

A medallion with four flowers inside and eight forming the outer rim is found at Angkor Wat. (fig. 7). Other bas relief panels contain repeats of medallions enclosing a simple upright leafy branch without further elaboration like those at Angkor Wat and Ta Phrom. (fig. 8). Another style of medallion—appearing on a window jamb on the western side at Angkor Wat—has an innermost circle enclosing four floral sprays surrounded by an outer band in which four flowers alternate with four animals. On one medallion in the array four pairs of eyes of a Cambodian bird, the *ak* bird, stare out at the viewer, on another four flying phoenixes are depicted in their stead, and on a third, four squirrels appear in that position. (fig. 9). According to Bernard-Philippe Groslier, this decoration represents an individualistic touch which illustrates that the Khmer were “incomparable animalists.”¹⁷ Squirrel-like animals do appear elsewhere in Angkorian period Khmer imagery—in bas relief scurrying up and down sugar palm trees¹⁸ and an official seal cast in bronze in the form of a squirrel is known.¹⁹ *Ak* birds inspired the form of some of the most character-

¹⁴ Vainker, “Silk of the Northern Song”: 165.

¹⁵ Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 182. During the Angkorian period this pattern does not appear on hipwrappers depicted on Khmer sculpted images, but a mid-post Angkorian image of a kneeling Khmer worshipper does have cash medallions on his hipwrapper, see Madeleine Giteau, *Iconographie du Cambodge post-angkorien* (Paris: Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1975): Plate XXXVII c & d. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE this design is depicted on hipwrappers of sculpted Javanese deities. Helen Jessup, *Court Arts of Indonesia* (New York: H. Abrams, 1990): 53; Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, “An Introduction into Majapahit Ornamentation.” *Arts of Asia* Nov-Dec (2000): 87. This pattern is reminiscent of the kawung pattern found on Indonesian batik.

¹⁶ Susan Whitfield, *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (Chicago: Serinda Publications Inc., 2004): 331. John Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998): 298 notes that “. . . [cash medallions] were in use in India from at least the Sunga period (first century BCE to first century CE); and that they circulated throughout the Buddhist world can be deduced from the pattern's appearance in Central Asian and Chinese textiles.”

¹⁷ Bernard-Philippe Groslier, *Angkor: Hommes et Pierres* (Paris: Arthaud, 1968): 36.

¹⁸ Madeleine Giteau, *Les khmers: sculptures khmères. Reflets de la civilisation d'Angkor* (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1965): 228.

¹⁹ Micael Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilisation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003): 142.

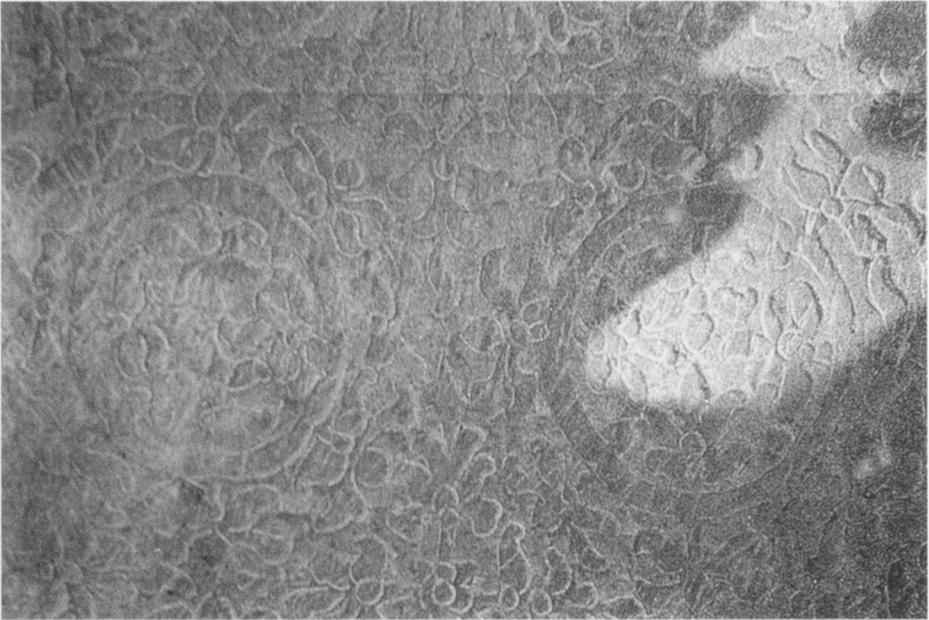


Figure 7: Floral medallions. Angkor Wat 2006

istic ceramic jarlets of Khmer potters²⁰ and the phoenix has already been identified in bas relief motifs.

