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Textiles from the Museum of San Isidoro (León): New Evidence for Re-evaluating Their Chronology and Provenance

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Abstract

This paper presents the first in-depth analysis of the textiles held by the Museo de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro de León, providing a careful investigation of textile features and raw materials, in addition to carbon-14 dating and archival research. These new data have allowed us to redate the fabrics, placing them within their tenth-through early thirteenth-century Mediterranean and European contexts. The result is a more complex image than was previously assumed, and it offers a significant starting point for further research into the roles played by textiles in medieval Iberia.

Keywords

al-Andalus – Byzantium – carbon-14 dating – Central Asia – embroidery – Kufic inscriptions – metal threads – silk

Supplementary Material



Figure 1 Room number 13, *Arte de Espana*, at the International Exhibition of Barcelona in 1929. The showcase displayed some of the textiles and artworks from San Isidoro.
photo: Arxiu Fotografic de Barcelona, AFM12461



Figures 2a and 2b The so-called Baghdad silk (Table 1, no. 8), with the left selvedge (2a).
The white and black warps have a Z twist, and the white and red wefts
are almost un-twisted (2b).
photos: author



Figures 3a and 3b Textile no. 11 showing faded front view and window at the back with
multicolored wefts of the same textile
photos: author



Figure 4 Detail of the embroidery (no. 2) with gold metal threads, scale 1,5 cms
photo: author



Figure 5
Detail of the gilt-silver metal thread of tablet
weave no. 13
photo: author

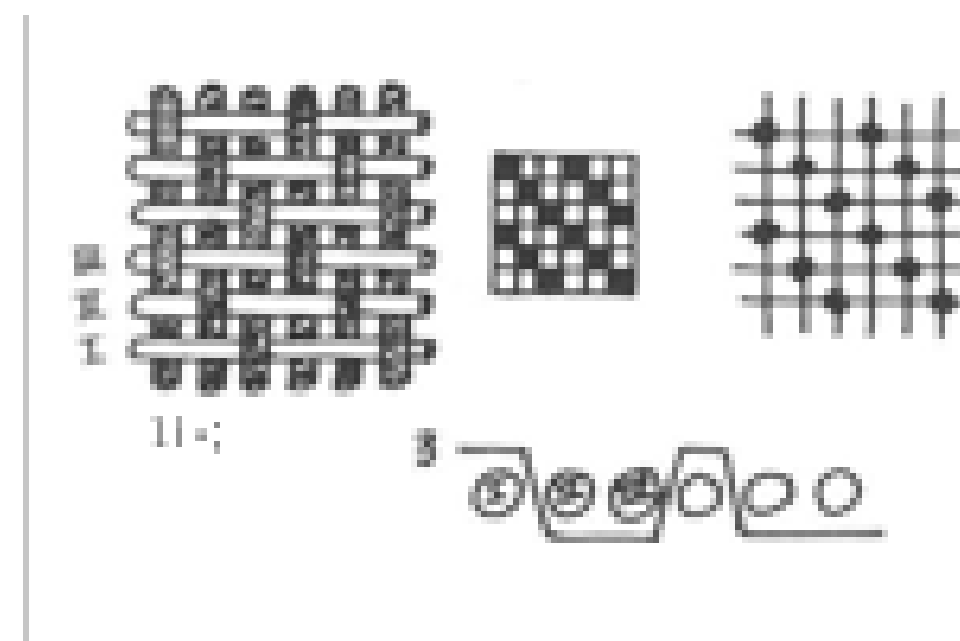


Figure 6
Diagram of a twill 2/1 (2 wefts or horizontal
thread cross over one warp or longitudinal
thread) and the different types of diagrams
used to represent the weaves.
published in CIETA technical notes



Figure 7 Full view of the embroidery, no. 2
photo: Therese Martin



Figure 8
Detail of the re-twisted warps from the
maniple (no. 13).
photo: author



Figure 9 Silk samite from Leon Cathedral
photo: author



Figure 10 Textile (now lost), originally lined Santa Eulalia's casket from the Cathedral of Oviedo
photo: Arxiu Mas

