

Silk production centers in Iraq

By Dr. Hamdan Abdul Majeed Al-Kubaisi College of Arts, Baghdad University

Iraq's major cities were distinguished by their various industries. Since Iraq became part of the Islamic Arab state, the Caliph's and Walis (governors) did their best to boost the existing industries in Iraq as well as to enhance and develop them. Meanwhile, they established new industries required by the new developments of the country and the advances achieved by the state. Labour was freely available and the door was opened wide to various social strata of society to the work of being skillful in all fields (1), particularly the inhabitants of Mosul who were very skilled in their industrial work including silk production.

In the second half of the Abbaside era the organization of craftsmen witnessed internal developments that gave it its general framework as every craft section had.

A chief from their own craftsmen, normally appointed or recognized by the government who considered the chief as the craft's representative. This policy naturally led to find means to protect craftsmen of that section and to prevent any aggression upon them.

The move of the cotton and silk textiles producers in Baghdad in 374 Hijra , 984 A.D. against the imposition by the tyrant Bowaihis of the one tenth tax on these textiles in Baghdad was a clear evidence on the well-run organization against that aggression. (2)

However a number of big factories were established in Iraq's major cities to produce glass, china and fabrics of cotton and silk, weaving wool, luxuries, oils, perfumes, leather industries and others.

Silk weaving industries in Iraq were developed significantly and extremely good types of silk fabrics were produced. The price of the good silky cloth reached 200 Dinars. Iraq's Wali Ziad Ibn Abbeh paid attention to activate the textile industries, including silk textile. He was considered the first person who introduced the silk industry to the city of Basrah. To enhance this kind of production and to encourage people to use local productions, Ziad wore clothes which were made in Basrah and he was imitated by a lot of people, which activated this kind of industry (3)

The Ommaiad Caliph, Sulaiman Bin Abdul-Malik was said to prefer the silky light clothes which were made in Kufa and sent to the Caliph in Sham (Syria) (4)

Among the things that led to the prosperity of silk production were that some of those in charge and a lot of people preferred to wear various kinds of silky clothes. Moreover the state had obliged its officials to wear silky clothes; this increasing demand encouraged producers to enhance their productions and to increase the range (5).

Mosul was considered pioneering among the Iraqi cities in the field of producing silk. The textiles of “Shashi” were famous and they were spread in the European West under the name of “Moslin”. Yaqout described Mosul as the station of the caravans and from which trips to all countries started at it was considered the gate of Iraq and the key to Khursan and from which people moved to Azerbaijan (6). He also stressed that visitors heading to the East or to the West must pass by the city of Mosul. Therefore the city became famous for its various industries, particularly the silk products. History notes that the industries of silk and light silky clothes with beautiful colours were produced there. Moreover there was another kind of silk from which excellent curtains were made and it was exported to other countries because there was a surplus of that material in the local markets.

The fabrics of certain curtains were unified with threads of silver gold (7).

Before the liberation of Iraq the city of Hera was famous of producing a good kind of silk. This industry developed during the Ommiad and Abbaside eras and the products were highly preferred in the markets due to their good quality and beautiful colours (8). The silk industry extended to the town of Noa’maniya which achieved fame in this kind of industry particularly in producing yellow colours.

Basrah was also known by the silk textiles production which was made of kind of wool and silk for clothes and women’s heads wraps (9).

Also in the town of Ubullla there was the industry of producing the light textiles in various kinds which included a high percentage of silk.

The Kufies were also skillful in making the excellent kinds of silk. Moreover the kind of silk from which the turbans were made was also produced in Kufa.

Among the cities that were famous for producing a good kind of silk that was used for clothes and curtains was the city of Missan.

In Wasit city various kinds of cloth industries appeared including silk textile of various kinds. These textiles remained including the silk textile of various kinds. These

textiles remained in good quality for a long time and the palace of the Abbaside Caliph Al-Moqtader Billah was decorated with them.

Wasit was considered the most famous place for coloring. The experts in this field were extremely skillful and they found various kinds of colours to beautify the silk textile. (10)

Since the foundation of Baghdad and making it the capital of the Arab-Islamic empire many industries were established in it, particularly the silk industry. History reveals that the weaving in Baghdad was prosperous since the 3rd Hijra century 9th A.D. century.

Baghdad produced excellent silky textiles and clothes in various colours. Also in Baghdad a purple thick silky fabric was produced in addition to another textile (called the Malham) which was a combination of silk and cotton. (11)

Al-Atabiya clothes were famous and they were made in Al-Atabiya area in Karkh side of Baghdad and were named after that area. Those clothes were woven from silk and cotton threads and they were made in various beautiful colors.

