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Wild Silks

Globalized materials in the *longue durée*

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Wild Silks in the past and today

Archaeological finds show the long-lasting use in Human industries of various Lepidoptera moths producing silk. Large families as Bombycidae and Saturniidae, and some Lasiocampidea and Notodontidea, considered by silk specialists as producing 'wild silk', have been used worldwide in local textile industries. Specimens, eggs, cocoons, filaments, threads, fabrics, and the techniques to process them, have travelled long distances along the silkS roads.

Wild silk tentatively identified as *Antherea assamensis*, *A. mylitta*, and maybe *Philosamia* have been used in the Indus valley (contemporary Pakistan) at least during the second half of the 3rd millennium BC, while two other species – *Pachypasa otus* and *Saturnia pyri* - seemed present during the following millennium in the Aegean.

Wild silks have an enduring globalized past which deserves attention in order to understand the history of silk/silkS as well as the importance of these materials in today's world.

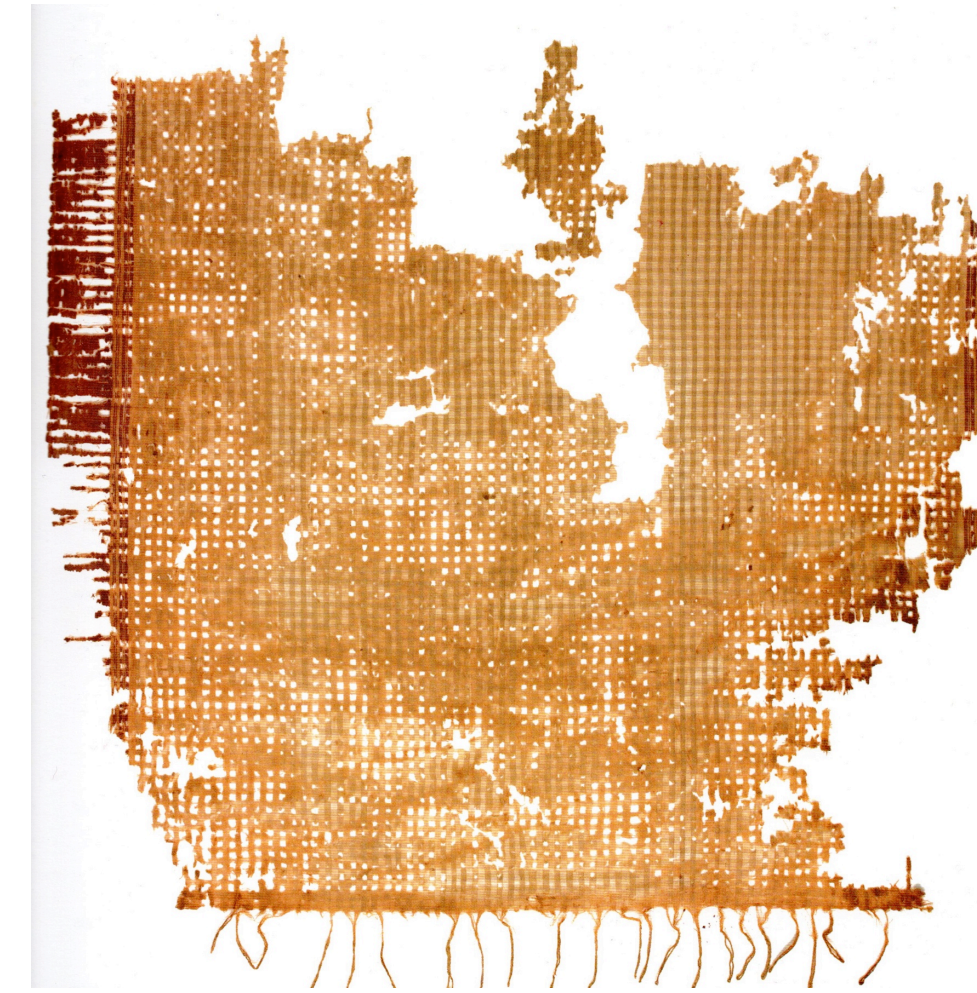
Objectives

Our project aims at examining wild silkS in two ways:

