

## **Iraq's fame in silk production and the transfer of silk into the world**

*By: Dr. Taher Mudhaffar Al-Ameed*

*College of the Arts, Baghdad University*

The Iraqis knew the silk since the first historical eras. It was produced at the Assyrian factories. The Assyrian documents had supported this fact and described the way of producing the colored material from silkworms.. (1)

The Arabs called the silk “Qasz” before its being woven and they called it “Ibrism” after it was woven. When it was mixed with wool it was called “Khazz”. If the “Ibrism” was dyed with colours, then it would be named “Hareer” (silk). (2)

During the Islamic era the Iraqis continued to produce the silk textiles starting from the first Hijra century. According to “Al-Aghani” book, Mus’as Ibn Al-Zabair presented Omar Bin Abi Rabeia’a a gift of a number of Iraqi silk textiles in mid first Hijra century (3).

Among the Iraqi cities which were famous of producing silk when the Arabs liberated Iraq, were Anbar, Hira, Nu’maniya, Hazza and Mosul. The inhabitant of Mosul played an important role in producing and exporting the textiles to other places.

Al-Masoudi said in “Murooj Al-Thahab” that Sapor had transferred a large number of silk producers and settled them in Tastur. When they settled there, they spread the textiles industry in which they were experts.

They played an extremely important role in the appearance of the industry of silk brocade and silk in Tastur and silk fabric in the city Sus (6). In southern Iraq, the city of Missan (7) achieved fame in producing textiles as silk fabrics (8) and “Daranicks” were made there.

In the Islamic era, the Arab liberators established three main cities in Iraq during the reign of the Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khatib (may God bless him) namely: Basrah, Kufa and Mosul, which later became among the important silk production centers in the world as well as textiles production.

The most important factor behind the fame of these cities in the field of silk production was, in addition to Iraq’s culture, that a large number of Yemen’s who accompanied the Arab liberation armies had settled in these new cities. The Yemenis were famous since the dawn of Islam of textile production.

The city of Basrah was known of producing textiles from which cloths and shawls were made. (10) The extremely beautiful garments and cloths of Basrah were proverbial. (11) Basrah was also famous of silk fabrics and linen (12) as well as of its silk, wooden and linen textiles (13). The inhabitants of Ubullah, near the city of Basrah were experts in weaving light linen clothes... (14)

As for Kufa, it gained a wide fame, since its foundation, in textile industry.

Proud of his city of Kufa, Abu Bakr Al-Huthali addressed the citizens of Basrah saying, “we have more oak, ivory and silk brocades than you do”. (15). Silk brocade is a textile which was made of silk (16). The city of Mosul was famous of textiles and exporting them to other places, as we have mentioned before, the textiles industry continued throughout the Islamic era. Silk fabrics embroidered with silver and gold threads were widely known.

Moreover, the textiles production also witnessed prosperity in Baghdad since the city’s foundation by the caliph Al-Mansour in 145 Hijra-750, and many kinds of textiles were produced such as silk fabrics (17) and a kind of textile called “Malham” which was made of silk, woven either with cotton or wool.

During the era of the caliph Al-Mansour a type of silk clothes was made and called “Al-Mansour” (18) after the caliph’s name.

Silk fabric is a kind of textile of which the wraps were made of silk and the wefts were made of wool. (19) The writers had various definitions for this kind of textile as some of them defined it as only silk fabric or as the silk itself. (20)

The Iraqis showed great expertise in producing embroidered fabrics (21) which were silk textiles embroidered with pictures of human, animal and plants leaves’ shapes, beautified with gold threads. The Abbaside caliphs used to make the cloth of the holy Ka’ba.

Al-Idrisi said that cloth was made of Iraqi silk brocade in the sixth Hijra century (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)

Europe was affected by the Arab textiles which were widely used by the Europeans. Many samples of Arab textiles are kept in western churches, museums. The Europeans named the textiles which were brought from the Arab orient names to the textiles they produced imitating the Arab textiles. We are here concerned of the Iraqi textiles without referring to other Arab textiles.