They gained wide reputation and that is why they were exported to other regions of the Abbaside Empire and they were exported to other countries as well. (12)

The word "Attabi" silk textile was used by Spanish language and then it was used in Italian and French and pronounced "Tabis". The English used the word Tabbi for the new kinds of silk textiles.

The word had come a common name in the 17th and 18th centuries A.D. when Queen Elizabeth received the ambassador of Venice in February 1603 A.D. She wore a white Tabi Silk. In his memories, Samuel Pepys said that he wore in 13 October 1661 a silk Tabbi waistcoat and a golden tape. Miss Bren also appeared in very beautiful clothes of purple Tabbi on the occasion of the birthday of a princess in Windsor Palace. The word Tabbi was mentioned in Johnson's dictionary with the explanation of "a kind of silk clothes described by the word Tabi if they were with soft fur" (13) All or part of these silk clothes were imported from the East, probably from Iraq in particular and they would have reached the West via the silk roads.

There were specialist brokers in Iraq who fixed the prices of the woven clothes including the silk ones. Meanwhile other workers stamped the wrapped goods to be delivered to foreign traders as the export operation was carried through the silk roads. Those merchants

usually trusted the brokers and bought the stamped silk without untying the ropes of the goods. Sometimes the silk exported goods were stamped by an official stamp. (15)

It was said that the industry of various kinds of silk textiles prospered in Iraq during the Abbaside era as the weavers were extremely accurate and skillful in their job. They used silk with wool threads and that is why those kinds of carpets were very expensive (16).

Since the beginning of the Ummayyad era (41-132 Hijrah) (661-749 A.D.) Iraq was famous for its weaving industry since a large number of experts in this field of industry existed in Iraq and they produced local silk decorated with lines of writing on the edges of the cloth with the names of the Caliphs, Walis of various religious words. Mostly, the writing was done with gold thread or with a color that differed from gap of the cloth or the flag or the carpet.

It is worth mentioning that such kinds of industry are the nearest to the concept of public sector industries nowadays as the fashion houses in the Islamic Arab state were owned by the government and their workers were employed by the state whose center was Iraq. Therefore this industry received great attention from the Caliphs and other officials particularly in the Abbaside era when Baghdad was the capital.

We can see the extent of the state attention to this industry and its development as a special dewan (office) was established under the name “Dewan Al-Teraz” in Baghdad and it was put under the supervision of a special official called “Saheb Al-Teraz” whose duty as well as that of his state was to carefully supervise the factories that had been weaving official suits for the state senior officials as well as the medals and flags which were mostly made with high percentage of silk in their textiles. (17)

Some walis such as the Hamdanis in Mosul had their special teraz houses (18).

- (1) Al-Masoudi-Ali Ibn Al-Hussain, Al-Tanbih Walishraf Beirut 1965) p. 38.
- (2) Al-Kharbouty-Ali Hosni, Iraq's history under the Omiads rules (Cairo) 1959 p. 357.
- (3) Al-Ya'qoubi-Ahmed Ibn Abi Ya'qoub, Al-Buldan, 1892 A.D. P. 248
- (4) Ibn Al-Jawzi, Abdul-Rahman Bin Ali, Al-Muntadham V. 7, Hayder Abad 1357 Hijra p. 127.
- (5) Al-tha'labi-Abdul Malik Ibn Mohammed, Lata'ef Al-Ma'ref (Egypt) 1960) P. 17.
- (6) Al-Masa'oudi Ali ibn Al-Husseini, Moroj Al-Thahab, V. 3 Cairo 1305 Hijra p. 205.
- (7) Yaqout-Yaqot bin Abdullah, Moa'jam Al-Buldan V. 4 (Beirut) p. 633.
- (8) Al-Khateb Al-Baghdadi-Ahmed ibn Ali, Baghdad history V. 1 (Cairo) 1931 p. 525
- (9) Ibn Rastra-Ahmed Ibn Omar, Al—A'laq Al-Nafisah (Ledin 1891) p. 186
- (10) The same source p. 192.
- (11) Ibn Rasta, Al-A'laq Al-Nafisa p. 153 Al-Maqdesi, Ahsan Al-TaqaSEM p. 129
- (12) Al-Jahedh, Al-Tabasur Bial – Tijarah p. 32.
- (13) Al-Demashqi, Al-Eshara ela Mahasin Al-Tejara, p. 24
- (14) Al-Masoudi, Moroj Al-Thahab V. 3, p. 175 Al-Douri, Iraq's economic history p. 89-90
- (15) Listran. Baghdad p. 122
- (16) Listrayakh, Baghdad p. 122-123
- (17) Mitz, Islamic civilization in the 4th Hijrah century V. 2, p. 355
- (18) Al-Douri Iraq's economic history in the 4th Hijrah century p. 92
- (19) Al-Jahashyari, Al-Wezara's p. 197
- (20) Al-Saby, Rasa'el Al-Saby, p. 141