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Physical Ornamentation in Tang Dynasty Zoomorphic Design

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While I was studying one of the artifacts stored in Shosoin, Nara, the batik screen decorated with moufflon and tree (Plate 1), it came to my attention that the realistically portrayed moufflon figures of Tang Dynasty naturalist style are decorated with discordant abstract geometric patterns in triangular and diamond shapes. I have previously presented my thesis as to these problems of ornamentation and their original sources of symbolism¹⁾.

These geometric designs were, by my judgment, grounded upon the animal style in Achaemenian Persian art, where abstract expression was employed for muscular structure. They were originally found in such works as the relief of lion attacking bull (Plate 2) on the Apadana at Persepolis palace, and the color-glazed brick of lion in Susa palace. Both of these lions bear waterdrop and circle patterns on their shoulders, and arc and circle patterns on thighs, all abstract shapes to represent solid muscular features on flat surface. These patterns, being suited to vari-colored inlay work, were soon widespread not only throughout Iran itself, but even among northern nomadic tribes.

Among Peter the Great's collection of Siberian gold, fourth century B.C., there is an East Iranian gold ornament from a headdress and a gold plaque for caftan (Plate 3) from Saka tribes. The moufflon and horses being attacked by eagle and griffin contain combined motifs of inlaid circles and circular triangle patterns. Among Altai art works of the third century B.C., a felt saddle cover (Plate 4) excavated from Pazyryk barrow No.1 holds applied designs of moufflon and elk with combined motifs of circles, arcs and waterdrop patterns, also inlaid²⁾. These, of course, are modified forms of abstract muscle lines of the Achaemenian Dynasty. However, the original purport and its significance having been forgotten, motifs became purely decorative geometric shapes.

There were other developments within Iranian borders. Sasanian silks decorated with moufflon, excavated from Antinoe (sixth century, Musée Guimet), contain arcs and double concentric circles. Although almost identical to motifs in the moufflon on the Shosoin screen, triangles are absent. In this respect, it is suggestive that a textile fragment (Plate 5) said to have been found in Egypt (sixth to eighth century, Yale University Art Museum) holds moufflon designs with stepped triangular patterns woven into its shoulder and back edge³⁾. However, a recent discovery, murals of late seventh century found at the site of Afrasiab castle in

Samarkand, clearly offers, among its anthropomorphic designs and saddle covers, an accurate portrayal of Sasanian brocade patterns. The moufflon designs (Plate 6) here have ornate triangular step-shaped embroidered patterns along the outlines. Clearly here we see an example that proves that a model existed out of which the design of moufflon in the Shosoin screen was derived⁴). This is clear-cut evidence that justifies my presumption that the Shosoin moufflon design inherited Sasanian textile motifs.

In the same vein, one Sasanian silverware, Yazdgerd I's deer-patterned silver plate (Plate 7) (sixth-seventh century, Metropolitan Museum of Art), has numerous three- or four-lobed half blossom patterns along its outlines, executed Ungen (暈網) style in pointilism⁵). Another Sasanian silk with hunting rider (sixth-seventh century, Berlin) holds family-insignia-like designs of animals facing each other. Among them, lions and moufflons (Plate 8) bear patterns on their shoulders and thighs that are clearly acanthus or semi-acanthus leaf patterns. These patterns are considered to be predecessors of eighth century works such as Byzantine silks where similar floral Ungen style patterns decorate winged horses (Sacro Museum, Vatican) and East Islamic silk, and its elephant design (Spanish chapel, Berlin). At that time it apparently was a popular practice to decorate animal designs with floral pattern motifs instead of abstract geometric forms⁶).

