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## EMBROIDERIES ON GARMENTS FROM KURGAN 20 OF THE NOIN-ULA BURIAL GROUND

**Keywords:** Mongolia, Xiongnu, Noin-Ula burial ground, kurgan 20, clothing fragments, embroideries, human depictions

Archaeological materials from kurgan 20 of the Noin-Ula burial ground in Northern Mongolia were studied in 2006 by members of the Joint Russian-Mongolian Expedition whose results were published in a book entitled, *The 20th Kurgan of Noin-Ula*.<sup>1</sup> However, many textile items were not included as they will be published in a separate monograph. Some of the most remarkable artifacts were published in separate papers.<sup>2</sup> The present paper focuses on Kurgan 20 that has yielded pieces of outer garments (Pl. I) and many other unique items. The textiles were recovered from the bottom of the looted burial chamber embedded in water-saturated clay. These pieces represent considerably large parts of the flaps of a garment. Presently, it is impossible to determine whether it was the short jacket of a horseman or a long outer garment (*kaftan*), or if it was the garment for a man or a woman. The basic textile was a thin, dense, sand-colored silk. The silk base was coated with ornately embroidered wool and silk fabrics lined with silk wadding. The sides and the bottom of the garment are edged with duplicated light beige silk bands decorated with repeated woven red motifs. The garment is also edged with fur, most likely sable. All the fabrics used in fashioning this garment are of great interest (Fig. 1).

**The decorative motif on the edges of this outer garment is unique.** The light beige silk bands bear the images of animals (dragon and tortoise), birds (phoenix), a man and a repeated hieroglyphic symbol woven with red threads (Pl. IIA). Traditionally, the images of an “azure dragon” (the symbol of the East),

<sup>1</sup> Polosmak, Bogdanov, Tseveendorzh 2011.

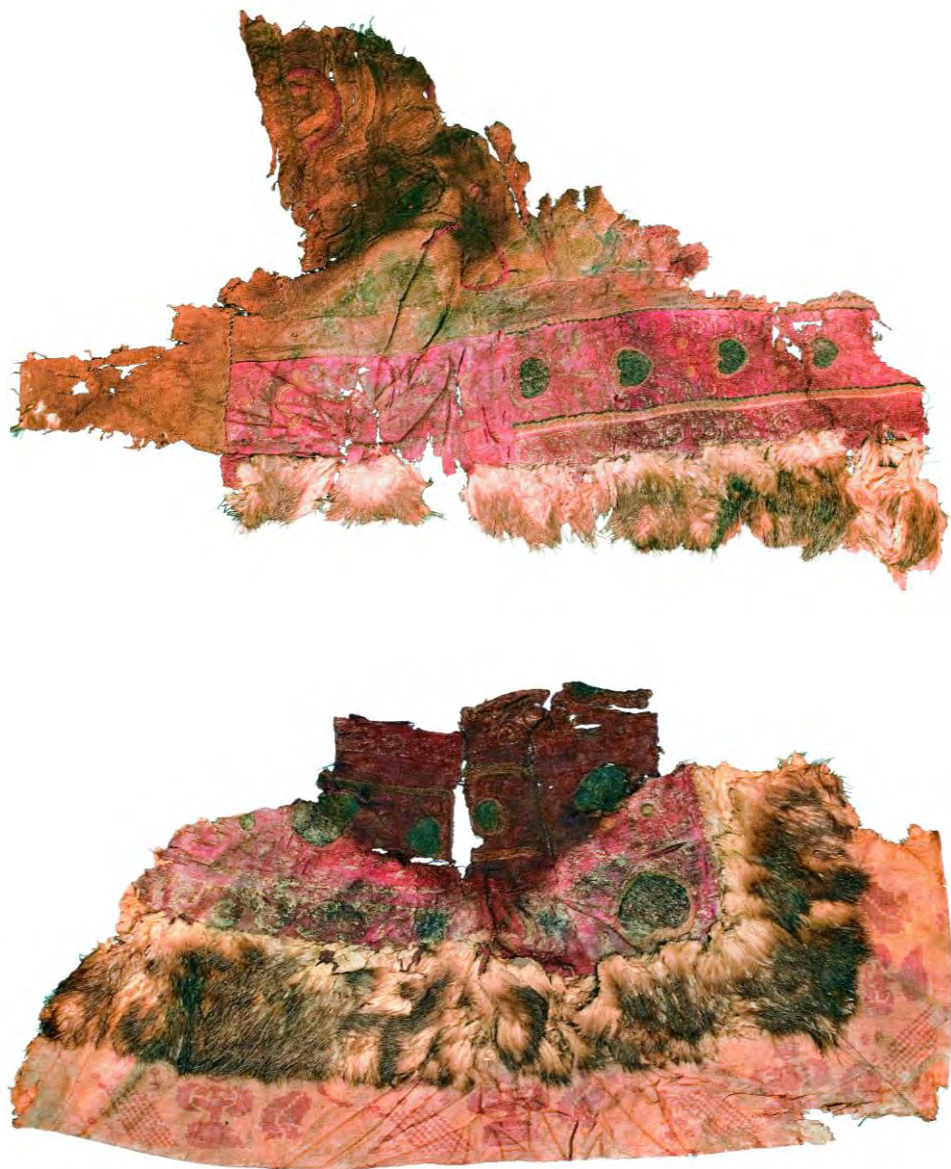
<sup>2</sup> Polosmak 2011, 112–133; 2013, 352–366; Polosmak, Chistiakova 2011, 97–100.