The question is, are there any comparable textiles? Two examples of silk self-patterned samite fabrics dated to the Tang dynasty feature medallions that are composed of floral elements alone.²¹ These correspond to fig. 7. Another Tang dynasty silk samite fragment has a medallion composed of four phoenixes alternating with four flowers in the outer band which enclose a floral interior. The pattern, on a rust colored ground, is picked out in red, pink, green, brown, and sea blue.²² On another, a tenth to eleventh century CE Chinese silk textile,

²⁰ Ang Choulean, "The âk." *Cambodia Bird News, special Angkor edition* (2000): 17-9. In *Southeast Asian Ceramic Museum Newsletter* 2/9 (9 December 2005): 4. He has identified this bird as the *ak* bird, a fish and shellfish eating bird celebrated in Khmer song and poetry. For an example of this jarlet, see Hiroshi Fujiwara, *Khmer Ceramics from the Kamratan Collection in the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Kyoto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 77.

²¹ Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 135; 137. A textile (EO.1193/B) has a very similar pattern, as illustrated in Riboud and Vial, *Tissus*: 73. It was recovered from the Dunhuang caves, Xinjiang Autonomous Province, China.

²² Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 145.



Figure 8: Medallion with single branch. Ta Phrom 2005 DSCF1354

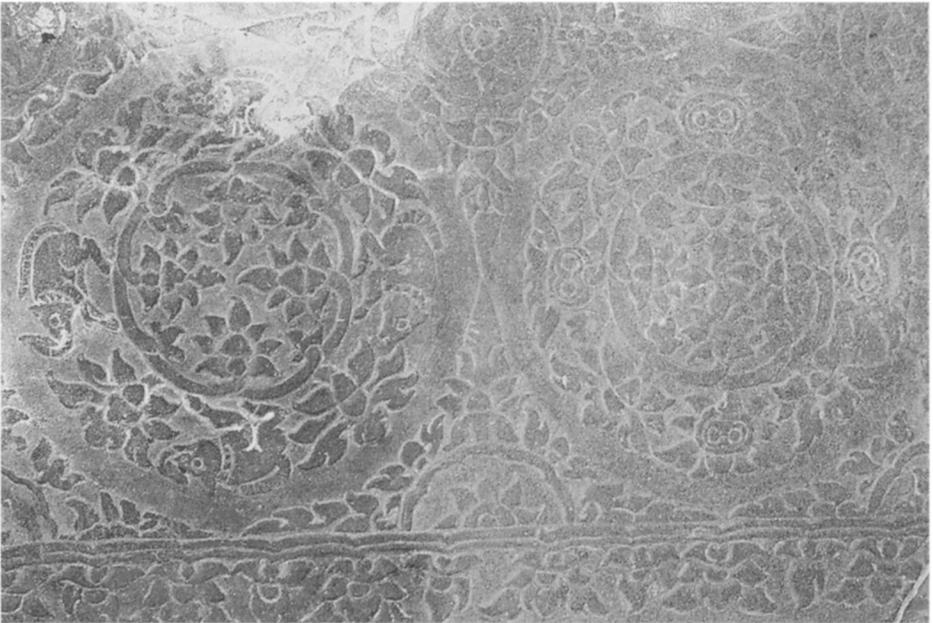


Figure 9: Medallions with squirrels and birds. Angkor Wat 2006

pearl medallions with four birds, possibly falcons, alternate with four flower buds and surround a quatrefoil flower in the center. This silk cloth with its gold ground color and indigo blue pattern is characterized as a “Liao (907-1125 CE) samite weave.”²³ It is not hard to imagine that these two textile examples could have been the model for the quirky Khmer *ak* bird /squirrel/phoenix style medallion wall pattern seen in fig. 8. A comment of Hiram Woodward seems appropriate here: “A fabric recreated in stone . . . may tell us more than would actual textile fragments or impressions, for it documents the local response to the local object.”²⁴ This example is a case in point.

4. Medallions with Figures

Floral rimmed medallions enclosing figures do appear on bas reliefs but are much less common. At Banteay Kdei one appears with a broad outer rim containing arabesques that surround a dancing figure inside.²⁵ At Preah Khan medallions with a deity with adjacent medallions each enclosing a worshipper are interspersed with those of the single branch type on the panel. (fig. 10). These appear in an almost haphazard way amongst the floral medallions. Another example, which includes a deer, is found at Banteay Samre. (fig. 11). Although silk textiles of this period with patterns of this type have so far not been located for comparison, extant Indian printed cotton cloths of a later period—seventeenth to eighteenth century CE—do feature medallions with worshipping or dancing figures very much in this style.²⁶

These particular forms introduce Indian cottons into the discussion. All the examples of textile patterns similar to sculpted medallions mentioned so far have been silks sourced from excavation sites along the Silk Road. Cotton textiles have been as important and desirable as silks for millennia, especially those woven by Indian weavers.²⁷ Fragments of Indian export cotton cloth were discovered in the 1930s in a necropolis at al-Fustat (Old Cairo).²⁸ The oldest

²³ Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 187. A textile (EO.1193D) has a very similar pattern, as illustrated in Riboud and Vial, *Tissus*: 81. It was recovered from the Dunhuang caves, Xinjiang Autonomous Province, China.

²⁴ Hiram Woodward, “A Chinese Silk depicted at Candi Sewu.” In *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History, and Ethnography*, ed. Karl L. Hutterer (Michigan: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1977): 233.

²⁵ Roveda, *Images of the Gods*: 319 figs. 8.115, 116.