Animal figures in Sasanian silver plate designs are generally executed in vivid realism. However, the tradition from ancient Persia of geometric muscular representation was not lost in reliefs. Such works as the fourth century Shapur II lion-hunt design silver plate (excavated at Touroucheva, Hermitage Museum) shows the lion with oval shoulder and with frontal thighs divided into three parts⁷). A sixth century silver ewer (Yabumoto Collection, Tokyo) shows stag design also with frontal thighs in three consecutive semicircles. Furthermore, a Sogdian silver plate (seventh-eighth century, Hermitage Museum) has in relief a lion pouncing on a deer (Plate 9) with both animals having combined pattern motifs of a circle enclosed in double teardrop shapes⁸). This was a popular motif in Sogdian or Khorasan silverware, and probably is an abstract from the Sasanian silver plate detail that divides thigh muscles into three parts. It is indeed intriguing that a lapse of a thousand years has not brought any change in terms of composition since the aforementioned fourth century B.C. Scythian gold ornament from a headdress and gold belt buckle, with their circle and triangle pattern combination. In the above-mentioned silver plate, the lion's chest holds the very same motif, intended probably as purely decorative detail.

In the case of the previously mentioned Sasanian horseman design silk, a lion has the femoral region covered from both sides with semi-acanthus pattern. The moufflon in the same picture has semi-palmette patterns in preference, with three clefts on leaf shape covering the thighs from front and back. It is known from many other artifacts that Sasanian craftsmen were very fond of plant patterns such as acanthus and palmettes. A good example is a bronze throne leg (seventh-eighth century, Metropolitan Museum of Art) that depicts a griffin whose head, chest and

legs are decorated with plant patterns, chiefly of semi-palmette shapes. Similar plant patterns also adorn a silver head of a spiritual animal, often considered to be of Sogdian origin, probably used on a throne (seventh century, Hermitage Museum)⁹. One of the famous Pereshchepina treasures of south Russia, a set of gold decorative saddle pieces (seventh century, Hermitage Museum) has wave-like semi-palmette arabesque repousse on its sickle-shaped decorative plates. The lion-shaped decorative plate interestingly holds a combined pattern of three C-shaped spirals, close to semi-palmette¹⁰. These also are another class of ornamentation in zoomorphic designs.

Among examples found in China, a winged spirit wantoning with a dragon (羽人戲龍圖) on an Eastern Chin painted tile from tomb at Tan-yang in Jiang-su, has a dragon with cloud patterns on shoulders and thighs, as the older example¹¹. As in Enshu xi's (爾朱襲) tomb stele dated by inscription to second year of Yong-an (永安) period (529 A.D.), Northern Wei, with etched heavenly maiden riding a white tiger, spiritual beasts of this era all display consecutive protuberated C-figure-cloud-floating pattern and it may be that, although the motif itself is of native Chinese tradition, its decorative formulae was influenced by the West¹².

Then, in early Tang, the column head of the monument stele to the memory of Limin (李愨), dated twenty-third year of Cheng-quan (貞觀) (649 A.D.) (Museum of Shanxi province) is decorated with dragon design. The shoulder of the dragon holds a cloud pattern almost like a semi-palmette; the thigh displays a cloud pattern of a long chain of C-shapes in leaf-like form¹³. Perhaps this is derived from the semi-palmette-like C-shaped swirls as in the lion-shaped decorative plate of Pereshchepina treasures that was handed down along with animal designs. Further on, we see perfect semi-palmette patterns in the column head of the monument stele (Plate 10) to the memory of sacred prolegomena of the high priest Xuan-zang (大唐三藏聖教之序碑) dated fourth year of Yong-hui (永徽) (653 A.D.) (Dayan-ta of Cien-si, Xian)¹⁴.

In fluorescent Tang Dynasty, the tomb stele of Princess Yong-tai (永泰公主), second year of Shen long (神龍) (706 A.D.) (Chien-xian in Shanxi Prefecture), has a dragon decorated with semi-palmette on shoulders and thighs, and S-petaled blossom patterns lining its back. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned lion figure of the horseman design textile with acanthus patterns. On another side of the same tomb stele, a winged horse (Plate 11) is decorated on the shoulder with complex palmette-arabesque with three-petaled fan-shaped blossoms¹⁵. Further on, Yang chi-yi's (楊執一) tomb stele dated 15th year of Kai-yuan (727 A.D.) has on its right side moufflon (Plate 12) of the twelve Chinese astrological signs with typical semi-palmette wrapped around its shoulders and thighs. There are other etched figures such as moufflon, and deer pursued by animals of good omen similar to horned lions, each having its shoulder covered by veined petal patterns. These animals are surrounded by swirls of arabesque with peony-like blossoms, as if in correspondence to plant patterns in these animal forms¹⁶.