a white tiger (the symbol of the West), a cinnabar bird (the symbol of the South) and a black tortoise twisted by a snake (the symbol of the North) represent the four spirit-patrons. This combination of images was usually represented on tiles, mirrors, burial murals and coffins in China during the Han period.<sup>3</sup> The fabric from the tomb shows the images of all these spirit-patrons excluding that of the tiger. These animals are associated with the Daoist Realm of Immortals that was traditionally associated with mountains. It is not without reason that the character *xian* 仙 consists of two graphemes “man” and “mountain”. The ancient character *hua* 華 consists of two characters: 華 – *hua*, meaning “flourishing” and “prosperous” and 山 – *shan* meaning “mountain” (Pl. IIA, Fig. 2). Representation of this hieroglyphic character on textile does not completely coincide with the written character, because it was woven and it looks slightly different. It should be noted that the Chinese language is characterized by homonymy: the interchangeability of characters with a common sound but represented differently in writing. The character discussed here has several meanings: a) a mountain; b) the Hua Shan Mountain (the Flourishing Mountain); and c) the family hieroglyphic character *Hua*. The Hua Shan Mountain is one of the five Sacred Mountains of Daoism in China. We believe that this connotation serves as the best explanation for the composition of the woven images (the interpretation of the hieroglyphic characters was made by Dr. A.N. Chistiakova).

The image of a man with snake-like legs seems to be the most interesting in this magical, celestial composition (Pl. IIA, Fig. 2). Four parallel lines are shown over his folded arms. This image can be interpreted as a portrait of Fu Xi, one of the five perfect sovereigns and legendary rulers of the antiquity. He taught people how to hunt, fish, make fire, and was very popular during the Han period. His major contribution is the creation of eight trigrams composed of three straight lines and three that are discreet (a straight line represents Yang, while a discreet line signifies Yin). One account has it that these trigrams appeared to him in the form of the motifs that covered the shell of a magic tortoise that emerged from the Loshui River, while another purports that they appeared as the curly hair on the back of a Dragon-horse that came out of the Hwang Ho River. In this case, the woven motifs illustrate the latter version of the legend about the trigrams, i.e. Fu Xi saw these images in the curly hair on the Dragon-horse’s back. These trigrams were used to decode the secrets of natural and social phenomena and aided in fortune-telling, medicine, and geomancy.<sup>4</sup> These trigrams served as the hexagrams used in *I Ching* (or *Yi Jing*), an ancient Chinese text used for divination.

<sup>3</sup> Loewe 2005, 128.

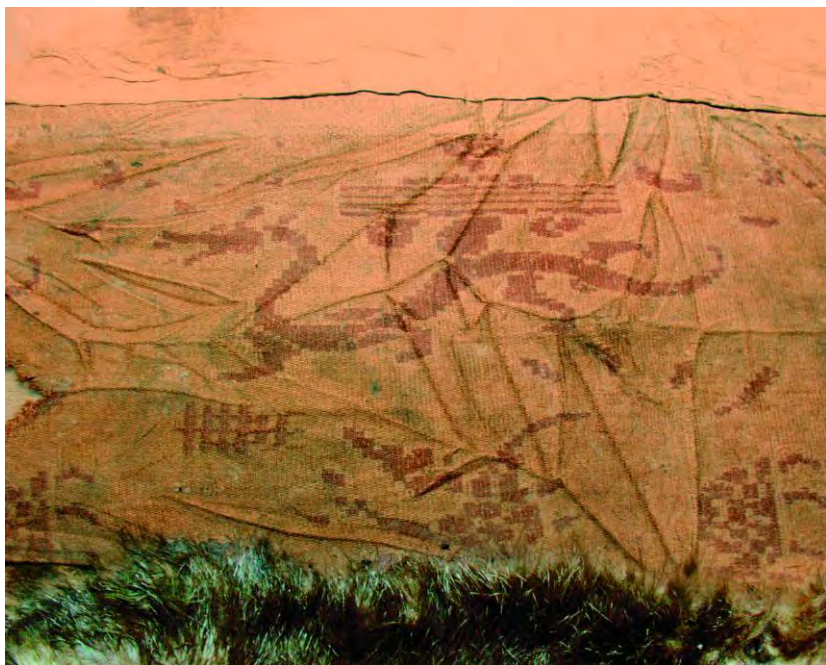
<sup>4</sup> Ermakov 2008, 35–36.



**Pl. I (A, B):** Fragments of the outer garment flap (wool, silk, fur) from Noin-Ula burial mound 20.



Fig. 1. Traces of the embroidered images from silk (above) and woolen (below) fragments of the outer garment from Noin-Ula kurgan 20. Sketch by E.V. Shumakova.



Pl. II (A, B): Fragments of the silk edging bearing a dragon and *Fuxi* images and the images of dancing man and woman.

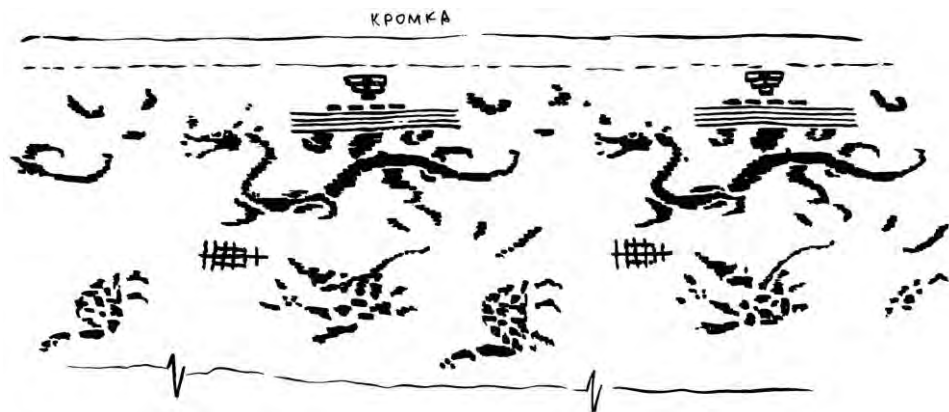


Fig. 2. Traces of the motifs from the silk edging. Sketch by E.V. Shumakova.