²⁶ Chandavij Natthapatra, *Phaa Phim laay booraan nay phiphithaphan thasathaen heng chaat*, Kruntheep, Krom Silpaakon PS 2545 [Ancient Chintz Fabrics in the National Museums] (Bangkok: National Museum, 2002).

²⁷ Cotton is not native to China, so cotton cloth was highly prized by the Chinese in these times for its coolness in summer.

²⁸ Examples are held at the Kelsey Museum, University of Michigan. See Ruth Barnes,



Figure 10: Medallions with figures and single branch. Preah Khan 2006

have been dated to the thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries CE though earlier dates are not ruled out. More recent finds of similar textiles have been made at the Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim (1250-1399 CE) and at Fustat C (late eleventh century CE), all constituting important and rare reference sources.²⁹ The patterns that were used on these cotton cloths were created by block printed mordant, block printed resist, and mordant applied techniques. A fragment of a textile with a printed cash medallion motif has been found at al-Fustat.³⁰ Some of these are patterned with pearl rims enclosing a rosette form, while in

Indian Block-Printed Cotton Fragments in the Kelsey Museum (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1993) and at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. See Ruth Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt. The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): vol.2: 214.

²⁹ Ruth Barnes, "Indian Trade Cloth in Egypt: The Newberry Collection." In *Textiles in Trade, Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium*, eds. M. Nabholz-Kartaschoff, R. Barnes and D. Stuart-Fox (Washington: Washington DC Textile Society, 1990): 182.

³⁰ Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt*: 327 fig. 92.



Figure 11: Medallions with deer, phoenix, hamsa, single branch. Banteay Samre 2005

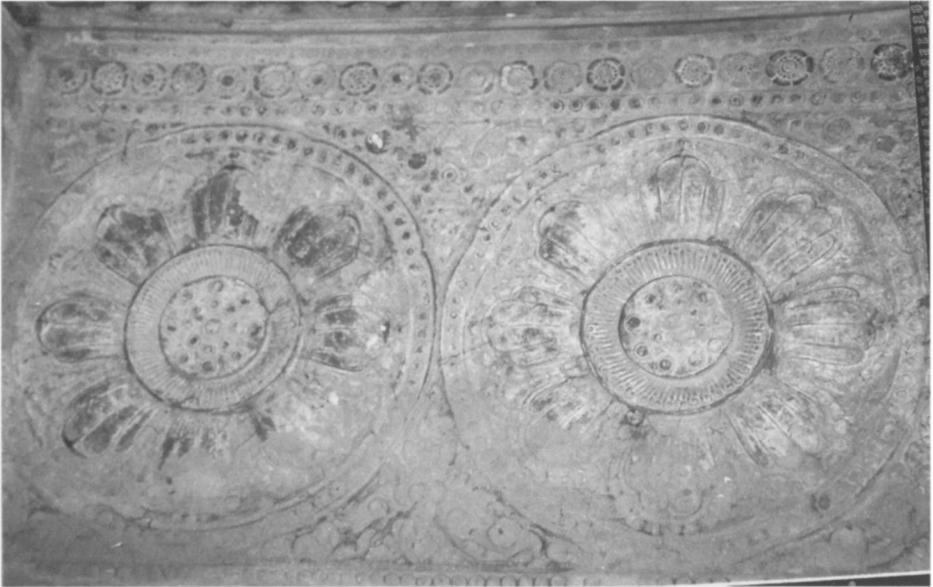


Figure 12: Pair of lotuses, under a lintel. Angkor Wat 2005

others the medallions do not contact each other, but all relate in format terms to what in this discussion is termed the “floral style.”³¹

5. Lotus Medallions

These medallions can be found on the underside of extant timber ceiling panels found at Banteay Torp (aka Banteay Tiep) six km southeast of Banteay Chhmar, and at Angkor Wat.³² A pair of them has been carved into the underside of a stone lintel of a doorway at Angkor Wat. (fig. 12). Two corresponding examples of lotus medallions on cloth sourced in China are known, one painted, one woven. The painted lotus appears on a silk canopy 1.39 meters square found at the Dunhuang Caves, dated to the Tang Dynasty.³³ A pattern on a ninth century CE silk samite textile found in China with a pearl medallion enclosing a fully open lotus is almost identical to that of the sculpted forms.³⁴

³¹ Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt*: 212 figs. 719, 720; 214 fig. 727.

³² Personal communication with Dr Olivier Cunin.

³³ Whitfield, *The Silk Road*: 269.

³⁴ Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 139.

Textiles Observed as Decor Items at Angkor

Khmer sculpted images and bas reliefs of the period visually affirm the use of both plain or patterned textiles in daily life. At Angkor Wat these include the following: Suryavarman II's couch is upholstered with a four petal flower patterned fabric over which a fringed sitting cloth with the same motif is draped and parasols and fans patterned with the same cloth surround him. At the Bayon there are blinds decorated with cash medallions that are half pulled down over balustered windows; (see fig. 6); a kittisol; unpatterned curtains draped around what could be either a lingam or a stele; there are textiles in a princess's apartment; curtains in a carriage; curtains suspended over ritual objects; and fabrics are used as litters for transport.

