

Silk in the Muslim Sartorial Code: The Making, Collaboration, and Separation of the Ulama and the Political Elites ca. 7th-10th Century

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Abstract: Lavish silk textiles have drawn considerable attention of historians that have been dedicated to studying the Islamic sartorial code. How changes in the style of silk garments were able to illustrate political development in the Islamic empire, however, was a topic that academic scholars have rarely touched upon. This essay is dedicated to examining how the establishment and development of the Sunni Muslim silk sartorial code is as much the making of the Ulama as the making of the political elites.

Keywords: Islam, silk, sartorial code, separation of state and religion

1. Introduction

The time from the 7th to the 10th century witnessed spectacular growth in the religious, political, and artistic aspects of the Islamic empire. As religious and political power came into shape, briefly worked as an entity, they gradually grew into two individual spheres of values and organizations [1]. Aside from the rise of social structures, clashes between ideologies cultivated fascinating artworks: paintings, literature, textiles, fashion... For Islamic history ca. 7th-10th century, scholars tended to study the developments of artistic expressions and governmental apparatus independently. Yet examining how variations in the Islamic silk sartorial code could reflect changes in the relationship between the religious and the political authorities might offer novel insights into the discussion on the separation of state and religion in the Islamic empire.

This essay aims to explore—How and why did the Islamic silk sartorial code vary over time? How did the establishment of the religious and the political class impact these stylistic changes? How could material culture evidence manifest transformations in the relationship between the religious and the political elites? To answers these questions, this essay would examine and compare the role of silk in three different periods: the 7th to the early 9th century, the late 9th to the 10th century, and time after the 10th century.

2. Age of Experimentation: Silk as a Representation of Political Status

For the following section, this essay presents the background of early Islamic society and argues that Muslims' extravagant incorporation of silk in garments could demonstrate the Umayyad's deviation

from the traditional egalitarian doctrines. Further, the lack of a definitive Muslim sartorial style indicated the absence of an official Islamic authority before the early 9th century.

In the early 7th century, Prophet Muhammed gathered different clans into one Muslim community through employing political tactics and preaching Islamic philosophies. After his death in 632 CE, the Islamic empire took shape and started expanding across the Middle East. By the end of the Umayyad caliphate, the Islamic empire almost tripled the size it started with, encroaching on parts of the Byzantine empire and fully conquering the Sassanid empire by 654 CE [2].



Note. ca. 7th century A.D., made of wool and cotton. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/326230>).

Figure 1: Textile Fragment: Walking Ram with a Neckband and Fluttering Ribbons.

Early Islamic society ca. 7th-late 9th century largely imitated the Iranian's lavish way of silk-wearing. Unfortunately, by far there is only a few Islamic material culture evidence (ca. 7th-early 9th century) made from silk that have been successfully preserved. Yet absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence—Islamic society's luxurious use of silk could be inferred from existing non-silk Islamic fragments. Take the piece of textile in figure 1 as an example. Made in the 7th century in Egypt (conquered by the Islamic empire in 641 CE), this piece was made of cotton and wool. An ivory-colored beribboned ram dominated the piece in the center, which was inspired by stylistic depictions on garments from the Sassanian period [3]. Since in early Islamic society "[t]he precious quality of luxurious silks led to the transfer of textile patterns to other media," this piece both proved the pervasiveness of the Iranian style and the existence of garments that included silk between the 7th and the early 9th century [3].

The silk-wearing culture demonstrated how the Umayyad governance deviated from egalitarian traditions. In pre-Islamic times, The Banu Umayya belonged to a nomadic political culture, which had pronounced egalitarian tendencies due to "two egalitarian elements present in pre-Islamic Arab society: monotheism and tribalism." [4] Both characteristics emphasized brotherhood and communitarianism that could promote a sense of equality. Yet fundamentally the Umayyads were not at all egalitarians. Holding high standing in pre-Islamic Arabia, the Banu Umayya represented how pre-Islamic elites gained dominance within an Islamic framework. Muslims later in the Abbasid caliphate condemned the way of the Umayyad elites because they carried out a hierarchical system in parts of their regime and favored other pre-Islamic families with prestigious genealogies. They liked to use silk as a symbol of their prominent social status. The Umayyads focused on the military and the political development of the empire, bringing in the political culture and the institutional landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia [4].



Note. ca. 7th-9th century. Made of silk, linen, and fur. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/327518>).

Figure 2: Kaftan.

How silk helped the Umayyad elites express their political power could be extrapolated from existing non-Islamic silk garments, considering the rarity of early Islamic sartorial evidence. Take the kaftan in figure 2 as an example. Kaftan is the name for a type of silk jacket that possibly originated from central Eurasian nomads and became normative among male Persian aristocrats. The design was later adapted by elites from early Islamic society. Created during the 7th and the 9th century, the piece in figure 2 was an example of one of the kaftan styles, attributing to the Caucasus region [5]. The edges of its front and back were made of samite (a type of luxurious silk), an indicator that it was once used by the nomadic aristocrats [5]. Costumes as such were able to cast a clear divide between the commoners and the political elites, thus contributing to the formation of hierarchies.

