The Textile Industries of Medieval Egypt (9th-12th Centuries): Social and Economic Aspects

Introduction

In medieval Middle Eastern society clothing served as a multi-role social signifier. On the personal level, clothes defined gender boundaries and emphasized the status people acquired through wealth or occupation but clothing also segregated, or meant to segregate, people according to their confessional belonging.[1] On the state level, clothing symbolized political authority and dynastic grandeur while, on the economic level, clothes served as both a form of investment and a means of payment. Next to food, especially grain and bread, clothing was a major concern for medieval society and one of its economic driving forces.

The wide consumption of clothes used for practical and symbolic purposes was sustained by the textile industry which produced for the low and high ends of the market and consisted of private enterprises and state owned workshops. The industry depended on the supply of raw materials such as flax, cotton, wool and silk and this firmly sets the topic within the wider context of both rural and urban economies. The discussion that follows begins with the rural dimension of the issue: that is the supply of raw materials, and will proceed to the organizational aspects of the industry and its economics.

Flax was the main cash-crop of ancient and Roman Egypt and provided the raw material for its textile industries. According to second century authorities such as Pliny the elder and the Greek essayists Julius Pollux of Egypt, cotton was also grown but its importance for Egypt's textile industries remains ambiguous, the importation of cotton fabrics and garments from India, on the other hand, is attested to by both literary sources and archeological finds.[2]

In medieval times, especially during the ninth-twelfth centuries, along with sugar cane, flax constituted Egypt's most important cash crop. Gladys Frantz-Murphy has traced both the predominance of flax and the rising importance of the textile industries to the Tulunid period (868-905), and Philip Mayerson has speculated that the spread of flax reduced the availability of land and water for the growing of wheat and exposed Egypt to famines.[3] By the tenth century the Fayyum depression south of Cairo became an important centre for the growing of flax and flax trade, while Ibn Zulaq (918-c.973) writes that in the mid-tenth century its tax revenues rose to be as high as 620,000 dinars, equal to the tax revenues of the towns of Ramla and Tiberias in Palestine and Damascus.[4] The sum seems to be exaggerated and the comparison is not particularly convincing but, if read in a loose way, it indicates how valuable flax was for everyone involved with it: farmers, traders and the regime.

Abraham L. Udovitch has estimated that during the eleventh century 5,000 to 6,000 tons of flax were annually exported from Egypt and twenty two types of flax, named after regions of cultivation, are mentioned in the documents of the Cairo Geniza. The way that flax was processed shows remarkable continuity from ancient to medieval times, but the growing international demand for Egyptian flax had a significant impact on the Egyptian rural world through introduction of a monetary commercial economy that have bonded farmers and traders.[5]

As for cotton, Andrew M. Watson perceives the eight century as the turning point for the spread of cotton and cotton products in Egypt but flax, despite this, continued to be important. The replacement of flax by cotton took place only during the late middle ages (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries). In late medieval society, as has been pointed out by Jong-Kuk Nam, the consumption of cotton

clothes was wide spread and not only limited to the well-to-do classes. Nonetheless, a convincing explanation for the success of cotton still eludes us.[6]

The agricultural history of medieval Egypt has not yet been written, the available sources have not been systematically studied and Mayerson's view about Egypt's exposure to famines because of cultivating too much flax seems to be exaggerated. Frantz-Murphy's approach, however, which traces the development of Egypt's textile industries to the Tulunid period provides a more promising starting point, especially if studied from the point of view of a demand created by the regime. The Tulunid period is characterized by a short-lived Egypt-centered regime which initiated a large scale building project in the form of a new administrative centre built near the capital city of Fustat, and began a massive military build-up and the construction of warships. The Fatimid period (969-1171) saw the continuation of these trends on a vast scale and the creation of an immense household economy to supply the needs of the court which, when

dispersed in 1171, consisted of 12,000 people who lived in the palace complex in Cairo. The role of textiles in the Fatimid political culture and the social life of the court is well-documented and we can, in broad lines, describe both the demand for textiles and the industry that fed it.