This visual information is supported by Zhou Daguan, a Yuan Dynasty emissary to the Khmer court at Angkor in 1296 CE. His textual references to cloth at the time of his visit one hundred and fifty years after Angkor Wat was built clearly establish the presence and importance of luxury textiles at Angkor:³⁵

- “They [Cambodians] have an excellent quality of fabric. The Prince wears that valued at two or three ounces of gold. They are most beautiful in colour and fineness . . . they come from the Western seas [India].”³⁶
- “Because the country does not, I believe, produce silver or gold, they esteem Chinese silver and gold even more. And as well rainbow/multi coloured fine silks in double thread.”³⁷
- “. . . houang ts'ao [variety of plant stem bast fibre] is also a desired product [by the Khmer] that Chinese merchants supply.”³⁸
- “The Cambodians know how to weave cotton cloth. . . . They don't know ramie, only lo-ma [a sort of hemp].”³⁹
- “Siamese weave their silk for [Khmer] clothing from dark colour wild silk.”⁴⁰

³⁵ The original Pelliot translations from the Chinese text into French are used as source material to ensure that interpretations are as close as possible to the original text. Paul Pelliot, “Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge par Tcheou Ta-Kouan.” *BEFEO* 2 (1902): 123-177. The items visually depicted at Angkor and Bayon include parasols and kittisols which were noted by Zhou Daguan a century later. He made no mention of these other listed furnishing uses but perhaps he did not have access to the inner sanctum of temples, to inner rooms in palaces, or to women's quarters where the other items depicted on bas reliefs would have been in evidence.

³⁶ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 145.

³⁷ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 167.

³⁸ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 168.

³⁹ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 171.

⁴⁰ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 171. “Tussor” is transliterated in Chinese as zuocan (Pinyin) or

- “They [the king’s subjects] cover their table utensils with a piece of cloth. In the sovereign’s palace gold brocade cloth is used, gifts of foreign merchants.”⁴¹
- “. . . ministers and princes have innumerable red parasols . . . wives and concubines of the king have parasols embellished with gold . . . the prince (sic) . . . [is accompanied] by more than twenty white parasols embellished with gold.”⁴²
- “parasols are made of red Chinese taffeta . . . oiled umbrellas [kittisols] of green taffeta.”⁴³
- “[a palanquin consists of] a large length of cloth folded up several times. One puts oneself in this fabric and two men carry the palanquin. Together with the palanquin, another object is used broader than the sail of a ship and ornamented with multi coloured silk.”⁴⁴

These observations both literary and visual confirm that textiles supplied functional needs other than costume. Lengths of luxury cloth adorned palaces for much the same purposes as they would in the twenty-first century, as well as supplying the material from which items denoting royal prestige were fashioned.⁴⁵

Sources of Luxury Textiles at Angkor

There is very little evidence of textile manufacture other than utilitarian cloth by Khmer weavers in the Angkor period; these weavers can therefore not be assumed to have produced luxury patterned silk and cotton textiles. Zhou Dagan observed that hill tribe Khmer wove on simple looms tied to the waist. These were most likely footbraced backstrap looms secured to an upright post

ts'o-t's'an (Wade). This term used by Pelliot refers to silk from a wild moth, see Ulla Cyrus-Zetterström, *Textile Terminology, Chinese-English-French-Swedish* (Boras: Centraltrykeriet Ake Svenson AB, 1995): 98. Silk from this type of uncultivated moth must be spun, it cannot be reeled off the cocoon. In the French to English translation of Pelliot’s article, the word “tussor” has been translated as “damask-like,” see Zhou Dagan, *The Customs of Cambodia* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, [1297 CE]1992): 58. This is misleading as “tussor” refers to the source of the silk thread and not to the pattern weaving technique implied by “damask-like.”

⁴¹ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 172.

⁴² Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 176.

⁴³ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 148.

⁴⁴ Pelliot, “Mémoires”: 172.

⁴⁵ Medallion patterns do not appear on sculpted Khmer costume textiles of the Angkorian period. See Gillian Green, “Indic Impetus? Innovations in Textile Usage in Angkorian Period Cambodia.” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43/3 (2000): 277-313 for a discussion of costume textiles of the period.

on which relatively narrow lengths of cotton could be woven on a continuous warp. This is an archaic technique that is shared by indigenous cultures of Asia and others around the world and is not associated with silk weaving. As he did not mention the presence of any other type of loom even during his stay close to the court it appears—in the absence of further evidence—that no more sophisticated ability resided with the Khmer at that time. This view is indirectly supported by his comment that the weavers and menders of Khmer silk garments were Siamese artisans.