The hands of the woven image of the celestial ruler bear four lines instead of three. We suggest the following explanation for this fact. Confucians adopted the *I Ching* philosophy of their teacher many years after his death (according to Iu.K. Shutskii, the most prominent Russian scholar of this text, who dates the adoption between 213 and 163 BC). The disciples did not only study the *Book of Changes*, but sometimes imitated it, such was the case with the *Book of the Great Secret* (*Tai Xuan Qin*) by Yan Xiung. This text also contains some symbolic linear images accompanied by aphorisms that occur in the *Book of Changes*. The images from the *Book of the Great Secret* are composed of four lines which consist of three different types: straight, discreet, and those that appear as two dashes.<sup>5</sup> It is exactly this symbolic combination of linear images that appear in the hands of the woven image of the divine ancestor.

The images of dancing men and women represent another interesting composition woven in the fabric (Pl. IIB). Dances were performed at important ritual festivities in ancient China. The dancing rituals emerged from shamanism.<sup>6</sup> Usually, the séance began with an ecstatic dance, which made the performing “shaman-woman” fall into a trance. The character “shaman-woman” in its oldest form denotes a dance or ritual movements.<sup>7</sup> The woven image of the male figure with four eyes can be identified as that of *fangxiangshi*, a pathogenic and evil ghost, or an exorcist wearing a mask with four golden eyes.<sup>8</sup> Huangdi, a major hero among the Five Sovereigns and emperors of antiquity, also had four eyes<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Shutskii 1997, 222.

<sup>6</sup> Vasilev 2001, 164–165.

<sup>7</sup> Ermakov 2008, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ermakov 2008, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ermakov 2008, 40.

The silk piece that was used in decoration of the festive garment of a nomad represents a unique specimen of fabric from the Han period.<sup>10</sup>

**Pieces of woolen fabric** used in garment manufacturing were of various sizes sewn together. These pieces possibly are the remnants of some worn out goods (Fig. 1). Judging by the preserved embroidery, they possibly had been part of some woolen rug or drapery, similar to those recovered from Noin-Ula kurgan 6 by the expedition headed by P.K. Kozlov<sup>11</sup> and probably derived from goods imported from Parthia. The rugs from Kozlov's collection show a repeated motif of a band of spirals and a cordiform flower as the most characteristic image. The same motifs have been noted on the woolen pieces under discussion. S.I. Rudenko identified this flower as a cordiform, while E.A. Koroliuk, a botanist, interpreted this embroidered image as a tuber of a bulbotuberiferous plant, like that of a cyclamen or a tulip. The cordiform then is perhaps of the tuber family used here as a decorative motif. It should be noted that flowers with a blossom, stem, leaves, and roots were often employed as decorative motifs on medieval fabrics from Iran.<sup>12</sup>

The secondary usage of the embroidered woolen fabric for decorating the outer garment of a high-ranking individual suggests that it was greatly valued and, when worn out, pieces were reused to create a new item. Pieces and patches of valuable and imported fabrics were often recycled for decorating garments of simple or home-made fabrics in many ancient, medieval and traditional cultures. Patchwork goods were often regarded as amulets.<sup>13</sup>

The upper portion of the recovered piece of the garment represents a patchwork of silk pieces. This section possibly represents a special cut of the garment.<sup>14</sup> These small embroidered fragments represent thin and delicate silk pieces that are severely decayed.

**Embroidery on silk fabric** presents considerable interest. The embroidered images might have represented a complete composition, but the recovered fragments do not reveal its original form. The embroidered images are

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<sup>10</sup> Kurgan 20, like all the other excavated mounds, yielded the most precious and fine Chinese silk fabrics from the Han period. K. Riboud and E.I. Lubo-Lesnichenko regarded the Chinese textiles from the Noin-Ula tombs as fabrics of the highest quality, which have no counterpart in any collection from sites where textiles from the Han period have been found. This can be explained by the fact that only high-ranking members of the Xiongnu were interred in the Noin-Ula tombs. The textiles found in them had been gifts produced in the emperor's workshops (Riboud, Lubo-Lesnichenko 1973, 278).

<sup>11</sup> Rudenko 1962, 99–105.

<sup>12</sup> Vishnevskaja 2007, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Lobacheva 1989, 29; Fielstrup 2002, 61.

<sup>14</sup> The style of the silk robe from the Noin-Ula burial mound 6 shows small, narrow wedge-shaped sections in the lower part of the robe (Rudenko 1962, fig. 37).

very small and extremely decomposed, although it is still possible to discern some of the images, which have been recorded in photo-format and are available for analysis.

The silk fabric bears images of warriors and hunters, imaginary and real animals in association with various signs and symbols. All the images were embroidered with silk threads.

**Descriptions of the images embroidered on silk pieces.** In total five male images have been detected including two which exhibit Asian facial features and three with European facial features. In this section, the images of these male figures will collectively be referred to as "Heroes".