- 1/ by collecting and geo-localising data on archaeological finds and historical documents in French museum collections and archives – textiles, cocoons, textiles and written commentaries by 19th-early 20th century scientific research scientists
- 2/ by comparing the past situation with what can be observed today on the same 'living' documents and wild silkS producers and users in Southeast Asia, Japan, India, and West Africa.

Collaborations with entomologists, physicians and chemists should help connect past and present and unveil some aspects of the wild silkS routes.

Early evidence of wild silks circulations in French collections

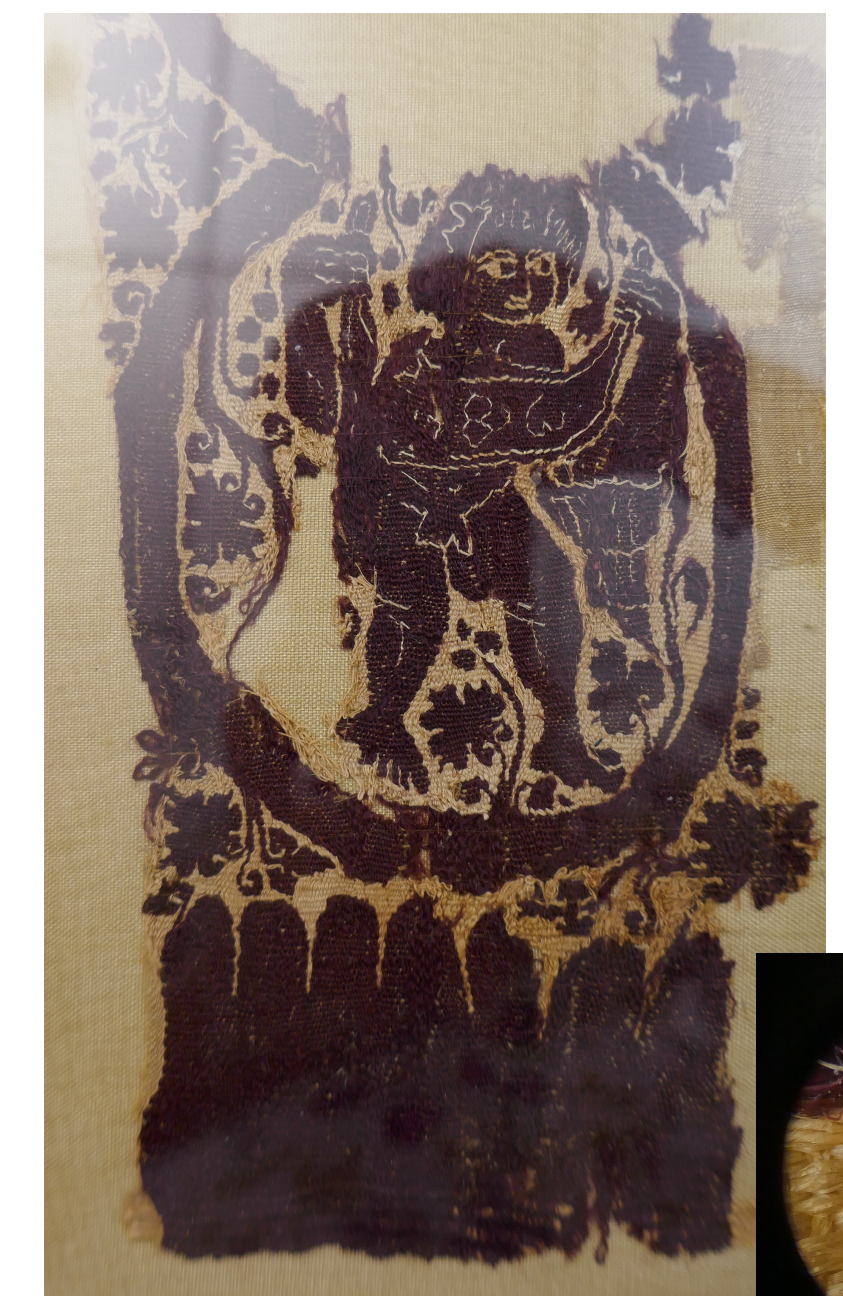