Apart from the stratified political culture, Abbasid Muslims later condemned how the Umayyad caliphate lacked a set of Islamic framework that the government could abide by, which resulted in the heterogeneous sartorial culture in the Umayyad caliphate. There was no overarching Islamic authority that could define good Muslim behaviors; in a sartorial context, there was no religious apparatus that could say “no” to any type of garment and render it immoral for Muslims to wear. Therefore, early Islamic society in fact did not have a uniform sartorial code. Susan Yalman from the department of education of the Metropolitan Museum of Art agrees that the Umayyad caliphate featured a mixed style of artistic expression:

The Umayyad period is often considered the formative period in Islamic art. At first, even though Arabic became the official language and Islam the principal religion of the diverse lands unified under Umayyad rule, artists continued to work in their established manner. The main artistic influence came from the late antique classical naturalistic tradition, which had been prevalent on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. This was also supplemented by the more formal modes developed by the Byzantines and Sasanians, a factor that especially affected metalwork, textiles, and the depiction of animal, vegetal, and figural motifs [6].

Early Islamic period was an age of experimentation, during which Muslims kept developing and defining the Islamic sartorial code, the Muslim identity, and the political structure. Artists adapted, merged, and recreated techniques and designs to create a distinctive Islamic style [6]. In a similar way, while where religious power should be invested remained unclear, Muslims continued experimenting with different political theories that could incorporate religious ideologies. Tens of

thousands of Muslim scholars across the Islamic world argued for their religious knowledge and how it should affect political position-making. As it came to the Abbasid caliphate, a group of well-educated Muslims gradually rose to power in the late 9th century, followed by the establishment of the Muslim sartorial code.

3. Tiraz—the Rising Power of the Ulama

As time approached the late 9th century, a form of Islamic sartorial code called tiraz gradually came to surface. Tiraz were usually ordered by rulers from royal workshops and would later be made into robes and presented to courtiers [7]. Tiraz's coming into shape revealed two changes in the Muslim sartorial culture: 1) the establishment of a definitive Islamic style and 2) a unanimous constraint on silk-wearing across the empire. Both adjustments in fact showed ground-up transformations in the political system of the late 9th century Abbasid caliphate—the foundation of the Ulama as the religious authority and how caliphs compromised to their religious standing.

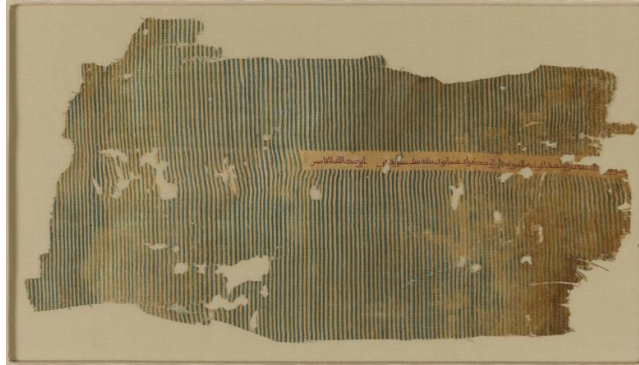
The Ulama emerged in the Umayyad caliphate, when an underlying social change took place: the shift of power from traditional landowners to the merchant families. Due the growth of commercial economy, the merchant class became socially dominant in Muslim cities. With enough wealth in their hands, merchant families spent their money on educating their sons with the Islamic texts. These students of Islam later became experts of the Islamic laws and eventually the Ulama class, who were dedicated to studying, discussing, and teaching Islamic philosophies [8].

Yet the Ulama did not concentrate enough power during the Umayyad caliphate. It was in the late 9th century when the Ulama started gathering pace, especially after the establishment of the *Sahih Al-Bukhari* in 641 CE. As a compilation of Prophet Muhammed's teachings, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* helped established the norms of the Islamic society in a textual base, which clearly defined and provided guidance on all aspects of the Muslim life, including how to dress like a Muslim. With the help of the creation of a normative framework, the intellectual scholars, instead of forcing Muslims to comply with their standards, came into power through gathering credibility amongst Muslims. They gained authority through convincing people of the superiority of their religious knowledge. Gradually, Muslims started to believe the words of the Ulama more than those of the caliphs. There was starting to be a separation between the religious and the political authorities.

The traditional idea that the caliph was a political and religious leader of all Muslims fragmented in the course of the 9th century—the Abbasid caliphs compromised to the religious doctrines of the Ulama in order to hold on to their supremacy over the empire [8]. While the caliphs under the Abbasids tried to claim its religious power due to their genealogical connection with Prophet Muhammed's family, they “did not inherit Muhammed's prophethood, nor were they a source of religious doctrine and law” [9]. On the other hand, although the Ulama's social status was not as high as those of the political elites, as their credibility accumulated through preaching, by the late 9th century the Ulama, whose “consensus (ijjma) on theological and juridical problems . . . [could] [determine] the communal practices of future generations,” held considerable religious authority among Muslim commoners [8]. The Ulama became influential to a point where they could potentially harm the caliphs' sovereignty if the caliphs kept ignoring their status in the Muslim community. To save their faces, and to perform their traditional image as both the political and the religious authority, caliphs had to agree with the interests of the Muslim majority and cooperate with the Ulama: Abbasid caliphs ca. late 9th century started to favor the decisions of the ulama when it came to religious policies [9].