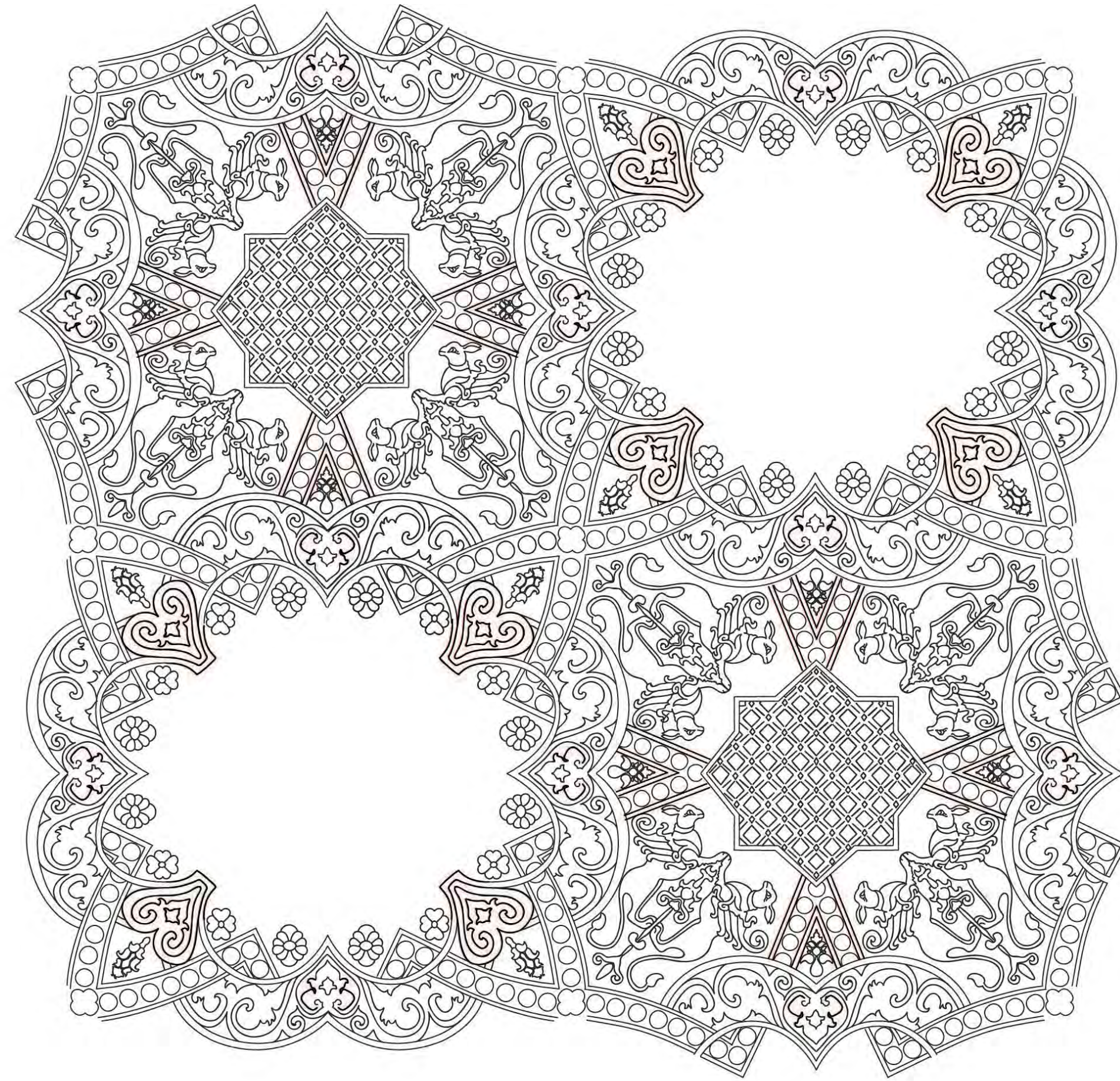


Figure 11 Drawing of the complex decoration of silk textile no. 7. The blank spaces represent the medallions with figures that need further photographs to be reproduced accurately.
drawing: Ayelet Shats