The Europeans used the Baghdad-made silk fabrics, which were known as the “Baghdad”. The Italians used Baghdad’s name as “Baldacco” and gave it to the excellent silk fabrics they had imported from Baghdad. They also gave the same name to the silk shadow which was hung over the altar in many churches and called them “Baldacchino” (22)

The Baghdad area “Al-Attabia” was famous of producing silk fabrics. The Iraqi textile was so famous that its production was widely spread in many European countries in the sixth Hijra century (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)

The Spanish imitated its production and called it “Al-Attabi” silk. The French and Italians called it “Tabis” and then it was famous of this commercial name throughout Europe. (23)

Europe continued to produce this kind of textile till modern times.

Crestel wrote that on 13 October 1661, Mr. Pepys wore his coat which was made of the local Spanish Attabi silk which was embroidered with golden laces. In 1786, Miss Burney attended a royal birthday of Windsor and she was wearing clothes made of Attabi silk.

In Berlin, there is a silk fabric marked with the name of Haroun Al-Rashid. It is possible that this piece of silk was among the many gifts sent by Al-Rashid to Charleman as sources said that he sent him pearls, diamonds, ivory, perfumes, silk textiles and a clock. (25)

There is also a textile piece kept in the property of “de san Isidaoro” in leone in Spain with writings stating that it was woven in Baghdad. The reader can see clearly writing on Two upper and lower laces. On the lower lace it was written “made in Baghdad” on one side and “Owned by Abu Bakr, made in Baghdad”, on the other side. (26) (figure No. 1)

Baghdad had become the world’s greatest center of civilization in which various industries peaked including textile industry. Certain areas in Baghdad were specialized in making textiles. Among those areas was Al-Tasturiyen area which produced beautiful and soft silk clothes. Moreover, the quarters of Nassriya, Dar Al-Qazz and Al-Attabiya were also famous of the same industry.

The Persians imitated the Iraqis in making Al-Attabi textile and produced it in the cities of Isfahan and Sebestan (27).

The Attabi textiles entered Spain and Andalusia.

Al-Idrisi said that there were 800 silk-weaving looms in the city of Al-Mariya and mentioned a number of textiles including Al-Attabi.

The word Attabi was used in Spanish language as “Attabi” and then it was transferred in Italian and French as “Tabis”, while the English used the word “Taby” for a good kind of silk textiles. (28)

The word “Attabi” was widely used in European language and it was given as a name for all excellent beautifully-colored silk textiles. (29)

The word Attabi was mentioned in English in Johnson dictionary who explained it as “a kind of silk clothes, of which a piece is called “Taby” it has a soft striped fur. (30)

The Iraqis showed huge expertise in producing another kind of textiles known as “Mosmat” which was a soft (31) textile of pure silk or cotton.

Baghdad also achieved fame in producing soft and thick (32) textile woven of silk and gold threads (33) and it was called “Seqlatoon”. Dozie identified this textile as a kind of gold-embroidered, Baghdad-made silk of excellent quality. This name was widely known all over Europe during the middle ages. (34) In Baghdad it was known as the Baghdadi seqlatoon, (35) which was considered the most precious Iraqi textiles and of the highest quality. (36).

#### Iraqi silk fabrics in world museums

In Cleveland museum in America there is a piece of cloth made of yellow silk. (Figure No. 2)

Archaeological researches outside Iraq had uncovered a large number of silk cloths, whose embroideries indicated that they were made in Iraq during the third Hijra century (ninth century A.D.), i.e. during the prosperity of civilization in Samarra’.

In Berlin museum, there is a piece of silk on which there is writing embroidered with white silk and they read: (...ser Billah Al-Muntasser Billah Al-...) (37)

In this text the reader can notice the repetition of “Al-Muntasser Billah” which is the title of the Abbaside caliph Myhammed Bin Djafar Al-Muntasser Billah. (figure No. 3)

In Washington museum in America, there is a piece of cloth woven of red silk (figure No. 4) beautifully embroidered with regular shapes pictures.

In the textiles museum in Washington, America there is a green silk textile (figure No. 5).

There is also another piece of silk amazingly-embroidered with regular shapes (figure No. 6).