Uses and Consumption

Political authority in medieval Islam was manifested and disseminated through such means as the proclamation of the ruler's name in Friday sermons at the congregational mosques (khutba), as well as by inscribing it on coins (sikka) and on special textiles known as tiraz. Although the term tiraz is of Persian origin and its simple meaning was embroidery, in its wider meaning it denotes inscribed textiles as well as the workshops where these textiles were produced. The Persian origin of the term must not obscure the fact that inscribed textiles were known in Egypt for many centuries prior to the Muslim conquest. And, as has

been shown by Jacques van der Vliet, in parallel to Muslim tiraz there were also Christian tiraz.[7]

In the case of the Fatimid ruler al-Mu‘izz (ruled in Tunisia 953-969 and Egypt 969-975), it is said that his name was inscribed on the tiraz produced in the Egyptian towns of Tinnis, Damietta, and Bahnasa prior to the conquest of Egypt by the general Jawhar in 358/969. This was undoubtedly was achieved trough the Fatimid da‘wa network of agents-propagandists who infiltrated Egypt prior to the conquest of the country. Egypt’s textile industry was flourishing and, at the time of the Fatimid conquest, its products were much in demand. Kindi, the tenth century historian of Muslim Egypt, in a booklet on the excellencies of Egypt, extols Egypt’s tiraz industries. He singles out three production centers each one known for its unique products. Tinnis and Damietta were renowned for their brocades (dibaj) which, even with no gold adornments, could fetch a price of one hundred dinars per piece. Bahnasa, on the other hand, was known for its

hangings.[8] The Fatimids were quick to harness this industry to their political and propaganda goals. In 359/970, immediately after the conquest of the country, Jawhar sent a large quantity of brocades woven with gold threads to his master in Tunisia.[9]

Securing political recognition from the local rulers of Mecca and Medina was at the heart of the political struggle between the Fatimids and Abbasids and the conquest of Egypt gave al-Mu‘izz an important advantage since Egypt was the supplier of grain for the holy cities of Arabia. The use of inscribed textiles was part of this struggle. In 364/975, al-Mu‘izz sent the kiswa, a fabric bearing his name to cover the Kaaba, and other fabrics for internal use in the sanctuary.[10] Another tradition adopted by al-Mu‘izz was the sending of the shamsa (a sunshade), to provide external protection for the Kaaba. Ibn Zulaq provides a detail description of al-Mu‘izz’s shamsa and compares it with those sent by other

rulers. It must have been a most impressive artifact made of red brocade and adorned with a variety of precious stones.[11]

The covering of the Kaaba was apparently an ancient pre-Islamic Arab tradition which surfaced under the early Abbasids.[12] Beginning with the inception of the Fatimid rule in Egypt, the new regime made the dispatch of the kiswa a standard practice and maintained this throughout the whole span of its rule in Egypt.[13] During the civil war of the 1060s and early 1070s the Fatimids could no longer send the kiswa to Mecca and the Abbasids were quick to fill the void by sending their kiswa. However, as the Fatimids recovered from the horros of the war, they reclaimed their position as the providers of the kiswa. The kiswa was produced in Tinnis. Other precious textiles woven in Tinnis and Damietta were included in gifts sent by the Fatimids to friendly regimes.[14]

Textiles were a regular gift item exchanged between states. In 420/1029, for example, the Fatimids received a gift sent by the Zirid rulers of Tunisia which included textiles and they reciprocated by sending a gift of fine textiles made in Tinnis and Damietta as well as Indian and Yemeni textiles that were available in Egypt as a result of the India Ocean trade. One would assume that with this type of gifts the emphasis would be placed upon a limited quantity of top quality, exquisite textiles but the state consumption of textiles involved both top quality goods and large quantities.[15]

Basically, the state consumption of textiles fell into two categories: goods for current yearly use and for hoarding. The first category entailed three main types of uses: 1) textiles for the private wardrobe of the caliph; 2) textiles distributed among state employees; 3) textiles for ceremonial and political uses.

Ibn al-Tuwayr (1130-1220), in his work dealing with Fatimid history and administration, has a chapter entitled The Garment Treasury (khizanat al-kiswa) that deals with the Internal and External sections of the khizanat al-kiswa. The Internal khizanat al-kiswa in fact consisted of the ruler's private wardrobe. Actually, it was a private storage department headed by a woman with a staff of thirty slave-girls who were responsible for providing clothing for the Fatimid caliph.

The External khazinat al-kiswa was headed by a confidant of the ruler, frequently a eunuch, who supervised the Master of Scissors and a team of tailors. The External Treasury served as a general storage department which stocked fine, plain and colored linen clothes for men and women as well as colored brocades and heavy damask fabrics which were produced in the tiraz workshops of Tinnis, Demietta and Alexandria. The clothes made and stored there were intended for summer and winter distribution among the caliph's family (children, womenfolk

and relatives) and state employees according to their ranking.[16] According to Ibn Abi Tayy (approximately 1179-1232), the expenses spent on the Garment Treasury were enormous and could reach 600,000 dinars, an estimate that seems realistic. These huge costs might have been due to the fact that the clothes of the Fatimid ruler were adorned with gold as was the ceremonial parasol carried above his head on public occasions. This artifact was regarded as a state insignia forbidden for others to use.[17] The summer and winter distributions of textiles carried out by the state were vast. In 516/1122, for example, 14,305 pieces of clothing were distributed at the onset of the winter. The Muslim calendar is replete with religious festivals and the Fatimids introduced new ones and also celebrated non-Islamic festivals. The Festival of Sacrifice is one of the two great Muslim festivals, and the state-sponsored celebrations involved the distribution of textiles and the meat of the sacrificed animals. These textile distributions were typical of the Fatimid political culture and served not only to establish a hierarchy and dependence but also to foster

loyalty. Another aspect of this symbolic use of textiles involved the dressing of robes of honor during ceremonies of investiture. These events were imbued with deep political meaning and signified the delegation of authority while implying expectations for loyal service.