How and from where could luxury textiles from abroad that were in use at the Khmer court have been acquired?⁴⁶ By the close of the thirteenth century CE both to the West and to the East sophisticated gold thread brocade and figured textiles, damask or samite, were being woven in vast quantities in Asia.⁴⁷ Iranian weavers in the Sassanian period (224—ca. 640 CE) wove brocade and samite cloth, and China had produced gold brocade long before the Yuan dynasty (1279—1368 CE). As Thomas Allsen notes:

According to the findings of E. I. Lobo-Lesnichenko, the earliest meaning of the character *chin* was a patterned textile woven from dyed silk thread. Chinese familiarity with gold thread occurred initially at the end of the Han in consequence of closer contact with the western region. Sources of this era describe true gold brocade as a product of Syria and northern India. Domestic production began in China in the fifth century [CE] but only in the Tang era does *chin* take on its modern meaning of gold brocade. In the following centuries Chinese brocade became known in west Asia.⁴⁸

In battles fought and won across the Asian continent, skilled weavers were highly prized and carried off by the victors to set up workshops a long way from home. This facilitated the transmission of new influences, which blended with, or were adopted by, the existing traditions.

Lee Chor Lin describes one mode by which luxury goods found their way to Southeast Asia during the period from the Song to the end of the Ming dynasty:

The ritual traditions of the Chinese and South East Asians involved extensive use of textiles. In both societies, the exchange of textiles was integral to the process of reinforcing ties between different groups of people, particularly in the relationship between

⁴⁶ Archaeological and inscriptional evidence has been reviewed; see Green, “Indic Impetus?” Additional details refer to textile sources. Inscription K618 (1026 CE) at Sek Ta Tuy refers to a garment and a hanging sourced in India; inscription K273 (1186-91 CE) at Ta Phrom and K 208 at Preah Khan, refer to superior quality silk and to a mattress, both items are from China; inscription K273 (1186 CE) refers to voiles from China; and inscription K485 (1200 CE) at Phimeanakas, to cloth for a banner and silk fabric both of Chinese origin. This information was kindly collated by Eileen Lustig.

⁴⁷ Thomas Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 37.

⁴⁸ Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange*: 95.

the superior and the subordinate. . . . If the Chinese thought that the South East Asians were vassals paying appropriate respect to the Imperial order of China, then the act of giving textiles to the South East Asians may also have followed the same philosophy of gift and reward [as to Chinese officials].⁴⁹

Looking at the relations between the Khmer court and China during the Angkorian period, roughly corresponding to the Song Period, the Khmer sent only two missions to China, in 1116 and 1120 CE, which is very few when compared with neighboring kingdoms: “Jiao Zhi (North Vietnam) sent 66 missions during the Song Dynasty (960-1260 CE); Champa 57; and Srivijaya 30.”⁵⁰ These figures suggest that although the Khmer court may not have received gifts from the Chinese court in quantities like its neighbors, Chinese textiles were certainly present in the region and could well have found their way to the Khmers indirectly.

Intra-regional sources should not be discounted either. Late Han dynasty period (25-225 CE) bas relief sculpted images found in Sichuan province in China’s southwest depict a backstrap frame loom with added treadles on which brocade could be woven. Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province lay on trade routes to the south and was even at that time known as the “brocade city.”⁵¹ By the Angkor period luxury cloth could have been woven in Java as the appropriate looms were in use then.⁵² Rich textiles from workshops such as these could hence have been circulated within the local region by merchants. Indian cotton cloth was also widely traded in Asia at that time, principally via maritime trade routes. Floral medallions are seen on fragments of printed cotton cloth woven in India for export in that period.

⁴⁹ Lee Chor Lin, “Textiles in Sino-Southeast Asian Trade: Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties.” In *Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia, vol. 17: South East Asia and China: Art, Interaction and Commerce*, eds. Rosemary Scott and John Guy (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1995): 175. Itinerant Pyu dancers from Burma and dancers from Cambodia performed at the Tang court, see Susan Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 140. Perhaps they were recipients of Chinese silk cloth gifts

⁵⁰ J. Miksic, “Angkor’s Contacts with China.” Paper delivered at the conference *Angkor—Landscape, City and Temple* (University of Sydney: Australia, 2006).

⁵¹ Richard C. Rudolph, *Stories from China’s Past: Han Dynasty Pictorial Tomb Reliefs and Archaeological Objects from Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China* (San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation, 1987): 97.

⁵² Jan Wisseman Christie, “Ikat to Batik? Epigraphic Data on Textiles in Java from the Ninth to the Fifteenth Centuries.” In *Weaving Patterns of Life: Indonesian Textile Symposium 1991*, eds. Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff, Ruth Barnes and David J. Stuart-Fox (Basel: Museum of Ethnography, 1993): 14. These are backstrap looms with a discontinuous warp, a warp beam supported on a stand, and a reed all of which facilitate more complex patterning techniques such as supplementary weft and warp decoration.