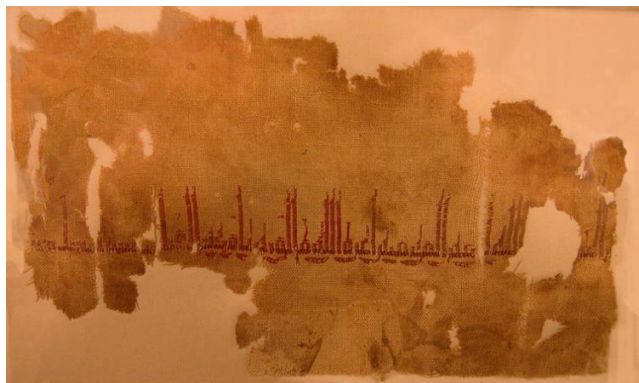
The caliphs' acknowledgment of the Ulama's religious power could also be found in the tiraz-making industry. The Ulama specifically “discussed the permissible amount of silk decoration and the height of tiraz bands, and informed the factories.” [10] It is written in *Sahih Al-Bukhari* that pure silk garments were considered improper for male Muslims [11]. The Ulama's disapproval for pure

silk garments reflected how the religious authority disapproved using silk as an expression of superior political status. Yet silk-wearing was still permissible in certain cases. For example, Prophet Muhammed allowed wearing “ornamented border and the wrap” made of silk and silk fragments within “the width of four fingers” [11]. Silk-wearing was also permitted for women and people with skin diseases [11]. These exceptions, however, were not meant to be symbols of social position.



Note. ca. A.D. 879-80. Made of silk and cotton. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/448603>).

Figure 3: Tiraz Fragment.



Note. ca. 918-23. Made of linen and embroidered in silk. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/448571>).

Figure 4: Tiraz Fragment.

All the policies mentioned above were well-enforced in the production of tiraz ca. late 9th-10th century as shown in sartorial evidence. Figure 3 is a sample of a mulham, a type of textile that mix silk and cotton [12]. Made in Nishapur, the piece was embroidered with the name of the Abbasid caliph al-Mu‘tamid in red silk [12]. In order insert the inscription more smoothly, the narrow band of fabric without the stripes was entirely made of silk [12]. Figure 4 was another common example of tiraz produced in Egyptian royal workshops [13]. Inscribed with the name of Hamid ibn al-'Abbas in silk, the fragment was mostly made of linen [13]. The limited use of silk in tiraz bands ca. late 9th-10th century showed the overarching influence of the Ulama and how royal workshops strictly followed the regulations on constraining the use of silk in tiraz, which further demonstrated how the caliphs respected the Ulama’s religious standing in the Islamic empire.

4. Completing the Circle: Declaration of Power Beyond the Sphere of the Ulama

After the 10th century, the Abbasid caliphate fragmented into local institutions. Caliphs completely lost their control over the religious sphere, which flourished and reinforced the Islamic institutions. Under the background of a prospering religious sector, however, the luxurious silk-wearing culture started coming back into the picture, returning to the pre-Islamic way of expression where elites wore silk to differentiate themselves.



Note. ca. 11th-12th century. Made of silk and samite. Located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450728>).

Figure 5: Textile with a Pattern of Stars and Birds, Originally from a Cap.

For instance, the textile fragment of a cap in figure 5 was made in Iran from the 11th to the 12th century [14]. The silk samite technique was said to be attributed to Seljuk Iran [14]. Silk was lavishly incorporated. Many other sartorial evidence as such could attest to the fact that political elites after the 10th century were wearing silk even though they were perfectly clear with the norms of the Ulama [15] [16]. That, however, does not necessarily indicate a rejection of the Islamic ideals, but the political elites were clearly using silk in a new way that sat in tension with the Ulama.

The appearance of the Muslim style *tiraz* and the transition from extravagant to limited use of silk in garments (ca. 7th-10th century) together reflected how the Ulama, who opposed men wearing silk to perform their social position, gradually rose to power as the religious elites. Yet unlike the previous period when the caliphs compromised to the Ulama's principles to protect their sovereignty, political elites after the 10th century no longer bothered themselves with a feigned religious authority. They used silk to distinguish themselves apart from the Ulama, to legitimize their existence as a fragmented but independent class, and to develop a sartorial culture that used to be part of but now different from that in traditional Islam. The return of the luxurious use of silk within an Islamic framework defined the new political class and symbolized the separation of politics and religion in the Islamic empire.

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