During the late Abbaside era, Mosul was famous of producing a kind of silk fabrics called “Al-Mosuli” which was known in Europe as Muslin and it was made of pure silk or of silk and cotton.

The traveller Marco Polo referred to this beautiful textile when he passed by the city, “The clothes of these inhabitants were produced in the city and they were made of gold-embroidered silk”. (38)

- (1) Al-Jader, Dr. Walid-Al-Heraf Walsena'at. P. 105
- (2) Jawad, Dr. Mustafa, Al-Sena'at Wafunoon Al-Qadeema, Baghdad commerce chambre magazine, 1941, p. 857.
- (3) Al-Isfahani, Al-Aghani, 11-244.
- (4) Al-Numaniya, a village between Baghdad and Kut of the west of Tigris (Ibn Rusta, Al-Aalaq Al-Nafisa, p. 186)
- (5) Hazza, a small town situated as Yaqout said in Al-Mujam 4-263 near the city of Mosul in northern Iraq.
- (6) Al-Masoudi, Murouj Al-Thahab, 1-16
- (7) Sergeant, Islamic textiles, Ars Islamica, Vol. 9, P. 88.
- (8) Al-Jahedh-Al-Tabassur Biltejarah, p. 21
- (9) Daranecks are similar to carpets. Al-Jawaliqi said and that the Daranecks were used as curtains and carpets and they were yellow. It was also said that they were kinds of clothes.
- (10) Al-Mataref (plural), Matraf (sing) is a silk cloth (see Ibn Sieda Al-Mukhassa 4-68). Alaq, it is a silk cloth embroidered with colours differ from its own colour (see Ibn Abd Rabbeh, Al-Aqd Al-Farid, 4-434). Al-Dinouri, Al-Akhbar Al-Tewal 1-289.
- (11) Dr Saleh Ahmed Al-Ali, Al-Ansejah, Al-Abhath magazine, p. 587
- (12) Saleh Ahmed Al-Ali, previous source, p. 587
- (13) Al-Maqdesi, Ahsan Al-Taqasim fi Marefat Al-Aqalim-p. 33.
- (14) Al-Maqdesi, the same source P. 128
- (15) Al-Dinauri, Oyon Al-Akhbar 1-217
- (16) Islamic Encyclopedia 4-356
- (17) Al-Maqdesi, Ahsan Al-Taqasim p. 128
- (18) Ibn Abi Ussaibe'a Oyon Al-Anba fi Tabaqat Al-Atebba, p. 136
- (19) Dozei 9-6
- (20) Ibn Sieda, Al-Mukhassas, 4-68
- (21) Al-Washi as mentioned by Ibn Sieda in Al-Mukhassas 4-66. Is a word that means originally embroiders.
- (22) Turath Al-Islam Islamic Heritage, p. 62, chapter of the Islamic secondary arts and their effect on European arts, written in English by Christie.
- (23) Islamic Heritage, Christie, pp. 61-62.
- (24) The same source, p. 64
- (25) Lebonne, the Arabs civilization, p. 172.

- (26) Islamic Heritage, Crestie, p. 64 (see figure No. 30 in it)
- (27) Pope, a survey of Persian Art, vol.p. 19996
- (28) Listering, Baghdad during the Abbaside era, p. 22.
- (29) Listering, Baghdad, margin no. 1 p. 122.
- (30) Listering, Baghdad, Margin no. 1, p. 128
- (31) Taj Al-Arous, item "samt".
- (32) Al-Douri, Iraq's economic history in the 4<sup>th</sup> Hijra century, p. 89.
- (33) Dr. Mustafa Jawad, fi Al-Sena'at wafunoon al-Qadimah, Baghdad commerce chamber magazine, 1941, p. 857
- (34) Mustafa Jawad, Previous source, p. 858
- (35) Al-Nuwairi, Nehayat Al-Arab, 1-369, Al-Tha'alibi, Lataef Al-Ma'aref, p. 235
- (36) Serjeant, Material for a history of Islamic textiles up to the Mongol conquest, vol. 9, p. 82.
- (37) Kuhnel, Abbasid silk of the ninth century, fig. 11
- (38) Marco Polo. The travel Marco Polo, London, 1978, p. 41.