Production

In 391/1001, the Fatimids made a great effort to adorn the palace and its main reception hall with exquisite fabrics so as to impress the Byzantine emissaries who had arrived in Cairo on a diplomatic mission. On the advice of a princess, the palace stores were searched for fabrics that had been brought to Egypt at the time of the transfer of the Fatimids from Tunisia. Eventually, silk fabrics adorned with gold that carried the inscription “331(942-943), the work of the slaves” were found and put on display.[18] Evidently, the Fatimid demand for textiles was partly satisfied through the household economy of the palace which, generally

speaking, utilized the resources of the state to procure adequate supplies of grain, textiles and weapons required for the palace and the army. Grain, for example, was cultivated on crown lands, and was shipped to Cairo by the state fleet of Nile boats, after it was stored in granaries while the production of bread for the daily needs of the palace took place within the palace compound.[19] It is clear that the production of textiles by slaves fits into this pattern of economic thinking and activity very well but the role of slave labor within the palace economy, and the Fatimid economy as a whole, should not be exaggerated since most of the textile production was carried out by a free work force in workshops in Cairo and elsewhere.

In Cairo the production of silk cloth was took place in the Dar al-Dibaj which, during the reign of al-Hafiz (1130-1149), was supervised by a court physician Ibn Sa‘id al-Qarqa. He was also responsible for both the production of weapons in the palace and the stores of weapons and saddles. Whether Dar al-Dibaj was

part of the tiraz workshop network or not is unclear but this production center was set up by the Fatimids probably at the beginning of the twelfth century and was housed in a disused vizierial palace.

When the Fatimids conquered Egypt, the tiraz workshop network was already well-established and the new rulers were quick to put it under their direct control. This was achieved by two means: first textiles exports from Tinnis to Iraq were curtailed even though these were very valuable. It seems that because of the political and ceremonial value of these textiles the Fatimids were ready to sustain losses in order to deny their rivals access to these fabrics. A more significant move was to put members of the Nu‘man family in charge fr the tiraz producing town of Tinnis. The Nu‘mans were a family of cadis who, until the family’s demise in the early 1010s, enjoyed a privileged position in the Fatimid state and were responsible for the shipping of textiles from Tinnis to the court in Cairo. In 384/994, for example, Yahya ibn al-Nu‘man delivered a shipment from Tinnis,

Damietta and Farama which included money, riding animals, the ceremonial parasol used by the Fatimid ruler during public appearances, and two kiswa fabrics for the Kaaba sanctuary.[20]

Following the fall of the Nu'mans, some time after the first decade of the eleventh century, the office of the Noble Tiraz was established. This office was a kind of administrative logistical unit and Ibn Tuwayr asserts that it was headed by the highest ranking civilian administrator or a military man. It had a staff of a hundred people responsible for the procurement of textiles produced in villages and towns such as Tinnis and Damietta, which were shipped to the capital by a small fleet of boats operated by the same office. The delivery of these shipments turned into carefully structured, state sponsored celebrations: in which the products were exhibited and great honors were bestowed on the official in charge of the office. The products that arrived included the parasol and "the special Friday garments",

meaning the attire that the caliph wore on Fridays for the prayers and sermons delivered by him at the congregational mosques of Cairo.

It seems that the administrative responsibilities of this office were quite complex since it had to synchronize the delivery of textiles produced by the tiraz system of workshops with the different festivals celebrated throughout the year. For each festival certain types of clothes were distributed and the office was also responsible for the purchase of gold threads and their distribution among the workshops within the system.[21]

As important as the local procurement of textiles was, international trade also played a role in meeting the palace's demand for fabrics and garments. The Fatimids took advantage of Egypt's booming international trade for the purchase of both strategic materials and luxuries and, as the shopping list of the Fatimid vizier Ma'mun al-Bata'ihi (1122-1126) indicates, vast quantities of textiles were

purchased from oversea traders. The palace's demand for textiles was truly insatiable and textiles made in Aleppo, Baghdad, Sicily, Tunisia (Susa and Mahdiyya) and Muslim Spain were bought. These textiles included sprinkled kerchiefs and cloaks, some embroidered with gold threads and some made of silk, raw unbleached silk and raw garments, broad shawls embroidered with gold and sari-like cloths. These types of textiles were massively traded across the Mediterranean and the Fatimids took advantage of existing trading networks to satisfy their demand for fabrics and garments.