Symbolism of Medallion Patterns

In the Angkorian context, what conclusions can be drawn concerning the use and significance of bas relief medallion patterns appearing on vertical walls and on horizontal ceilings? The foregoing discussion—comparing medallion bas reliefs with extant textile patterns—it is proposed, provides clear evidence that the bas relief patterns could represent textiles known to have been circulating in Asia at that time and which found their way to the Khmer domain. There does appear, however, to be a distinction between Angkorian wall medallion patterns—specifically those with motifs of birds, cash patterns, flowers, and figures—and those used for ceilings with lotus medallions. The former appear to serve a purely decorative, or interior design, purpose.⁵³

Lotus medallions, however, do seem to fulfil a different function. Very few of these wooden carved panels are still in place: one example is preserved at Banteay Torp and the other at Angkor Wat. They are only found carved on horizontal surfaces, i.e. the underside of ceilings and there is one example on a beam supporting the ceiling at Angkor Wat.⁵⁴ This particular lotus medallion pattern on the underside of timber ceilings suggests a more significant function than simple decoration;⁵⁵ since it appears above a space in which a deity would be placed, this ceiling protects as well as defines this sacred space.

Examples of cloth ceilings in the last century relate to this function. In 1899 Adhémard Leclère noted the presence of a white cotton textile, *pidan* (“ceiling” in Khmer language), which had silk and cotton flowers stitched on it and had been donated to a Cambodian temple.⁵⁶ Photographs dated to 1929 of two temples in Cambodia show that lotus medallions or floral motifs, which were based on a lotus medallion, appeared above the Buddha image. These temples are Wat Kas Luong in Kompong Cham and Wat Moha Leap, Sithor, in the Kandal province.⁵⁷ A silk *pidan* with stars and celestial elements was in place above a

⁵³ “This custom of using fabric directly as a wall covering or painted to resemble fabric wall covering, is evident in a mural dated to 1782 CE, where textiles cover the walls and pillars of the Amarin Throne Hall of Rama 1 and in Cambodia and Thailand, many existing temples have pillars painted with textile designs”: Phasuk Santanee and Philip Stott, *Royal Siamese Maps: War and Trade in nineteenth-century Thailand* (Bangkok: River Books, 2004): 27.

⁵⁴ The presence of “crochets” (Fr) or hooks inserted high up into the internal walls at Sambor Prei Kuk and at Prasat Kravan probably supported ceilings at the time of their construction but these have not survived, see Henri Parmentier, *L’art khmer primitif* (Paris: Vanoest, 1927).

⁵⁵ As has been noted lotuses are also carved on the underside of stone door lintels at Angkor. These may have denoted entries to a sacred space.

⁵⁶ Adhémard Leclère, *Le buddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: Leroux, 1899): 457.

⁵⁷ These images are recorded in the photographic database of the EFEO, Siem Reap.

Buddha figure in a wat in the Angkor Thom complex in 1999.⁵⁸ These instances indicate that the practice of installing textile canopies, or their painted forms, as ceilings above the figure of a deity, usually a Buddha image, has had a long history in the region.

Nithi Sthapitanonda and Brian Mertens state that, in Thailand panelled ceilings of ordination and assembly halls “. . . have been decorated with lotus motifs since Sukhotai period (1279-1438 CE). Done in paint, gold leaf or carved wood, and sometimes inlaid with glass mosaic the lotus is usually rendered as a rather crystalline rosette . . . they are called ‘star ceilings’ (*dao pedan* T). Twinkling overhead, they symbolise order in the cosmos brought about by dhamma, or Buddhist Law.”⁵⁹

Temples with medallion patterns on ceilings elsewhere in Asia support the notion that such situated textiles, or representations of these, define sacred spaces. At the early eleventh century CE Tabo monastery, Himachal Pradesh, in Northern India the cold, dry climate has, quite astoundingly, preserved the original cloth in place.⁶⁰ The cloth is in the form of strips 2.2 × 0.7 m fitting the spaces between the beams. Chinese style floral medallion patterns with a lotus enclosed in a pearl rim are painted directly onto the fabric.⁶¹ Erna Wandl ponders why medallions with different motifs appear on different sections of roofs in this temple: “. . . If we assume that the cella was considered the most sacred part of the temple, the depictions of lotus flowers and offering deities, practically hovering over the sanctuary and symbolising an act of worship, may have been considered a more appropriate means of covering a sacred space than ‘ordinary’ textiles . . . From Buddhist tradition we know that such canopies have an honorific function.”⁶²

Twelfth century CE temples at Pagan, Burma have medallions painted onto their vaults. In some cases these patterns extend downward from the vault to the sides of the windows; some enclose Buddha images, some are cash medallions. In this instance the paintings could represent textiles which had the same purpose of denoting the space reserved for a deity image beneath.⁶³

⁵⁸ Gillian Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia: Cultural Threads and Material Heritage* (Bangkok: River Books, 2003): 217.

⁵⁹ Nithi Sthapitanonda and Brian Mertens, *Architecture of Thailand* (Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2005): 164.

⁶⁰ Erna Wandl, “Painted Textiles in a Buddhist Temple.” *Textile History* 30/1 (1999): 16.

⁶¹ Wandl, “Painted Textiles”: figs. 1, 5, 6.

⁶² Wandl, “Painted Textiles”: 25.

⁶³ Pierre Pichard, *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

PART 2

“Pseudomedallion” Panels at Angkor.