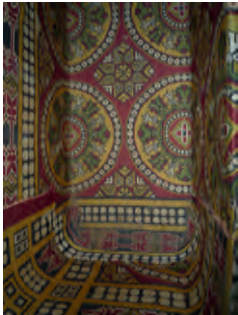
Figures 12a and 12b Detail of the silk samite that lines the casket of Saints Pelayo and John the Baptist (no. 9). One band has oval rather than round medallions.
photos: author and Therese Martin



Figure 13 San Marcelo casket, early twentieth century, with textiles no. 7 and no. 10 still in situ

photo: Archivo Gomez-Moreno, CSIC

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology ^a	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk 65 × 47 cms.	Warp faced samite or compound twill. Warps: Main: cream (with some pink) silk, Z-spun. Binding: white silk, Z-spun. Proportion: 2/1. Wefts: Main: red silk. Patterning wefts: yellow, white, green and dark blue, patterning wefts. All untwisted. Some irregularities on the ground weft.	Central Asia or Near East. ¹⁴ C: 773–960 cal AD. 9th–early 10th centuries (Beta – 4623 ± 1160 ± 30 BP).	Schorta, “Central Asian Silks,” 52–54: Shroud of Saint Lambert, ¹⁴ C: 667–872 AD. Shroud of St. Mengold (¹⁴ C: between 780 and 980 AD, 95.4% probability). Stauffer, <i>Die mittelalterlichen Textilien</i> , 52–54: silk samite, Byzantine, 10th century?; 78–79: silk samite, Byzantine, 9th–10th centuries. Otavsky and Wardwell, <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> , pp. 34–35 (with fragments in Musée du Cluny and Cleveland Museum of Art); Central Asian, 8th century; Van Raemdonck, <i>En Harmonie</i> : 670 to 880 with 95.4% probability.	There are 4 fragments, stitched together, following the pattern. The sewing threads are modern, and one side is fixed with a nail similar to one fixing the embroidery. The modern threads could be related to the restoration in the early 20th century by Gómez-Moreno. No other restorations have been done (as far as we know).

SI 1 (3-089-002-002)

^a The radiocarbon analyses were carried out by Beta Analytic (Miami) and IRPHA (Brussels) laboratories.

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (*cont.*)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology ^a	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Linen, silk, and metal thread 16 × 59.3 cms. max.	Ground: Linen tabby. Warp: linen, S-spun. Weft: linen, S-spun. Embroidery: silk and metal threads (gold sheet wrapped around a yellow silk thread, S-spun). Embroidery: couched and split stitches with silk threads, untwisted. Free style embroidery.	¹⁴ C: 878–1013 cal AD 10th century (Beta – 462330: 1110 ± 30 BP).	Mackie, <i>Symbols of Power</i> , 156–158 and 161: Embroideries with animals (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 37.7103 and Cleveland Museum of Art, 1952.257 and 1938.300), Iraq, Baghdad, Seljuq period, 11th–12th centuries. Printed textile, lions in square medallions, Seljuq period, 11th–12th centuries (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1950–558). <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> , 21–23: embroidery in silk, China 7th–8th centuries.	Two fragments, cut to fit in the lid of the casket. Fixed by modern nail and sewing thread (further analysis needed). The modern threads are said by the museum to be related to the restoration in the early 20th century by Gómez-Moreno. No other restorations have been done (as far as we know), according to the Museum information.

SI 2 (3-0089-002-001)

^a The radiocarbon analyses were carried out by Beta Analytic (Miami) and IRPHA (Brussels) laboratories.

