
Richard van Leeuwen ouvre les dossiers de nouveaux fonds d’archives, essentiellement certaines liasses de la “Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide” et des documents encore conservés par des membres de la famille Khâzen. Il est dommage qu’il n’ait pas directement regardé les archives françaises car la publication qu’il cite est aussi partielle que taphique. Quoiqu’il en soit, l’ensemble original sur lequel il s’appuie couvre essentiellement les deux derniers tiers du XVIIIᵉ siècle et les deux premières décennies du XIXᵉ. Ces sources permettent à l’auteur de bien préciser le contexte ottoman et ses institutions. Son étude se clôt avec les premières conséquences des bouleversements du XIXᵉ siècle.

La concession fiscale a permis aux familles fermières de contrôler des terres cultivées—dont les catégories sont décrites—, d’y consolider leur influence, avant que celle-ci ne se dissolve entre plusieurs branches en rivalité les unes contre les autres, ce qu’utilise l’émir de la Montagne, lui-même fermier. De leur côté, les couvants se sont affirmés en liant leurs intérêts à ceux des notables, puis ils se renforcent aux dépens de ceux-ci en accaparant les biens affectés aux œuvres pieuses que sont les waqf-s. L’auteur trace ainsi le cheminement de l’autorité. Il décrit l’ascension et le déclin d’une famille de notables, les Khâzen du Kesruwân, puis le rôle que prend le clergé maronite dans l’organisation communautaire où il trouve son assise populaire.

Ce nouveau livre sur les notables et le clergé du Mont Liban mérite d’être chaleureusement salué pour le sérieux de son information. Son apport sur le waqf, par exemple, pourra être fructueusement comparé à d’autres travaux actuels, comme ceux de Bernard Heyberger, Zouhair Ghazzal ou Randi Degulhem. Souhaitons que Richard von Leeuwen enrichisse à nouveau nos connaissances par d’autres publications aussi utiles que celle qu’il nous a offerte.

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Textile as a medium of art rarely finds the appreciation it deserves. Throughout time man has used textiles to express himself, but their practical uses, and non-durable nature (except in desert sand or permafrost) have combined to present this form of art gaining scholarly attention only recently. Textiles in their archaeological and historical contexts are nowadays considered a valuable source of information about their users and their technology. Where textiles have disintegrated, their traces can be studied as cloth marks impressed on pottery with soft clay revealing weave-structure or type of fabric; also, paintings, frescoes and sculpture depict textiles’ uses. Outstanding examples are indeed preserved because they were treasured for their costliness, beauty, and significance as historical or sacred tokens. Many precious textiles survive in religious institutions, palaces and museums. A corpus of Persian velvets from the Safavid era (1501-1722), part of the Rosenborg Palace collection in Copenhagen, is the subject of this detailed study by Carol Bier, Curator of the Eastern Hemisphere
Collections at The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. Her work demonstrates that textiles can yield information about their own manufacture and use, and the trade, politics and culture of the societies which produced and acquired them.

In the world of textiles velvet (pile on a satin ground-weave, woven, not knotted like carpetry) has a special place: the use of silk, gold and silver foil as basic materials makes it the most expensive as well as the most complicated fabric to produce. Its costliness and potential challenge to weaving skills allow velvet a fitting material for exclusive and royal possession. It would seem that these velvets were prized within the culture that produced them, even though as Carol Bier found, there are no written records of the Persian industry or its product. She has had to infer from the material remainder alone the process of manufacture of these very fine lengths with their multi-coloured repeat patterns. Her study necessarily involves a careful scrutiny of the weave-structure, colours and dyes, patterns and marks of wear and use.

The reconstruction of pre-industrial velvet weaving in Iran is not the only aim of the book. The author sketches the contemporary cultural and political situation, especially the foreign trade policy of Safavid Iran, and lucidly describes the role played by the velvets in diplomacy.

In medieval Europe Persian velvets were scarce, and sought after by courts and nobility. They became an important symbol of status. With the opening up of the Persian Gulf by the East India trade companies, the European market for purchase of these precious textiles expanded. Shah ‘Abbas, Persian ruler from 1588 to 1629, promoted their commercial production, and exchanged embassies with European countries, Russia and India with the aim of encouraging the trade. In spite of the boost his interest gave to production few artifacts have survived. Since velvets were mostly used for furnishings, the textile easily wore out and the furniture was thrown away. Ultimately the Persian velvet industry proved not to be economically viable. As Bier’s description of the production process demonstrates, it was labour-intensive, complex and expensive in basic materials: not only silk but also the dyes needed to provide a large colour spectrum. In the late seventeenth century Europe’s own increased production of velvets brought about the collapse of the Persian market.

How the Rosenborg velvets came to Denmark is an episode in the history of the Holstein Dukedom. In 1633 Duke Friedrich III of Holstein was ambitious to direct the Persian trade overland via Russia to Europe. He sent an embassy to Isfahan and received Persian envoys at Gottorp Palace; in the end his scheme ran aground. However, the Persian embassy had brought lengths of velvet as diplomatic gifts to the Duke. After Friedrich’s reign Holstein fell into Danish hands and Gottorp became a royal possession; the velvets were moved to the Rosenborg Palace, then used as a royal storehouse. The diplomatic gift was hung on the walls of a room, opened to the public when the palace became a museum of Danish royal history (1833).

In 1901 they were identified by F.R. Martin¹) as precious relics from Safavid Iran. Unfortunately his publication did not further their appreciation: in 1911 some of the velvets were removed to a small tower room and the remainder stored on a roll. In Carol Bier’s study they are awarded the attention they deserve. The Rosenborg corpus is now recognised as the largest collection of Safavid velvets in the world; about thirty-two meters in all, divided into sixty-one fragments consisting of long and short panels and palmets with fringes.

Clues to their use can be discovered from the way they have been cut up and sewn together. The panels had a life as bedhangings and bedspreads, later as upholstery for chairs, and then as wall coverings. Heavy wear and candlewax stains on some reveal their function as table covers. The history of their use is partly reconstructed on the basis of Gottorp palace inventories, a research carried out by Mogens Bencard, the director of the Rosenborg Museum.

Carol Bier analyses the patterns according to symmetry and technical repeat units based on a notation developed for crystallography. The method is used to describe repeat motifs in two-dimensional patterns in wall paintings, pottery decoration and textiles. The velvets