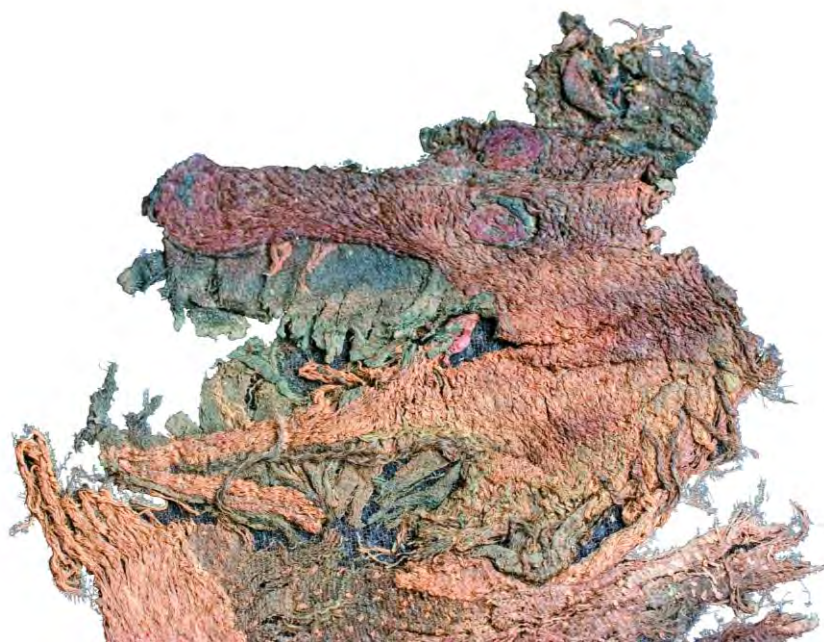
**Hero 1 (Pl. IIIA)** is shown facing left. He has an expressive, round face with thick lips, a thick, round nose that is slightly up-turned, a low forehead, his eye is semi-closed and drawn to the temple with a thin, long eye-brow, a short, thick neck that hardly appears, and a small, narrow beard. The beard issues from the lower lip, while the round chin is clearly prominent. The hair style can not be detected in full, yet there is a characteristic high temple suggesting that it is arranged in a ponytail. The figure's dark hair is combed behind the ear. He wears a garment without a cut in the front with long sleeves widening at the ends, a hallmark of Han attire. The neck of the garment is edged with a wide band of different color and texture. A similar horizontal band appears on the upper portion of the sleeve. The figure holds some sort of object resembling a bifurcated stick in his right hand drawn in front of him. There is an image of a dragon-like creature embroidered in front of him toward which he seems to draw his right hand.

Only the long muzzle with the open mouth with bared teeth, round eyes and embroidered pupils set close to one another is preserved (Pl. IIIB). This image is quite typical of the Dragon-horse in Han art. The Dragon-horse is regarded as a lively spirit of river water in ancient China. This mythical creature was believed to have a long neck, round eyes, its body covered with scales, and two wings on either side of its body. It was thought to walk on water and was considered to be a good prognostic for the emperor.<sup>15</sup> Sacred and immortal gods were thought to ride such wild Dragon-horses. The association of Dragon-horses with the West emerged around the second century BC and is associated with the Han emperor Wudi (147–86 BC). His ardent desire was to possess a team of celestial horses that were capable of bringing him to Heaven.<sup>16</sup> An embroidered spiral turning to the right appears over the dark silk fabric between the animal's muzzle and the male figure's right hand.

<sup>15</sup> Fisser 2008, 59–60.

<sup>16</sup> Schafer 1981, 89.





**Pl. III (A, B):** Fragments of silk fabric with embroidered images of Hero 1 and horse-dragon muzzle.



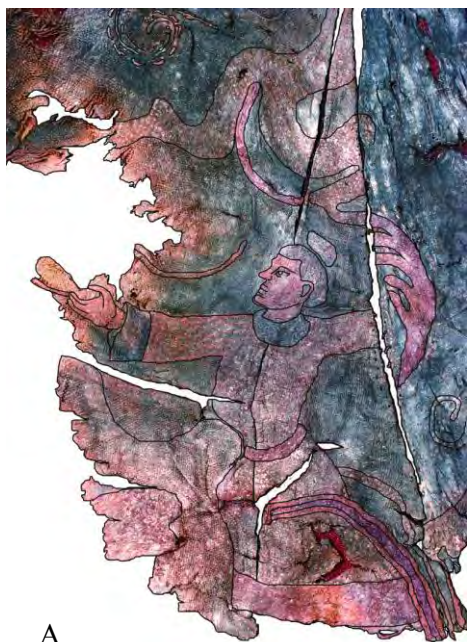
Pl. IV: Fragment of silk fabric with the image of Hero 2 (tracing on silk).

**Hero 2 (Pl. IV)** is shown facing right. The figure has a round face, a very short neck (if it is indeed represented), and has black thick hair with high temples. The hair is tied into a knot high on the crown of the head. A long hairpin, embroidered with brown thread, holds the hair in place. The narrow shape of the eye and a thin eyebrow drawn to the temple are noteworthy. The figure gazes upward. The small nose forms a single line with a low, retreating forehead. The narrow line of the moustache seems to be shown over the full lips. The figure wears a garment without a cut in the front, narrowing at the waist, reaching the hips. The round neck is edged with a wide band of a different color and texture. A similar band appears on the upper portion of the right sleeve widening at the end where it rests on the figure's chest. The wide cuff and the lower part of the garment and the pants are made from the same fabric, while the lower edge of the jacket has a band composed of different fabric. The garment is perhaps made from a combination of materials, like leather and a textile. Leather might have been seen through a satin stitch of sandy-brown threads, while the bands on the neck and the cuffs represent a textile. It should be noted that the shoulder portion of the wide sleeve of the outer garment is appears through slanting checks. Rectangular checks usually represent armor consisting of closely connected metal plates, such as those in the Khalchayan sculpture, on Indo-Parthian coins portraying a king and others. The figure is mounted on an imaginary animal, a Dragon-horse. The preserved part of the animal's back bears the motif of parallel lines and resembles a tiger's coat.