There is, in addition to true medallion patterns, a second group of sculpted decorative motifs presented in panels. (fig. 13). These are found located at Angkor Wat at the western side of the third enclosure and at a limited number of locations further inside the complex. The panels are composed of what are here termed “pseudomedallions.” A pseudomedallion differs from a true medallion in a number of ways: the circle is incomplete being formed by a leaf, which though curving round, does not completely close the circle; they do not contact each other but arise from the “spine” of the supporting arabesque form; finally, the motifs within the forms are much more variable in subject, including deities, humans, ascetics, animals and birds, apsaras, and mythical scenes.⁶⁴ They were first published as ink rubbings by Georges Coedès in 1913⁶⁵ and no inscriptions are associated with them. These panels like the true medallions also appear on door jambs.⁶⁶ They are sculpted in bas relief and arranged to form panels of up to six vertically-aligned columns with curved leaf forms extending out alternately left and right from the arabesques.⁶⁷ Between five and ten layers of these curved leaf forms, horizontally oriented, complete the panel. More recently Vittorio Roveda has published an exhaustive image record of these forms.⁶⁸

Coedès was the first to suggest that the figures in the pseudomedallions may be interpreted as relating to the larger, narrative bas reliefs.⁶⁹ Each pseudomedallion with its single image has been said by Roveda to “. . . simulat [e] ‘tapestry decoration’ (‘décor en tapisserie’) and ‘tapestry reliefs.’”⁷⁰ Roveda supports Coedès’s opinion in that each pseudomedallion

⁶⁴ Single lines of arabesque panel patterns are found carved around doorways, windows, and niches with deities at many Angkorian temples. They consist of just one “line” of arabesque, not a panel of aligned forms. They feature similar enclosed motifs which are usually coarser in execution.

⁶⁵ Georges Coedès, “Etudes Cambodgiennes: VII. Seconde étude sur les bas-reliefs d’Angkor Vat.” *BEFEO* 13/6 1913): 1-5.

⁶⁶ Vittorio Roveda, *Sacred Angkor: The Carved Reliefs of Angkor Wat* (Bangkok: River Books, 2003): 268-9; François Bizot, “Les Ensembles Ornementaux illimités d’Angkor.” *Arts Asiatiques*, Tome XXI (1970): 110-130.

⁶⁷ The pattern of flowers, stylized leaf forms and swags in the Javanese candis, is quite different from the arabesque patterns at Angkor.

⁶⁸ Roveda, *Images of the Gods*: 306-319.

⁶⁹ Coedès, “Etudes Cambodgiennes”: 1.

⁷⁰ The quoted term “tapestry decoration ‘décor en tapisserie’ relief” is used to describe these arabesque panels by Roveda, *Sacred Angkor*: 224; *Images of the Gods*: 306. The source of this quote is not provided.



Figure 13: Panel of pseudomedallions. Angkor Wat 2006

“... presents... the essential iconographic elements of each story’s protagonist, and can be used to help identify or confirm characters and stories in reliefs from other sites of the temple... each image or unit is like a word, which combined in a logical way creates a phrase... respect[ing] certain rules—a syntax.”⁷¹

Neither Coedès nor Roveda provide evidence to support these assertions but an example in South Asia does lend historical support. These scholars’ iconographic reading of Angkorian pseudomedallions as a visual narrative may be compared with medallion style images at the Sumtsek temple at Alchi, Ladakh dated ca. 1215 CE. This temple is dedicated to a triad of Bodhisattvas—Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya—who are depicted as larger than life statues.⁷² Maitreya’s hipwrapper “... contains a painted lifecycle of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni.”⁷³ The episodes are depicted within fifteen cm diameter medallions with a red ground “... rendered within a basic textile pattern.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Roveda, *Sacred Angkor*: 224.

⁷² C. Luczanits, “The Life of the Buddha in the Sumtsek.” *Orientalia* 30/1 (1999): 30-39.

⁷³ Luczanits, “The Life of the Buddha”: 30.

⁷⁴ Luczanits, “The Life of the Buddha”: 30.

This mode of representation of episodic events is reminiscent of those in the Angkorian pseudomedallion panels. Suffice to say that in the context of this paper, the narrative intent of this depiction on a textile hipwrapper is the significant point and resonates with conclusions about the iconographic purpose of the Angkorian arabesque panels.

In part 1, true medallions were compared with textiles. This prompts the question whether textile equivalents of pseudomedallions exist.

Pseudomedallion panels and their motifs do re-emerge several centuries later as textile patterns. Extant cotton textiles dating to the late seventeenth century CE used in the Siamese court feature patterns with motifs derived from these particular panel arrays.⁷⁵ Textiles with these specific patterns were ordered from Indian suppliers by the court for its exclusive use. Worshippers, deities, and apsaras were favored motifs though enclosed in diamond and ogival lattices.⁷⁶ Medallions like those described here as “floral medallions with figures”⁷⁷ also appear. It is tempting to speculate that these panel patterns at twelfth century CE Angkor in the course of time became the model for motifs on these prestigious extant Indian sourced textiles of the Siamese court of the seventeenth century CE, or even earlier. In this context pseudomedallion panels with the purpose of portraying a narrative theme became the inspirational source of textile patterns in later centuries, rather than the other way round of contemporaneous textile motifs being the source of bas relief patterning inspiration.