Shawl found in Antinoé, Egypt, in a tomb of the 5th-early 7th c.: wild silk and cotton with specific technical characteristics pointing to an Indian production. This piece may be the result of trade across the Indian Ocean.

© Musée des tissus, Lyon.

One example, from four figured silks, in wild and *Bombyx mori* silk with scenes from the life of Vishnu, probably Assam (India), late 16th to 18th c.

© collection Riboud, Guimet Museum, Paris.



Fragment of a so-called 'Coptic tapestry': wild silks with white linen and violet wool, Egypt 6th c.

© Musée des tissus, Lyon.

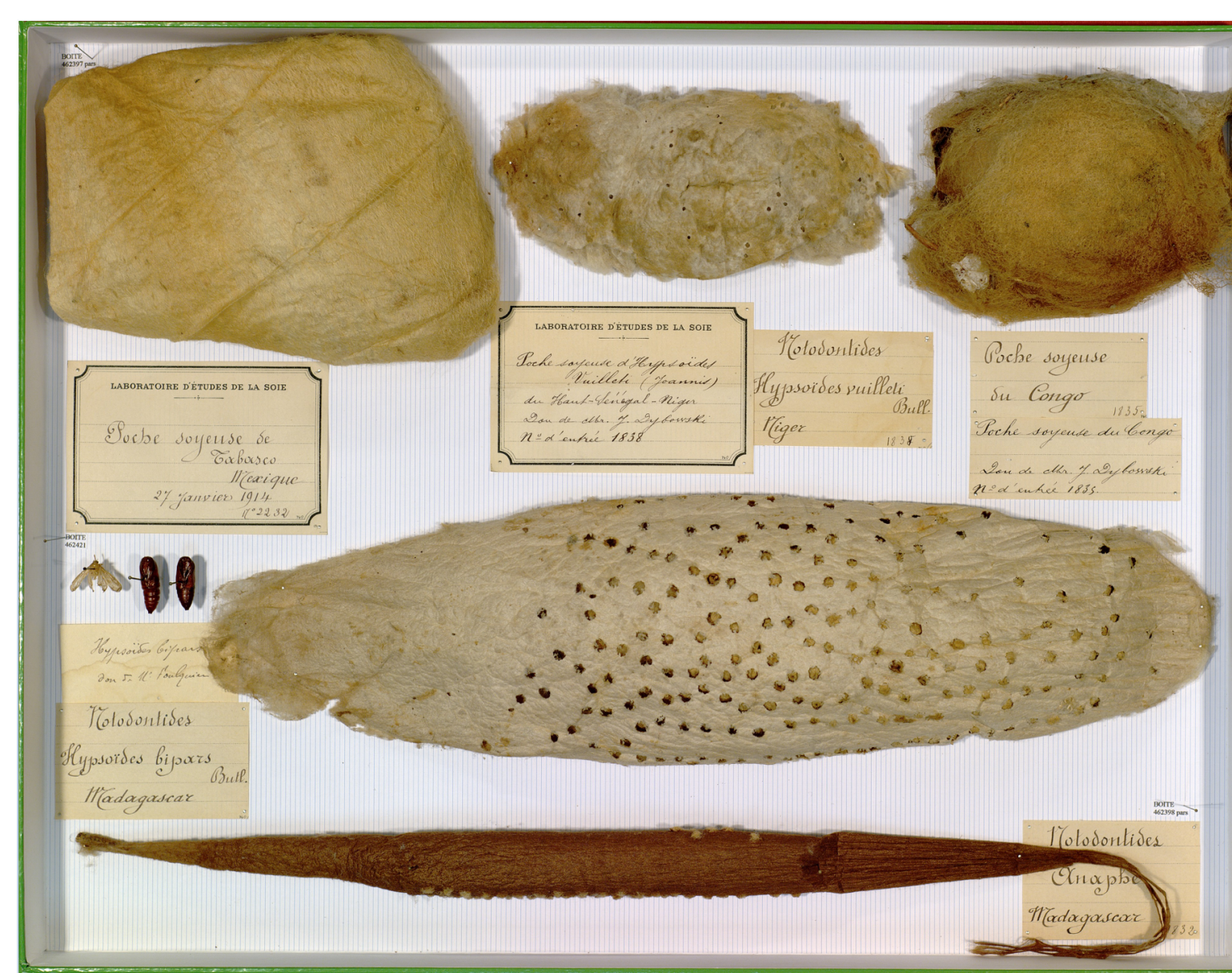
According to their morphological characters, these wild silks are all usually determined as *tussah*, which does not help reconstructing their circulations and history.