Lee Bo describes Dragon-horses as:

"The family of celestial horses emerged from the caves in Yuezhi Country,  
*Their backs are patterned like those of a tiger,*  
And the body has the wings like those of a dragon."

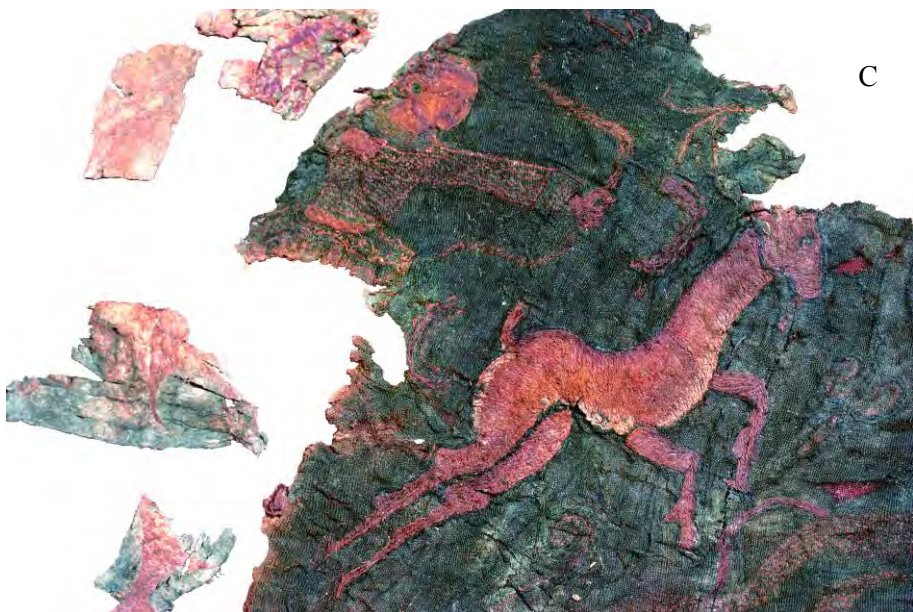
The closest analogy to this figure can be found among the images of the horsemen in the act of hunting depicted on the ivory plate from Takhti-Sangin (Fig. 3 shows one of the horsemen). The images, as with our figure, are portrayed in profile with broad faces and round heads, but there are also significant differences. For instance, we are not sure whether our embroidered horseman sports a moustache. Also, the images from these two sources have a seemingly common hair style with high temples and their hair top knotted, although the knots are different. The embroidered image shows the hair tied in a loose round knot with a long hairpin high on the crown of the head, while the Takhti-Sangin images show the hair styled in a rather small "cylindrically-shaped" protrusion low on the back of the head. The Takhti-Sangin horsemen are shown in typical Iranian garments, like girdled short jackets opened to the chest bare. The boots and pants are likewise similar.



A



B



C

Pl. V (A, B, C): Fragments of silk fabric with the images of Hero 3, 4 and 5 (tracing on silk).



Fig. 3. Traces of images from the Takhti-Sangin plate (after B.A. Litvinskii).

B.A. Litvinskii argued that these images from the Takhti-Sangin Temple illustrate the real hunting practices of the Bactrian nobility. He attributed the Takhti-Sangin and Orlat plates to the third century AD and suggested that they were influenced by Sasanian iconography.<sup>17</sup> His view has found support from other scholars.<sup>18</sup> B.A. Litvinskii initially dated the Takhti-Sangin plate to the second – first centuries BC or to the first century BC – first century AD. G.A. Pugachenkova argued that the plate belongs to the beginning of a new era for the representation of warriors and hunters.<sup>19</sup> We believe that Pugachenkova's attribution is safely supported by the discovery of the silk garment bearing the embroidered horseman from Noin-Ula kurgan 20.<sup>20</sup> The amazing similarity of the figures on these two very different artifacts, one of which is an engraved bone plate, the other is embroidery on silk, should be noted.

**Hero 3 (Pl. VA)** is shown in his left side view. The figure has a thin, long face. The hair is styled in a large, oval-shaped top knot high on the crown of the head and he has high temples. The large nose is straight, the eye is almond-shaped, the forehead is low, and the eyebrows are protruding. The figure looks slightly upwards. He wears the same garment as the other figures in this composition: a girdled, unopened coat (it does, however, contain a seam on the fabric). His right arm is extended with the palm placed upward. The left arm extends backward; it is shown up to the elbow where it is cut off by a seam that separates the image from another motif that is not related to our discussion. A preserved rear part of some imaginary zoomorphic creature with a twisted body and long tail appears above this figure. An ornate volute is shown next to it; several others appear in connection with other images on this textile.

<sup>17</sup> Litvinskii 2002, 201.

<sup>18</sup> See in detail Litvinskii 2002, 181–201; 2010, 335–356.

<sup>19</sup> Pugachenkova 1989, 99, 101–103.

<sup>20</sup> Chistiakova 2009; Miniaev, Elikhina 2010.

**Hero 4** is shown in three quarter view and appears to exhibit European facial features (Pl. VB). The figure has large eyes and bulbous nose. He holds in his right hand a long sword overhead in a striking position. The pommel at the end of the sword's hilt is a T-shaped. The figure holds the sword handle close to the hilt, which seems to be straight. Unfortunately, any distinguishing characteristic of the hilt remains undetectable due to the small size of the embroidery. The left hand is extended backwards, and a wide cuff is shown. Some part of the body and possibly a muzzle of some imaginary beast seem to be behind him.