Lastly, I would like to mention in chronological order the palmette-like plant

patterns in the zomorphic design found on various stored artifacts that found their way to Shosoin from abroad. First, a fragment of the oldest example of Tang Dynasty, so-called "Sino-Iranica" style brocade that follows Sasanian textile influence, the brocade of a rhinoceros design on a brown ground with peripheral bead ornamentation (茶地犀連珠文錦), shows nearly semi-palmette cloud patterns on shoulder and thigh¹⁷). This would be in my estimate a work of the mid-seventh century. Comparatively, the silk with pearl roundel bearing confronted deer (Plate 13) and a central flower tree (花樹對鹿錦) (Tokyo National Museum), discovered and brought to Japan by the Otani expedition, has a deer design decorated by perfect semi-palmette arabesque motifs on the shoulder, which places this piece at about the latter half of the seventh century¹⁸), or prior to the time of the tomb lid inscription of Princess Yong-tai.

The relief marble slabs (白石板) also stored in Shosoin, have four spirits (四神) and twelve Chinese zodiacal animal signs (十二支) in pairs. Of these, tiger and hare (Plate 14) have clearly a three-leafed semi-palmette combined pattern on shoulders and thighs¹⁹). Yet around it are also near-palmette cloud patterns, which would place it late seventh or early eighth century. A dragon (Plate 15) from another artifact carries a veined blossom pattern on the shoulder and a combination of five-petaled semi-palmette patterns on the thighs. This Kin zither is decorated with gold and silver *Hyomon* inlay (金銀平文琴). Dated 23rd year of Kai-yuan, it corresponds with the previous Yang chi-yi's tomb stele (727 A.D.) in its pattern formation²⁰). Both are works of the first half of the eighth century, Tang Dynasty at the height of its prosperity, and they seem to coincide considerably in terms of chronological order.

A silver jar marks the third year of *Tempyo-Jingo* (天平神護) (787 A.D.), like the silver gilded floral platter. At its base, a Tang Dynasty vestige of typical kicking-chisel-work inscription of the Tang Dynasty seems to have been scratched off. This piece is also considered to be an import. A *qi-lin* (麒麟) (Plate 16) etched onto its base bears a combined design of two spiritual cloud patterns (靈芝雲形) and three-petaled blossom patterns (三葉形花文) on its shoulder. On the thigh is a pattern of two semi-palmettes joined over a chevron. The latter pattern has been employed since the time of the symbolic animals to ward off evil (辟邪) found in the tomb of Princess Yong-tai (永泰公主墓誌石)²¹). The vase is probably a work of the rich period of Tang.

A lion leaps, throwing its tail up. This particular design, employed in the light brown Aya silk with patterns of a date-palm tree and lion trainers (花樹獅子使い文白椽綾) (Plate 17), most closely western work of Shosoin pieces, is of the same design found in the Aya silk with a pattern of lion-hunting (獅子狩文錦) owned by Horyuji temple, which has its source in the Shapur II lion-hunting design silver plate (獅子狩文銀皿) of Sasanian period²²). This lion holds rather broken and free-style palmette patterns on its shoulder and thigh parts. From the characteristic weave, the fabric is considered to be an import of near the end of the eighth century²³).

Finally, let us look at a work considered to be the most ornate incense burner

among Shosoin artifacts, the lacquered lotus flower pedestals (漆金薄繪盤)²⁴. Against gold-leaf and multicolored arabesque background, along with the spiritual animal Kalavinka (迦陵頻伽), are depicted phoenix, lion and horned-lion animals of good omen (瑞獸) (Plate 18). All of these carry semi-palmettes with veined petals on shoulders and combined-pattern three-petaled semi-palmettes on thighs, accurately reflecting T'ang manner. In full color, it is very much like the animal in Yang chi-yi's tomb stele (楊執一墓誌蓋), dated 15th year of Kai-yuan. Furthermore, this pedestal holds not a single identical decorative pattern. The portrayal is carried out faultlessly, and the scheme of Ungen coloring is most precisely planned, being no doubt executed by one of the best painters of the period. We have to wait for further research to know its place of origin.