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (*cont.*)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk 17,5 × 12,7 cms.	Wef t faced compound twill or samite. Warps: main: white/cream silk, Z-spun. Binding: cream/white silk, Z-spun. Proportion 2/1. Some irregularities in the main warps, sometimes grouped by 3. Wefts: Ground: red silk, untwisted thread. Patterning: blue, white and yellow, untwisted threads.	Byzantine. 9th–10th centuries.	Anna Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silk Weaving, AD 400 to AD 1200</i> (Vienna: Verlag Fassbaender, 1997), 192: lampas, Byzantine, 10th–11th centuries; 214, fig. 34A: M375: peacock with columns, from Aachen Treasury. Stauffer, <i>Die mittelalterlichen Textilien, 75–77</i> : silk samite 8th–9th centuries, Byzantine. Chartraire, <i>Les tissus anciens</i> , 12, fig. 3 and 32–33, fig. 32: Coptic and Byzantine textiles, 10th century.	

SI 3 (03-089-002-0030)

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (cont.)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk and metal threads 16 × 21 cms.	Warp compound twill or samite. Warps: Main: red or orange silk, Z-spun. Binding: white or cream silk, Z-spun. Proportion 1/2. Wefts: Ground: yellow silk, untwisted. Patterning: blue, white, green, untwisted, and metal threads. Metal threads: gold wrapped, S-spun, around a yellow silk thread, S-spun.	Byzantine or Near East. 9th century.	Stauffer, <i>Die mittelalterlichen Textilien</i> , 56–57: silk samite, Central Asian, 10th–11th centuries (lion tail); 128–129: silk samite, Spain, 10th century (snake head and composition). Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silks</i> , 180–182: M52–M57, silk samites with lions, Byzantine, 10th century.	The warps threads are a red-orange color, even when these threads are hidden by the wefts. This is an unusual combination that we need to consider as related to a particular workshop practice. ^b

SI 4 (3-089-002-0031)

^b There is a group of Late Antique textiles with red warps in wool that Trilling considers to be from Syrian workshops, J. Trilling, *The Roman Heritage. Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 300 to 600 AD* (Washington: Textile Museum, 1982), 16–44, cat. n° 16–22).

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (cont.)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk 30.3 × 25 cms.	Wefť faced compound twill. Warps: brown silk, Z-spun. Binding: brown silk, Z-spun. Proportion 2/1 Wefťs: Ground: violet silk, untwisted threads; patterning: blue, yellow, green, white, untwisted. Interesting effect of darkening ground with the brown warps.	Byzantine or Near East. Late 9th–10th century?	Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silk</i> , 170: M19, Byzantine, 6th–7th centuries. Schmedding, <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> , 244–245, silk samites, Syrian or Byzantine, 9th century.	
SI 5 (3-08g-002-002g)					
	Silk 18.7 × 20.9 cms.	Samite or weť compound twill? Warps: Main cream silk, S-spun. Binding: cream silk, S-spun. Proportion: 1/1. Wefťs: Ground: yellow silk, untwisted. Patterning: orange/brown, blue, untwisted. Warps very thin: similar to <i>draps de l'Arrest</i> or late samites.	Byzantine. 10th century.	Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silk</i> , 171, M20, fig. 81a–b: silk samite, Coptic/Byzantine, 6th–7th centuries from the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. T93-1937).	Difficulties in studying the weave due to the conservation treatment. The shape of the fragment recalls the shape of some caskets.
SI 6 (3-08g-022-0032)					

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (cont.)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology ^a	References and similar pieces	Comments
 SI 7 (3-089-002-0025 and 26; 3-089-002-00333 to 36)	Silk 54 × 56,5 cms. (reconstructed)	Lampas, tabby/tabby with 3 wefts. Warps: Main: blue silk, Z-twisted, paired. Binding: white or cream silk, Z-spun. Proportion 4/1. Wefts: Ground: cream silk, untwisted. Patterning: yellow, cream and green, untwisted.	Near East or Persia. ¹⁴ C: 968–1046 cal. AD (Beta 462332: 1020 ±/– 30 BP). Textile glued to the blue and white textile: ¹⁴ C 1050–1260 cal. AD (RICH-24296: 849 ± 30 BP).	Otavski and 'Abbas, <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> , 132–134; 137–138; n. 79 and n. 81, Persian or Mesopotamian, 11th–12th centuries; Byzantine or Eastern Mediterranean, 11th century.	Textile in 6 fragments, not all restored. One of them has a second textile glued to the back.
 SI 8 (3-089-002-0028)	Silk 26,8 × 25,5 cms.	Lampas, tabby/tabby, with 3 wefts. Z-spun 2 Warps: black (ground) and white silk (binding). Proportion: 2/1. Wefts: ground black silk. Patterning: red, yellow, white. Some black warps grouped in 4 threads. On the left side has a selvedge of three linen cords and some loom mistakes.	Iberia. 11th century.	Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silk</i> , 195; Mg6: silk samite, Sogdian, 12th century. Otavski and 'Abbas, <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> , 166–167; n 91, silk lampas, Spain, 12th century.	The yellow wefts may be an imitation of metal threads.