**Hero 5 (Pls. VC-VI)** is a hunter. The European round face is young, the forehead is low, the almond-shaped eyes are shown below the straight line of the eyebrows. The hair style is the same as that of the other heroes in this composition: the hair is combed back revealing high temples. It seems that he wears the same top knot and garment as the other heroes. He is in the act of drawing a bow as he aims at a roe deer leaping in front of him. The animal is shown in detail. The embroidery stresses the summer red color of the light and slender body of the antlerless doe. Its abdomen is shown with a lighter color; a white "mirror" is shown below its short tail. Roe deer run with their tail up shown on the embroidery.<sup>21</sup> The depiction of a sika deer (*Cervus* [*Pseudaxis*] *sica*) appeared in Chinese art as early as the Zhou period. This is a large animal with spotted, chestnut-colored summer hair. The White Deer is a character of Daoist mythology representing a riding animal and accompanying the immortal heroes *xian*.<sup>22</sup>



**Fig. 4. Spirit-guardians and spirit-patrons. Traces from the lacquer images on the black background from Lady Dai sarcophagus 2, Mawangdui (168 BC).**

<sup>21</sup> Roe deer or wild goat inhabit vast regions of Europe, western Middle Asia, the Caucasus, Central Asia as well as the mountains in the southern part of Siberia, Mongolia and the Far East (see *BE* 23, 2006, 529–530).

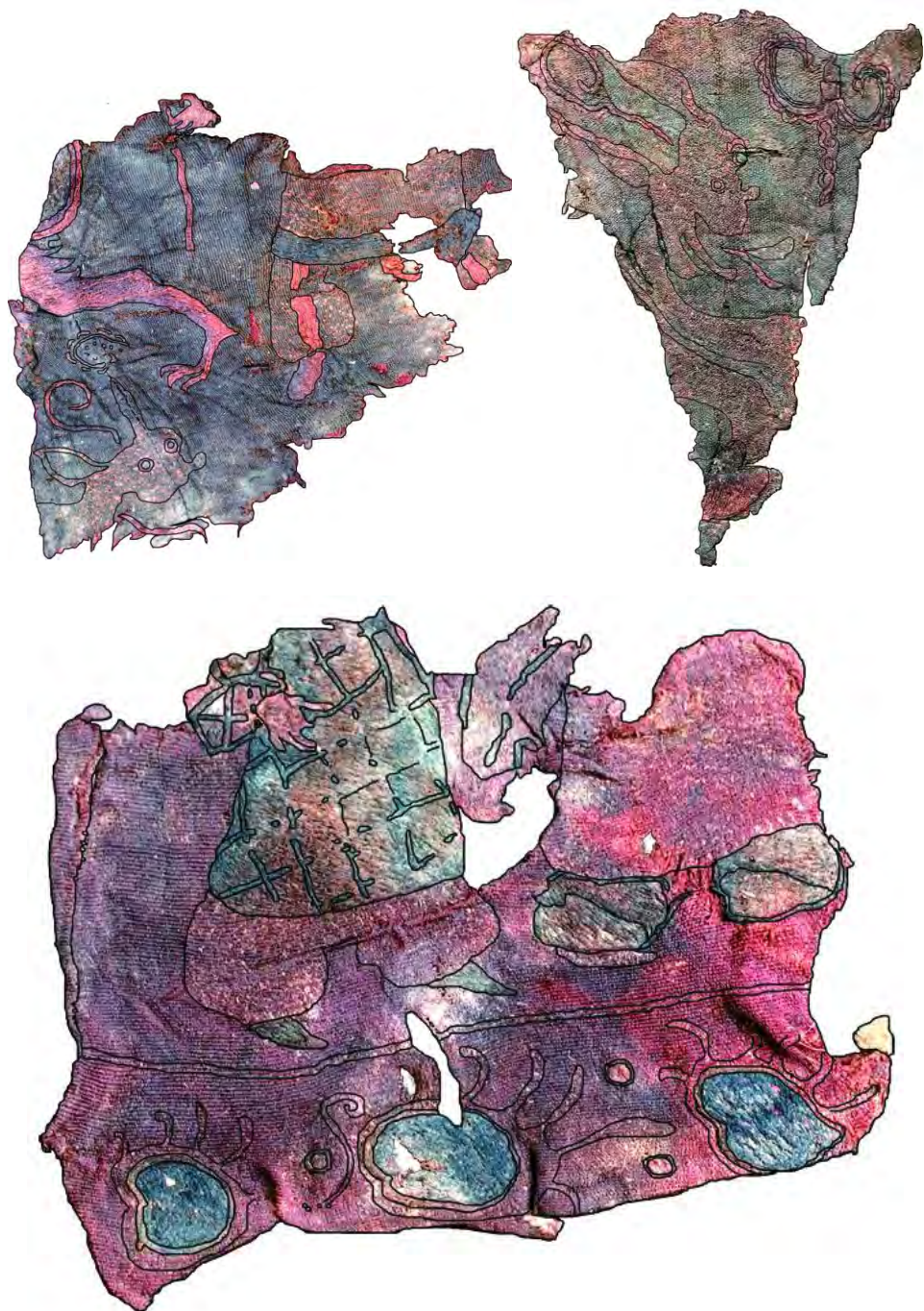
<sup>22</sup> Kravtsova 2004, 416–417.