In conclusion, these assorted patterns in Tang Dynasty animal figures have their origin in regions of the West. They were handed on by craftsmen, with many stylistic changes along the way, throughout maintaining balance between abstraction and naturalistic realism. These patterns are one of the indicators of East-West cultural exchanges, and well deserve attention.

NOTES

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11. *Nanching Museum Exhibition*, The People's Republic of China, Nagoya City Museum, 1981, Plate 65.
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13. *Ibid.*, Plate 41.
14. *Ibid.*, Plate 53.
15. *Ibid.*, Plates 177, 178, 183, 192, 196.
16. *Ibid.*, Plates 235, 236, 240, 243, 244.
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18. *Ibid.*, Plate 34.

19. Ibid., Plate 115.
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PLATES

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17. Lion in light brown Aya silk (detail). Eighth century. Shosoin. (Courtesy Shosoin Office)
18. Horned-lion animals of good omen on lacquered lotus flower pedestals (detail). Eighth century. Shosoin. (Courtesy Shosoin Office)



pl. 1. Moufflon and tree in batik screen (detail).



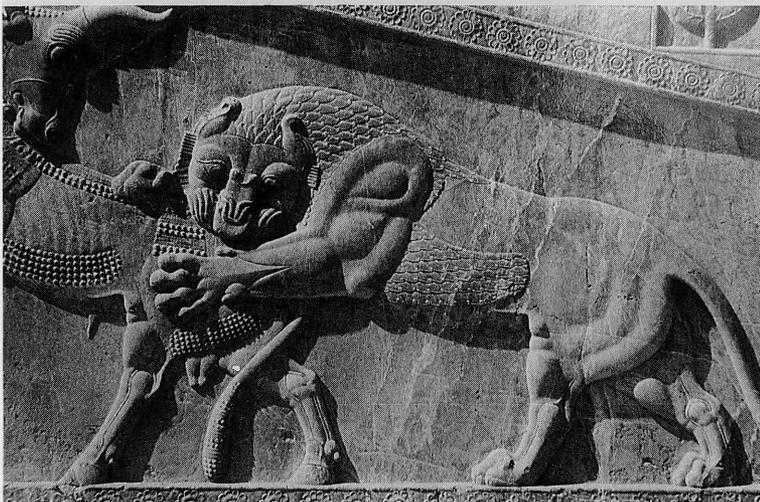
pl. 5. Moufflon in textile fragment from Egypt.



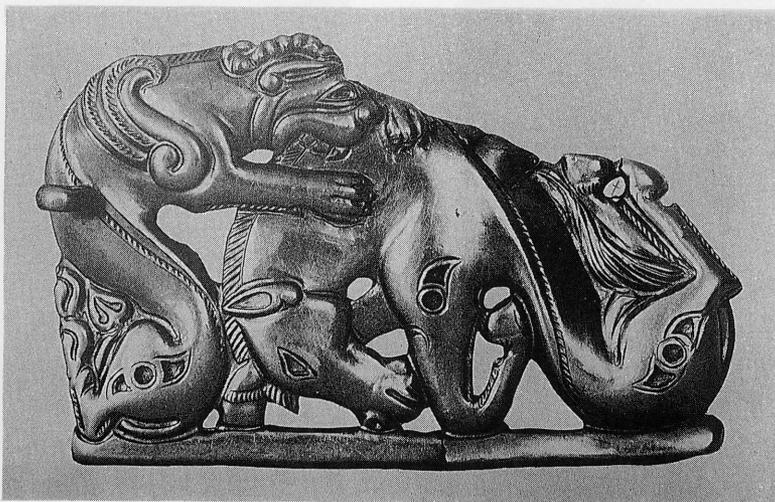
pl. 17. Lion in light brown Aya silk (detail).



