

Suaire_de_St-Josse

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The Suaire de St-Josse, the "Shroud of [Saint Josse](#)" that is now conserved in the [Musee du Louvre](#),^[1] is a rich silk [samite](#) saddle cloth that was woven in northeastern Iran, some time before 961, when Abu Mansur Bakhtegin, the "camel-prince" for whom it was woven, was beheaded. It was brought back from the [First Crusade](#) by [Etienne de Blois](#) and dedicated as a votive gift at the [Abbey of Saint-Josse](#), near [Caen](#), Normandy. It has been described as the major landmark in early Islamic silk weaving.^[2]

This fragmentary textile with elephants woven into the design is the only known surviving example of a silk textile produced in Eastern Iran, in the royal workshops of the [Samanid dynasty](#), probably at either [Merv](#) or [Nishapur](#).^[3] The "prince" referred to in the woven [Kufic](#) inscription, though decipherable in more than one way, is most likely to refer to the general and [emir](#) Bukhtegin, active in the service of '[Abd al-Malik I](#), the Samanid sultan of [Khorasan](#), 954-61.

The cloth is now in two fragments, which are regarded as comprising about half of the original piece. They are 52 x 94cm and 24.5 x 62cm respectively, the first measurement being the length. The design was somewhat like a carpet (not that any from this date survive), with a central field containing two pairs of confronted elephants, one above the other, of which one pair survive. There is then a thin border with geometric patterns, outside which the sides have friezes of repeated camels and at least the bottom (which survives) an inscription in [Kufic](#) script. In all there are five

zones of border between the elephants and the edge of the cloth.^[4]

Like many trophies of foreign adventure, both in the [Middle Ages](#) and in more modern times, in its new context, the rare textile was given new meaning, for it was used to wrap the bones of [Saint Josse](#) when he was reinterred in 1134.^[5]

When the Abbey of Saint-Josse was secularised just before the [French Revolution](#),^[6] the abbey church became the parish church of the [French commune](#) of [Saint-Josse](#); the suaire was kept there until it was transferred to the Louvre.

Notes[^] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field", *The Art Bulletin* 85.1 (March 2003:152-184), p. 154, fig. 1.

[^] Jones & Michell, p. 74

[^] Louvre Museum: "The Saint-Josse Shroud".

[^] Jones & Michell, p. 74. The image in Jones appears to be a photo-reconstruction, as more is shown than in the Louvre's photograph.

[^] M. Bernus, H. Marchal, and G. Vial, "Le Suaire de St-Josse", *Bulletin de Liaison du Centre International d'Etudes des Textiles Anciens* 33 (1971:1-57).

[^] The Abbey of Saint-Josse was closed in 1772, sold and then deismantled in 1789, leaving no traces of the monumental buildings.

References

Louvre Museum: "The Saint-Josse Shroud"

Exhibited as no. 4 in Jones, Dalu & Michell, George, (eds); *The Arts of Islam*, p. 74, [Arts Council of Great Britain](#), 1976, [ISBN 0728700816](#)

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