The image of a roe deer has not yet been found in Chinese art. The roe deer from this composition embroidered on silk possibly represents a real hunting scene in the mountains in Mongolia. The composite bow is the same as that shown on the Takhti-Sangin plate. The hunter's left hand draws the bow at the level of his chest, unlike the Takhti-Sangin images in which the hunters draw their bows to their neck. The image of the spirit-guardian from sarcophagus 2 of the tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui 1 (168 BC) kneels on one knee and draws his bow in the similar fashion (Fig. 4). The area surrounding the hunter and roe deer is filled with symbols. An S-shaped configuration is embroidered below the roe deer. Three twigs are shown above the animal and a predator's paw with claws is above it. A monogram or a flower is depicted in front of the deer as is and some sort of imaginary creature that is fleeing before it. The imaginary animal seen in profile seems to have a wing, two legs each with three toes and a long bare tail with a switch at the end (the head is not preserved) (Pl. VI). This dragon-like creature on the embroidery resembles the images on sarcophagus 2 of Lady Dai (Mawangdui 1) (Fig. 4). Some researchers<sup>23</sup> believe that the images from sarcophagus 2 illustrate the transition of the deceased into an otherworldly existence where she encounters zoomorphic spirit-guardians in the guise of warrior and spirit-patrons.



Pl. VI: Fragment of silk fabric with the image of Hero 5 (tracing on silk).

<sup>23</sup> Kriukov, Perelomov, Safronov, Cheboksarov 1983, 260–261.



Pl. VII (A, B, C): Fragments of silk fabric with embroidered images (tracing on silk).





Fig. 5. Images of divine dragons. Traces with the feather on silk, Mawangdui, Lady Dai tomb.

Along with fragments of human faces and body parts, the embroidered composition also contains images of legs without faces or bodies. For instance, a slender foot in a soft shoe and wide trousers with a vertical decorated band (Pl. VB) appears above the hilt of the sword that the male figure wields over his head. Two legs clad in a similar looking pair of wide trousers with a vertically decorated band on each trouser, wearing a pair of soft shoes appear on another fragment of fabric (Pl. VIIA). The figure wears a knee-length, garment with a broad decorated edge covering its legs. Another remain of this figure is a right hand holding some object. This individual seems to be depicted in the act of pursuing some imaginary beast that is fleeing from him. Only a large bird's leg with three claws and feathers in the upper part of the fragment has been preserved. Another dragon-like monster with round eyes, horns, a wide-opened mouth and a long, narrow tongue is embroidered below (Pl. VIIA). A similar creature appears on another textile fragment (Pl. VIIB). A series of S-shaped symbols are embroidered above the muzzle of this image. These creatures are quite similar to the divine dragons that are drawn on a silk picture from Mawangdui 1 (Fig. 5).

A fragment of woolen fabric from the same garment shows the partial remains of an embroidered image. The figure's legs wear a pair of wide trousers ruffled at the ankles. Over the trousers, long (metal?) greaves composed of square plates are shown. The right hand of this figure is also preserved (Pl. VIIC).

**Interpretation of the images.** The discovery of the garment is important because it originates from the well-dated burial mound. The tomb has been attributed to the beginning of the 1st century AD, and belongs most likely to the first decade.<sup>24</sup> The most important questions about this garment that need to be resolved are: Who embroidered these images? When were they made? Who and what are portrayed on these textiles?

<sup>24</sup> Chistiakova 2009, 59–68; Miniaev, Elikhina 2010, 169–181.



- Pl. VIII: A. The embroidered face image from the curtain from Noin-Ula burial mound 31;  
 B. The man's face (Hero 1) image embroidered on silk from Noin-Ula kurgan 20;  
 C. The embroidered image of a foot in soft shoe and wide trousers with the vertical decoration band (a detail of the embroidered, woolen curtain from Noin-Ula kurgan 20);  
 D. The embroidered image of the feet (a detail of an embroidered image on a fragment of a silk fabric from Noin-Ula kurgan 20).

The embroidery on silk is identical to that on woolen fabric from the Noin-Ula burial mounds in terms of the techniques used to reproduce the human faces

and the garment.<sup>25</sup> A comparison of the face of the male figure on the woolen curtain from Noin-Ula burial mound 31 (Pl. VIIIA), with those on the silk fabric from Noin-Ula Kurgan 20 (Pl. VIIIB) show that the same embroidery technique was used in outlining facial features with threads of various colors. Both fragments reveal that at first the images were drawn on fabric and only afterward were they embroidered. However, the size of images on silk is smaller than those on wool. The size of images on wool reaches 9 cm, while the largest male head (hero 1) on silk does not exceed 3 cm, while all the others are not larger than 1.5 cm. The fine and dense decorative motifs both embroidered and woven are characteristic of ancient Chinese textile production. During the Tang period, it was prohibited to produce multicolored ornate fabrics (AD 771), because laborious work proved too unhealthy for female artisans.<sup>26</sup>

The embroideries show the otherworld inhabited by traditional Chinese zoomorphic spirit-guardians and spirit-patrons, dragons, Dragon-horses, and S-shaped symbols. Warriors and hunters are surrounded by these creatures and represent semi-mythological heroes. The embroidery represents a typical Chinese illustration of the otherworld in the Han period with “intrusive” and unusual masculine images.<sup>27</sup> It is most likely that the embroidery on the remains of garments worn by the interred found in Noin-Ula burial mound 20 was made by Chinese female artisans. Chinese art in antiquity adopted many foreign traditions. This is true of textile manufacturing. During the Han period, fabrics were decorated with motifs that originated from the Middle East. These include images of heroes in a “flying” gallop with their heads turned backwards among others.<sup>28</sup> During the Tang period, China produced beautiful silk fabrics with the woven images and motifs that were characteristic of Sasanian Iran.<sup>29</sup> It is known that tapestry and rugs from Parthia and rugs and blankets from Syria made their way into China at this time.<sup>30</sup> Such items were often recovered from sites along the Silk Road and burial sites of the Xiongnu elite, finds that are supported by literary sources. Embroidered images on woolen fabric served as models that were then imitated.