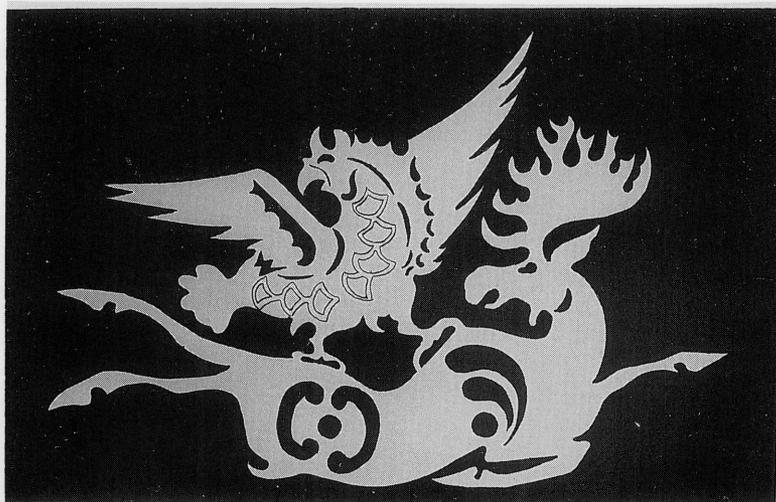
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pl. 2. Relief of lion attacking bull in Apadana at Persepolis palace.



pl. 3. Leonine griffin attacking horses on gold plaque for caftan from Saka tribes.



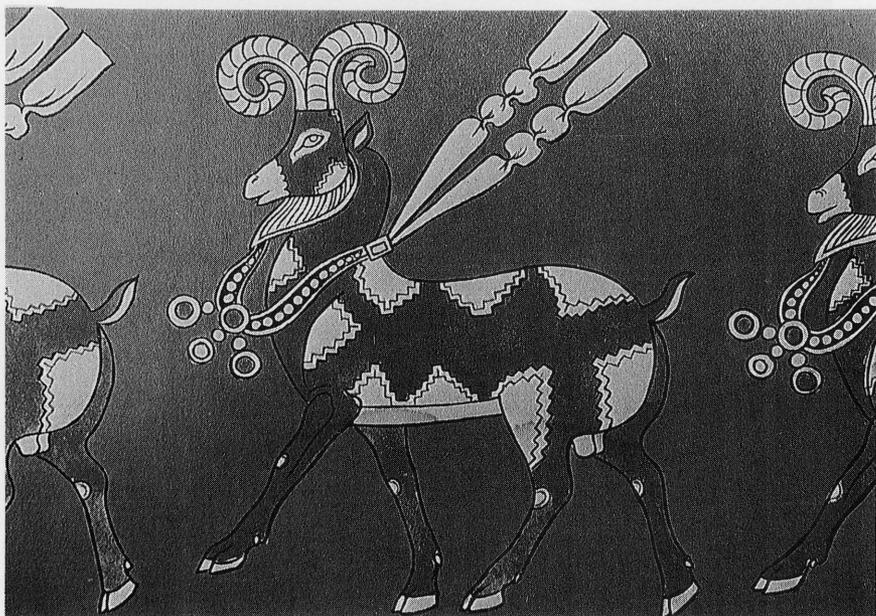
pl. 4. Elk in talons of an eagle in felt saddle cover from Pazyryk barrow No.1.