CONCLUSION

The hypothesis proposed for this study has been that stone bas relief decorations in Angkorian period temples represented actual textiles patterned with medallions available at that time. This implies that the craftsmen sculpted from life, so to speak, portraying the textiles as they saw them on walls and ceilings, or that they had access to the fabrics embellishing Khmer wooden palaces and used the medallion motifs as the inspiration for patterning walls in temples thus recreating that palatial decor.

To prove this hypothesis, it had to be shown that textiles with medallion patterns were present in the Khmer court. There is no evidence to date that the

⁷⁵ Guy, *Woven Cargoes*: 167-171; Natthapatra, *Phaa Phim laay booraan nay phiphithaphan thasathaen heng chaat*.

⁷⁶ Interestingly, many of the motifs on royal Siamese cloths portray deities such as Brahma and Vishnu, and other characters associated with the heavenly domain such as worshippers, apsaras, kinnari, garuda, and lions, see Natthapatra, *Phaa Phim laay booraan nay phiphithaphan thasathaen heng chaat*.

⁷⁷ Roveda, *Images of the Gods*: 319 figs. 8.115, 116.

Khmer had the capability at that time to weave luxury cloth of this kind. Evidence for possible sources of such textiles was, therefore, sought through comparison with extant fabric fragments found elsewhere in Asia in a time period roughly contemporary with the Angkor one. Matches with foreign sourced cloth were found.

Likely routes by which textiles could have become available to the Khmer needed explanation. The results of the study indicate that the most likely mechanisms by which luxury textiles patterned with medallions found their way to the Khmer court were through trade and tributary gifts bestowed by the Chinese Emperor. International trade in silk textiles from China—whether woven in that country or elsewhere along the Silk Road—and cotton fabrics from India could both have supplied this need. Intraregional trade with Java was also possible as it had a flourishing textile economy at that time.⁷⁸

The function of the textiles, whatever their source, as visualized in bas reliefs on the walls was examined. All patterns, be they medallions filled with birds, flowers, “cash” patterns, or figures, appear to fulfil a purely decorative function. The lotus medallion—only found on ceilings—appears, however, to have a more significant religious function in defining a sacred space beneath. This differentiation of patterns and their functions finds its counterpart in other temples and candis in Asia. Additional evidence from similar medallion patterns both sculpted and painted and on textiles themselves in use elsewhere in Asia during this time period was introduced for comparison.

Finally another group of sculpted bas relief motifs called pseudomedallions was characterized. The hypotheses of other scholars into the function of these suggest a narrative “shorthand” function which allowed myths to be told in minimal iconographic images rather than in full scale large reliefs. The search for textile equivalents of these pseudomedallions revealed none in the Angkorian period although fabrics patterned with such motifs are in evidence in Thailand some five centuries later.

The major difficulty in a study such as this is the miniscule number of textile examples of the ninth to fourteenth centuries CE (Angkorian period) which have survived from any source with which to carry out comparisons. In addition, those that have been found can often only be dated in whole centuries or even whole dynasty terms. Their age is determined from archaeological dates and trade records. Carbon dating of extant textiles of the period is rarely undertaken as the fragments are so precious that even single, short lengths of a thread are reluctantly parted with for analysis.

⁷⁸ Wisseman Christie, “Ikat to Batik?”

Their surviving representations in other media found throughout Asia from the sixth century CE onward, however, stands as proof that medallion patterned luxury textiles were significant in both decorative and religious practice.

I would like to express my thanks to Dr Olivier Cunin for making available his images of lotus carved ceilings at Angkor Wat and Banteay Torp.

GLOSSARY OF WEAVING TERMS

Brocade: silk cloth with a weft pattern in discontinuous gold or silver wrapped or surface applied thread. Brocaded technique may be applied to tabby, damask, gauze, and double weave ground weaves. (Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 338)

Damask: see self patterned.

Mordant printed or painted: a mordant is a chemical that fixes dye to the cloth. It is applied to the surface of the cloth by stamp or brush prior to the dye being applied.

Pearl medallion: the rim of this medallion contains spots, “pearls,” looking like ball bearings in a race.

Samite: Liao [dynasty] samite is a “compound twill weft faced on both sides.” (Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 339)

Self patterned: “Using one set of warp and weft to create the ground and pattern, commonly used to describe patterned textiles using a warp and weft of the same colour. Self-patterned textiles could be divided based on the different ground structures into three categories: damask on tabby, twill damask and satin damask” (Zhao Feng, *Treasures in Silk*: 333). Another term for “figured cloth.”

Surface patterned cloth: see mordant printed or painted.

Tussor: zuocan (Pinyin) tso-ts’an (Wade). Silk spun from the cocoon of wild silkworm which feeds on oak leaves (Cyrus-Zetterström, *Textile Terminology*: 98). This is in contrast to the silk reeled from the intact cocoon of the cultivated silkworm, *Bombyx mori*, which feeds on mulberry leaves.

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