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Case Study of Byzantium

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Shelby Johnson

Arth 3620- Fall

Case Study of Byzantium

ABSTRACT:

The Byzantine Empire (395-1453 CE) was a large cultural center that included a meshing of different societies in terms of trade. Located along the Mediterranean Sea, the empire had a monopoly of sea trade, leading to their multiple years of success under many different ruling emperors. Many different countries brought with them pieces of their culture and textile materials to the Byzantine Empire.

Around 500 A.D. China was known for their silk making textiles, holding the secret of their creation for many years until a group of traveling monks in Europe were able to smuggle out silkworm eggs from China, the main component of creating silk. These eggs would be transferred to the Byzantine empire, who began their own version of silks that would even rival those from China in terms of quality. These silks would soon transform the Empire, adding to their sophistication and elegance in art styles, influencing the Mediterranean World.

CASE STUDY:

In Byzantine society, weavers held a place of high class and status because they could create these highly valued silks. Emperors would wear this luxury **textiles**, using the finest silks and deepest dyes that would be reserved only for those of imperial royalty, most commonly the dye purple, called the **Tyrian dye**.¹ Special workshops would be created for emperors, where

¹ Anna Maria Muthesius, "Silk, Power and Diplomacy in Byzantium," (1992) *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, p.99-110. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1579&context=tsaconf>

weavers would work to create the silks that emperors could wear and would dye them in these workshops, using the most expensive and hard to make dyes to show the power of the emperor and distinguish him from the common people who might wear cheaper, Syrian silks.² Since the European monks stole silkworm eggs for the Byzantine Empire, they have perfected the craft so that it may rival those made in China, who were well-known for their production and soft and finely created silk. Seen as the height of sophistication and elegance, Byzantine silks were sold to other trading countries who would also take hold of the secret of silk making and create their own versions. This allowed more trade along the Silk Road and Byzantine Empire, bringing in more money and influence. Because of Byzantium silks, the textile was advanced into new stages never seen in the ancient Mediterranean world, such as the creation of the five-color silk.

One of the most well-known surviving examples of Byzantine silk is called the **five-color silk**, receiving its name from the five different distinctive colors used on the textile. This had never been done previously in the ancient Mediterranean world because of the intricacy to the process of adding different colors to a piece of textile. The most famous example of this is the “Silk with ‘Samson’ and the Lion” (Fig. 1).

² Omri Schwartz, “Antique Byzantine Art: Textiles,” *Nazmiyal Collection*, Last Modified February 21, 2020. <https://nazmiyalantiquerugs.com/blog/antique-byzantine-art-textiles/>



Figure 1

This piece shows a man, presumed to be Samson from the Bible, who was a warrior renowned for this strength. He is depicted wrestling a lion in a repeated mirror pattern, which would have continued on if the entire piece survived. The purpose of this silk is unknown, but it would have been commissioned by the wealthy and higher-class, who were the only ones of the time who could afford the luxury of silk. Because it was so difficult and fine to make, the price of silks was high, but so was the demand due to the luxury it offered to the wearer or buyer.

More commonly found silks were **two-color silks** since they did not require as much work to produce and could easily sell to higher-class citizens of the Byzantine Empire. The “Fragment of a Band with Noble Equestrian and Soldier” (Fig. 2) is an example of this, where it is more simply made compared to the five-color silk of “Silk with ‘Samson’ and the Lion”. This piece also has biblical origins, the name “Joseph” being inscribed in the piece in either Greek or

Coptic, made sometime between the 7th and 9th century. This follows the widely popular hunting theme, which is shown in the five-color silk as well. There is a hypothesis that these scenes might have originated as previous polytheistic ideas, for example, that they copied Greek and Roman gods, turning pagan to Christian.³ During the Byzantine period, pagan images were still very prominent in art making, using Greek and Roman gods and goddesses in representation. There was still Christian iconography as well, which could have been seen as more important because it relates back to their faith of Christ and God.⁴



Figure 2

³ Mark Cartwright, "Byzantine Art," *World History Encyclopedia*, last modified June 22, 2018. https://www.worldhistory.org/Byzantine_Art/

⁴ Isabelle Sabau, "The Power of Symbolism in Byzantine Art," *Paideia Project Online*. <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Aest/AestSaba.htm>

VOCABULARY LIST:

Textiles

Tyrian Dye

Five-color silk

Two-color silk

ILLUSTRATION LIST:

Figure one: *Silk with ‘Samson’ and the Lion, late 6th-early 7th century. Made in Eastern Mediterranean. Weft-faced compound twill in polychrome silk. Byzantine Collection, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.*

Figure two: *Fragment of a Band with Noble Equestrian and Soldier, Inscribed ‘Joseph’ in Greek or Coptic, 7th-9th century. Made in Egypt or Syria. Weft-faced compound twill in blue-violet and beige silk. Byzantine Collection, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.*

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