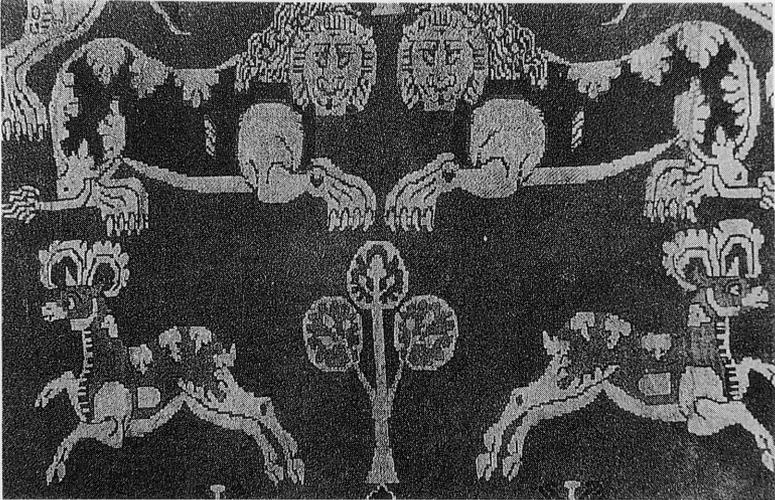
pl. 5. Moufflon in textile fragment from Egypt.



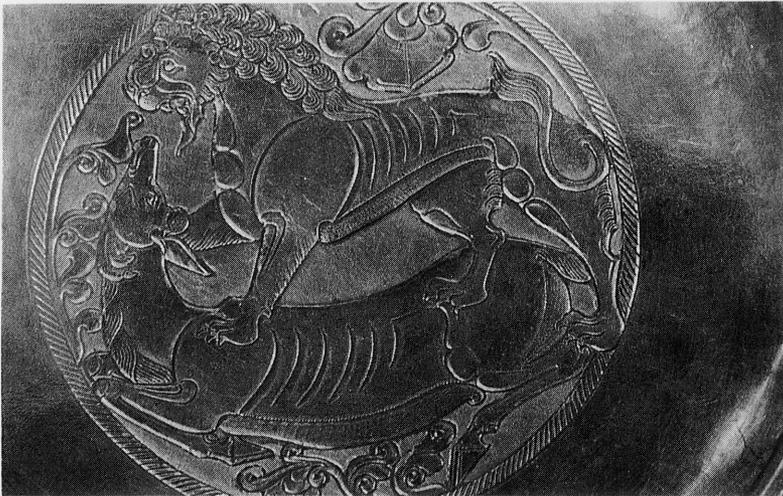
pl. 7. Deer in Yazdgerd I's hunting pattern on Sasanian silver plate (detail).



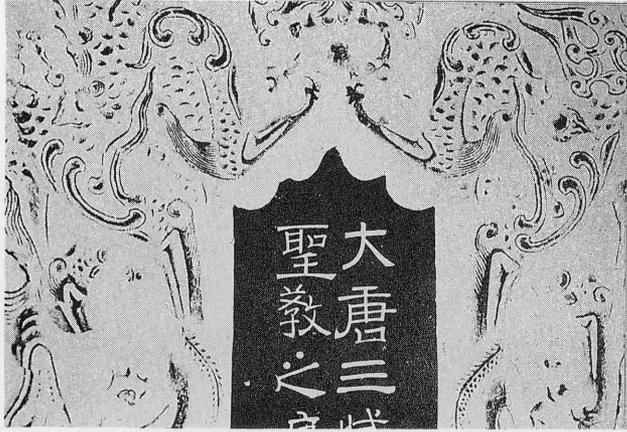
pl. 6. Moufflon design in textile design in mural painting from site of Afrasiab castle.



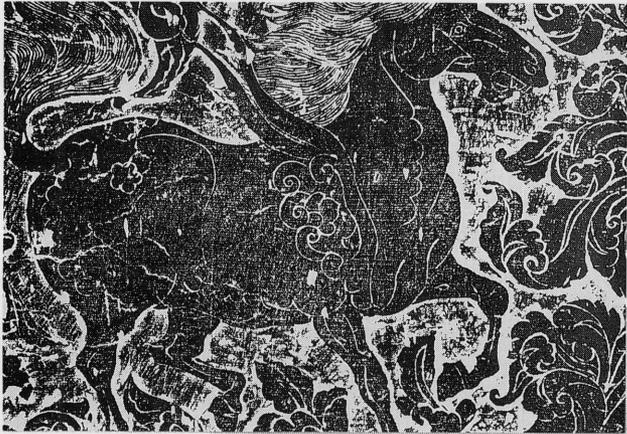
pl. 8. Lions and moufflons in hunting rider pattern on Sasanian silk (detail).



pl. 9. Lions pouncing on deer on Sogdian silver plate (detail).