The years 1130-1171 saw a steady decline in the political fortunes of the Fatimid state, and Saladin's overthrow of the Fatimids in 1171 inaugurated a new chapter in Egypt's medieval history. Saladin harnessed Egypt's wealth to carry out wars in Syria against Muslim foes and the Franks and spent most of his time in Damascus or on the battlefields of Palestine and Syria. Fatimid court culture with its emphasis on textiles became a matter of the past and the fall in demand for

such textiles at the upper end of the market must have affected the local textile industry.[22] Furthermore, the wars of the Crusades brought about the decline of Tinnis and its tiraz workshops. For a revival in the interest in textiles as the embodiment of court culture and relations in Egypt, one must turn to the rule of the Mamluk sultans such as Baybars (1260-1277) and Mansur Qalawun (1279-1290) who reinstituted courts and a state grandeur reminiscent of the Fatimid period.

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[1] Arabic sources depict the Persian Sasanian society as rigidly structured with each class having its color and attire code. In Islam special colors and clothing (ghiyar) were proscribed for the non-Muslims. For both topics, see Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims, 88-96, 147-8. For clothing and social hierarchies in the Muslim world, see Shoshan, "On Costume and Social History", 35-55; and for clothing as signifying belonging to professional groups, see Kohlberg and Kedar, "A Melkite Physician in Frankish Jerusalem", 118-9. Another important social marker involved the use of riding animals: horses being the privilege of the rulers and high ranking emirs while mules and donkeys were used by the middle and lower classes. See Van Renterghem, "Le sentiment d'appartenance collective", 237. One must not forget, however, that food, beginning with different types of bread and the way food was consumed constituted the most basic and significant marker of social stratification. See Lewicka, Food and Foodways, esp. 351-80.

[2] For flax and cotton in Roman Egypt, see Wild, "Cotton in Roman Egypt", 287-98; Quenouille, "Some Aspects", 229-50.

[3] Frantz-Murphy, "A New Interpretation", 284-5, 288; Mayerson, "The Role of Flax", 201-7.

[4] Fada'il Misr, MS Dublin, f17b.

[5] Udovitch, "Fatimid Cairo", 687; "International Trade", 271. For Latin, Hebrew and Arabic sources referring to the processing of flax, see Gil, "The Flax Trade", 81-3.

[6] Watson, Agricultural Innovation, 40; Nam, Le commerce du cotton, 1.

[7] See " 'In a Robe of Gold' ", 30-49.

[8] See Fada'il Misr, 67, 68.

[9] Maqrizi, Itti'az al-Hunafa', I, 121, 230.

[10] Maqrizi, Itti'az al-Hunafa', I, 122, 225, 230; Halm, "Al-Šamsa", 125-35, including German translation of Ibn Zulaq's relevant accounts.

[11] Ibn Muyassar, Akhbar Misr, 161-2, Bierman, Writing Sings, 74.

[12] Shalem, "Offerings to the Kaba", 76-7.

[13] For the description of the covering of the Kaaba in 1051, see Nasir-i Khusraw, 77-8.

[14] For the textile industries of Tinnis, see Lev "Tinnis: An Industrial Medieval Town", 83-97

[15] Maqrizi, Itti'az al-Hunafa', I, 283; II, 177-8.

[16] Ibn al-Tuwayr, Nuzhat al-Muqlatayn, 128-30.

[17] For the public appearance of the Fatimid caliph al-Zahir, during 1024-1025, and his attire, see Musabbihi, 11, 18, 19-20, 38. For the Exclusive Garment Treasury of the vizier and caliph in 517/1123, see Ibn al-Ma'mun, 44, 58, 94.

[18] Maqrizi, Itti'az al-Hunafa', II, 55.

[19] Actually, the grain obligations of the regime went beyond the needs of the palace household economy. In the 1120s, for example, these also included supplying grain to the costal towns of Egypt (Alexandria, Tinnis and Damietta) and the Palestine-Syrian littoral (Ascalon and Tyre). See Ibn al-Ma'mun, 95.

[20] Maqrizi, Itt'az al-Hunafa', I, 283.

[21] For festivals celebrated during 516-517/1122-1123 and the distribution of tiraz textiles, see Ibn al-Ma'mun, 40, 65, 71, 81. For gold purchases, see Ibn al-Ma'mun, 100.

[22] Lev, "Saladin's Economic Policies", 307-49.