The male figures portrayed on the silk embroidery share certain features. All of them are shown with the same hair style in the form of a round top knot likely fixed with a long pin, revealing high temples. The hair style seems to have Chinese analogues. The Chinese of the Han period did not cut their hair, but styled it

<sup>25</sup> Rudenko 1962, 105–107, pls. LX–LVII, Polosmak 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Schafer 1981, 263.

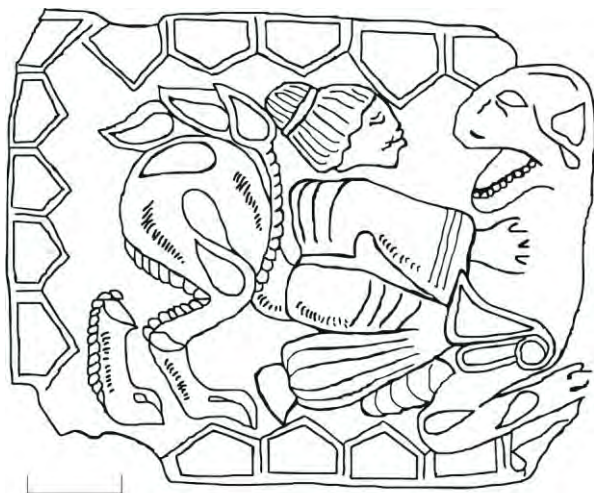
<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Birrel 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Lubo-Lesnichenko 1994, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Schafer 1981, 263.

<sup>30</sup> Lubo-Lesnichenko 1994, 248–249.

using pins.<sup>31</sup> For instance, certain figurines in Shi Huangdi's terracotta army also exhibit a similar hair style with the sleek top knot, the majority of which have it shifted slightly to the right. Some Dien bronze images contain a similar hair style. The plate from Kochkovatka (Fig. 6)<sup>32</sup> displays the image of a male figure whose hair is likewise styled in the same manner. Mordvintseva has argued that the top knot on the Kochkovatka image resembles certain images from Gandhara.<sup>33</sup>



**Fig. 6. Traces of the images from the Kochkovatka plate (Mordvintseva 2003, Fig. 22, catalogue 57).**

The male garments are specific. These are neither robes, nor nomads' jackets, nor armor that are typically depicted in ancient pictures. The garment is simple, yet no direct analogy can be suggested. The lower part of the garment consists of wide trousers ruffled at the ankles with a vertical decorative band and soft shoes with flat sole. It is analogous to that worn by the male figures embroidered on the woolen curtain found in the Noin-Ula burial mounds (e. g., Pl. VIII C).<sup>34</sup> In general, the embroidered garments are quite original.

The embroidered human faces portray individuals of various ethnic types. People of various ethnicities might have represented the real social situation in the Steppe community. Weapons, like the composite bow and the sword without

<sup>31</sup> Kriukov, Perelomov, Sofronov, Cheboksarov 1983, 198.

<sup>32</sup> Mordvintseva 2003, 34, 87, fig. 22.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Rudenko 1962, Polosmak 2011. We are here comparing only embroidered ancient textile items.

a metal pommel, are attributable to eastern weaponry types. Such weaponry was broadly used by Eurasian nomads.

Whose images then are embroidered on this ancient silk fabric? The garment, which was sewn using different pieces of fabric, was recovered from the tomb of a high-ranking Xiongnu individual and it might have been tailored to fit his taste. If it had been a ready-made garment by Han artisans that had been gifted to the *shaniuy*, then it should not have been made from silk pieces that were afterward embroidered and wool pieces that were not used by Chinese in manufacturing their garments at this time. The combination of Chinese and barbarian (Iranian in this context) features in the garment and hair style of the images suggests that the women-embroiders portrayed real people, possibly certain high-ranking Xiongnu. Robes and silk and woolen trousers were recovered among other grave goods from Noin-Ula burial mound 6 where a high ranking Xiongnu nobleman was buried. According to the written sources, gifts from the Han court include silk fabric and wadding together with ready-made clothes. Garments worn by high ranking Xiongnu noblemen consisted of pieces of attire of Chinese origin. Xiongnu attire also includes clothes received from the subordinate tribes, like the U-huan (women of this tribe were known for their skill in garment making) and western tribes, possibly nomads of Iranian origin.

The information concerning relations between the Xiongnu and the West is scarce in written records. It is for this reason that archaeological remains provide an insight into these matters. It is likely that Chinese female artisans produced the garments from various pieces of fabric and embroidered it with traditional Chinese motifs using the same artistic and technical methods employed by western masters. Thus, the recovered garment pieces represent unique objects of ancient art portraying the “Lords of the Steppe”.

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## Abstract

Kurgan 20 was excavated by the Russian-Mongolian expedition in 2006 in the Xiongnu burial ground called Noin-Ula (Mongolia). It contained fragments of embroidered clothing. The present article deals with miniature representations of warriors and fantastic creatures embroidered in silk by Chinese craftswomen. They must have worked at the *shaniuy*'s headquarters and have been well-acquainted with western embroideries on wool, judging by the finds from other kurgans in Noin-Ula.