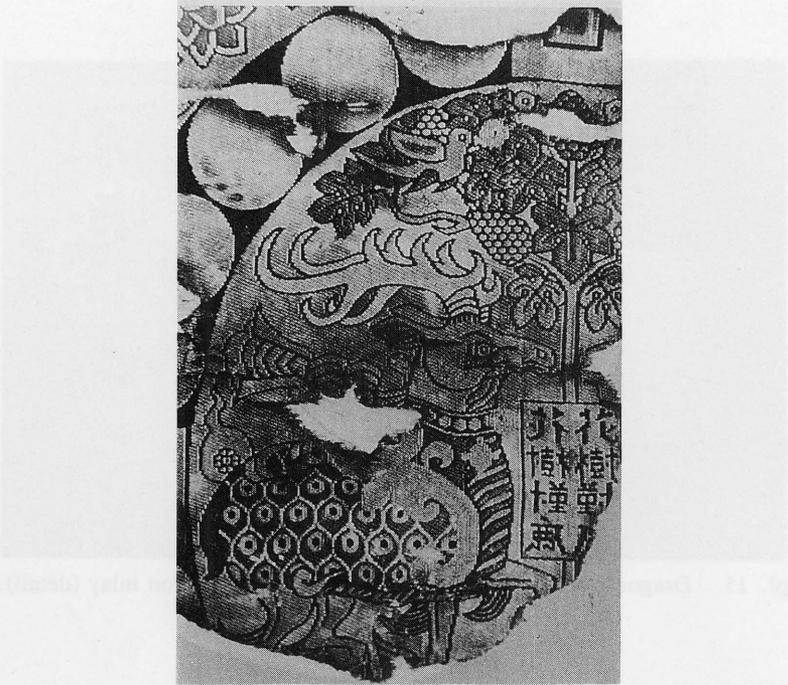
pl. 10. Column head with dragon designs of monument stele to memory of sacred prolegomena of high priest Xuan-zang.



pl. 11. Winged horse on tomb stele (rubbing).



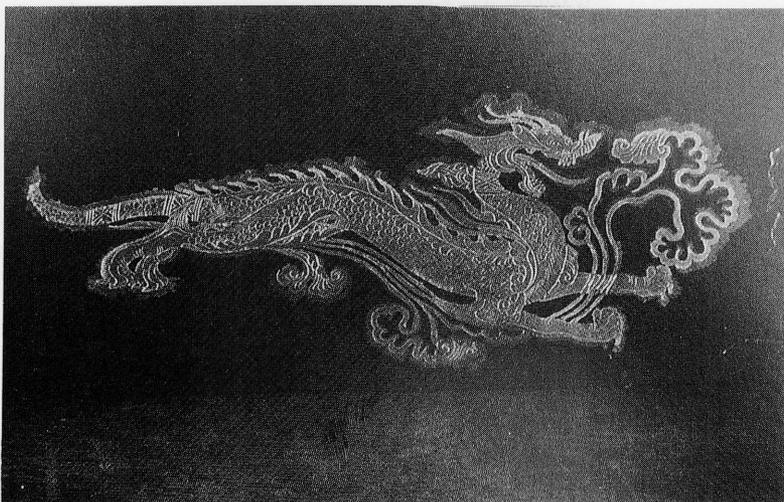
pl. 12. Moufflon on Yang chi-yi's tomb stele (rubbing).



pl. 13. Deer with central flower tree on Tang silk (detail).



pl. 14. Chinese zodiacal animal sign of tiger and hare on marble relief slab (detail).



pl. 15. Dragon on Kin zither with gold and silver Hyomon inlay (detail).



pl. 16. Qi-lin on base of silver jar (detail).



pl. 17. Lion in light brown Aya silk (detail).



pl. 18. Horned-lion animals of good omen on lacquered lotus flower pedestals (detail).

