Fragments

Place of origin: Loulan (possibly, excavated)

Date: 200-400 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Tapestry-woven wool and plain woven silk

Museum number: T.107-1964

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

This tapestry woven fragment is edged with plain woven cream silk. It is unclear what this textile would have been used for, although it is likely to been part of a burial shroud. It was recovered from the site of Loulan cemetery, which dates from the 3rd to the 4th century AD. The site of Loulan is remarkable for the carved wooden capitals, beams and balustrades that show clear affinities with western Classical decoration that filtered through Iran and Northwest India.

The site is part of an area of Central Asia we now call the Silk Road, a series of overland trade routes that crossed Asia, from China to Europe. The most notable item traded was silk. Camels and horses were used as pack animals and merchants passed the goods from oasis to oasis. The Silk Road was also important for the exchange of ideas. Whilst silk textiles travelled west from China, Buddhism entered China from India in this way.

Descriptive line

Fragments of tapestry-woven wool edged with silk, possibly from Loulan, 200-400

Physical description

Fragments of polychrome tapestry weave in cream wool showing bands and points in brown edged by plain woven cream silk. Remains of coarse stitching.

Dimensions

Length: 14 cm, Width: 11.7 cm

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Historical context note

Loulan was once an important garrison town which lay between the Pei shan and Taklamakan deserts on the Silk Road. The city was also a centre of Buddhist worship. When Sven Hedin explored the site in 1900, he discovered remains of a stupa, reliefs depicting Buddhas among lotuses, and statues of deities. This strategically important city is mentioned in Chinese records for the first time in 176 BC with the conquest by the Xiongnu, but the area fell under Chinese control around 100 BC. Located in the middle of the Silk Road, Loulan had contacts with many cultures, represented by hundreds of documents in Chinese, Indian Kharosthi, and Sogdian scripts which were unearthed by Hedin and Stein. A woollen cloth, which Stein found in a tomb, depicted the head of Hermes and his caduceus, or staff, in the classical style of western Asia. He also unearthed a number of mummies with feathered felt caps and arrow shafts by their sides; which indicated that a community of herdsmen and hunters had inhabited the region long before various imperial conquests. Loulan flourished until the fourth century AD, when it was abandoned, due to the desiccation of a nearby lake, Lop Nor. The V&A holds, on loan, a large number of textiles from Loulan, including cotton, wool and figured silks, carpet and tapestry fragments.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O101609/fragments-unknown/