a The radiocarbon analyses were carried out by Beta Analytic (Miami) and IRPHA (Brussels) laboratories.

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (cont.)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology ^a	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk 82 × 43 cms (further studied is needed)	Wef faced samite or compound twill of 5 wefts. Warps: main: white/cream silk thread, Z-spun. Bindings: white/cream, Z-spun. Proportion 2/1. Some irregularities on the main warps, sometimes grouped by 3. Wefts: Ground: red silk, untwisted threads. Patterning wefts: yellow, blue, green, white and brownish (or orange), untwisted threads.	Iberia? 11th century (from late 10th or early 11th to early 12th).	Otavsky and Wardwell, <i>Mittelalterliche Textilien</i> : 136–137, no. 44, incised silk, Mesopotamia, 11th century.	Restored and put back in the casket. One fragment in the lid, plus three in the casket. Lined during the 2000 intervention.
SI 9 (3-089-002-00)					
	Silk 28,6 × 40 cms.	Double faced samite or compound twill. Warps: cream silk, S-spun. Irregular thickness. Proportion 1/1. Wefts: cream and green (blue?) silk, untwisted.	Central Asia or Near East. 14C: 1040–1250 cal AD (RICH-24297: 867 ± 28 BP).	Sens Cathedral, doubled-faced silk with crescent moon, B189. Muthesius, <i>Byzantine Silk</i> , 170.	
SI 10 (3-089-002-0037 and 38)					

^a The radiocarbon analyses were carried out by Beta Analytic (Miami) and IRPHA (Brussels) laboratories.

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (cont.)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk 20,2 × 14,3 cms.	Lampas, twill/twill (?) (further study is needed) Warps: Main: blue silk, Z-spun. Binding white silk, Z-spun, irregular thickness. Wefts: ground weft: blue silk, untwisted. Patterning wefts: white, yellow, pink, untwisted.	Near East? 11th century.	Van Raemdock, <i>En Harmonie</i> , silk samite with senmurvs (14C: 860–1030 AD). Silver dish with senmurv, 6th–8th centuries (British museum M124065).	
SI 11 (3-089-002-0027)					
	Silk and metal threads Stole 156 × 6,5 cms.	One stole and one maniple. Tablet weave. Warp: green and yellow silk; Patterning wefts: White, red, blue and silver threads. Silver threads: silver sheet wrapped around a yellow silk thread.	England or Iberia. End of 12th century.	Spies, <i>Ecclesiastical Pomp</i> , 88, fig. 97. Weave study at 265.	
SI 12 and 13 (3-089-002-0025)					

TABLE 1 Textiles features from San Isidoro treasury (dimensions in warp direction) (*cont.*)

Fragment (and Museum catalogue number)	Materials and dimensions	Weave	Chronology	References and similar pieces	Comments
	Silk and metal threads 5 × 4,1 cms	Box lined with tablet weave and silk tabby. Tablet weave: Warp: green and yellow silk; Patterning wefts: White, red, blue, and silver threads. Silver threads: silver sheet wrapped around a yellow silk thread.	Iberia or Sicily; 13th century.	Spies, <i>Ecclesiastical Pomp</i> , 127. Band, silk and silver threads, 13th–14th centuries.	

SI 14