When history, social anthropology, biochemistry and science of materials meet! The envelop of Saint Domnin's relics

Found in the treasury of the Cathedral of Le-Puy-en-Velay (France), this non-woven wild silk fabric has been used to wrap relics (a few bones) of saint Domnin. It may have been introduced in the reliquary during the 9th, 13th, or 19th century.



© Cathedral, Le-Puy-en-Velay.



© Confluences Museum, Lyon.



© The Quai Branly Museum, Paris

After many fanciful hypothesis, it is possibly a cocoon collectively built by processionary caterpillars as suggested by comparisons with such cocoons preserved in French collections (Confluences Museum, Lyon ; the quai Branly Museum, Paris), or investigated by L. Douny in West Africa. Indeed, moths, cocoons, yarns and textiles related to wild silks have been collected in various parts of the world during the second half of the 19th and early 20th century by European scientists and industrials looking for new species and/or new materials.

Between collections and living practices: comparative explorations

The social dimensions of several localised wild silks cultures are studied and compared through multi-sited ethnographies and historiographies.

- What kind of role have wild silks played in the diffusion of sericulture and weaving between Asia and Europe since the beginning of our era?
- Are there specific features of today's practices that can help reconstruct how wild silks were transformed and circulated in the past?

Detailed observations of the human handling of either the same species in different contexts or of different species in similar regions will help to uncover the socio-cultural and technical mechanisms that underline wild silks cultures, as well as to explore them as localized forms of cultural identities and values.

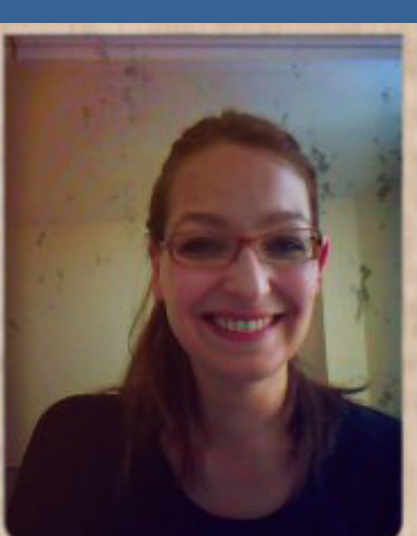
Comparisons drawn between the studied regions and the ancient silks discovered by archaeologists and art historians will help us to refine the long term vision of wild silks cultures in global history.



Spinning of *Attacus atlas* in Yayasan Royal Silk (Yarsilk), Yogyakarta.

Breeding of *Samia cynthia* moth.

© N. Césard, Java, Indonesia, 2017 and 2019



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