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2008

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Charlotte Jirousek

Cornell Costume and Textile Collection, caj7@cornell.edu

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Rediscovering Camlet: Traditional mohair cloth weaving in Southeastern Turkey

Charlotte Jirousek
caj7@cornell.edu

It is well known that mohair, derived from the Angora goat, was long unique to Turkey, and only successfully reared outside of that region in the 150 years. The term Angora is an archaic spelling of the city now known as Ankara, now Turkey's capital, but in the Ottoman era it was a sleepy town known as a center for weaving and selling the mohair raised in the region.

As the ambassador from Emperor Ferdinand of Austria to Constantinople, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq made a journey into Anatolia to Amasya in 1556, where Sultan Suleyman was encamped, one of the first official visitors to the Ottoman Empire allowed to travel so deep into Anatolia. He encountered herds of the mohair goats, and wrote that: "We saw also the famous goats from whose fleece or hair...is made the well-known cloth, known as camlet or watered cloth. The hair of these goats is very fine and wonderfully glossy, and hangs right down to the ground. The goat-herds do not shear it, but comb it out, and it is hardly less beautiful than silk.... Their food, which is the thin, dry grass of the district, is supposed to contribute to the fineness of their wool; for it is certain that, if they are removed to other pastures, their coats change with the change of food, and their species is scarcely recognizable¹."

The luxury cloth was known as camlet to English merchants and *sof* to Ottomans in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. The fiber was known in Ottoman Turkish as *tiftik*, as it still is in modern Turkish. The term camlet was apparently derived from the erroneous assumption by early traders that this cloth was made from camel hair. The English term mohair apparently is derived from an Arabic term *mukhayyar*, meaning "chosen" or "preferred." Since the mohair goat does not thrive in the southern deserts of the Arab Middle East, it is likely that this term came to English merchants via Ottoman Turkish, which contained many Arabic words; indeed a similar term can be found in a modern Turkish dictionary: *mukayyet*, meaning "registered", or "restricted"—also implying a select status for the object in question. In a further turn of vocabulary, the English term mohair is identified as the source from which the French term *moiré* is derived; the watered finish characteristic of the imported mohair cloth being closely associated with the fiber content initially, although *moiré* finishing was later applied by Europeans to silks as well.²

Camlet was originally 100% mohair, warp faced, and with a distinctive glossy finish that at least initially European weavers did not know how to duplicate. De Busbecq did observe the finishing of this cloth when he passed through Angora, and reported that "It is dyed and given by means of a press its watered appearance, from the 'waves' produced by pouring water upon it. The pieces

¹ de Busbecq, Ogier Ghiselin. *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin De Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople, 1554-1562*. Elzevir edition, 1633 ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 46-47.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 580 and 588.

which have received the marks of very broad 'waves' in continuous lines are considered the best and choicest.³”

Ottoman traveler and chronicler Evliya Celebi in the seventeenth century described how the goats were washed in water containing ashes and lime to make the plucking of the mohair undercoat easier.⁴ After the eighteenth century the use of shears to collect the fleece was reported, perhaps because demand for mohair was exceeding supply.⁵ However, there are also accounts that distinguish between the finer grades of *sof* woven exclusively from the under coat and more ordinary grades of this cloth, presumably woven from the outer hair as well as the underhair. Certainly in modern Turkey there are products made from the outer coat, from the finer undercoat, or from a mixture of both.

European merchants intensively sought access to mohair from an early date. When William Harbourne was sent to negotiate a treaty between the Ottoman court and Queen Elizabeth in 1580, his first shipment following the successful completion of his mission included "three tables of white camlets" (these being wooden containers each containing 103 pieces).⁶ It was a luxury material not only in the west but also in the Ottoman world. Ambassador de Busbecq reported that "The wearing of this cloth is a mark of distinction among the older Turks of high rank. Soleiman himself does not like to be seen wearing any material but this..."⁷

Fortunes were made with camlet. It was so important as a luxury good that the Levant Company merchants themselves filled their homes with it to proclaim their affluence and success in the Levant trade. For example, the former Smyrna chancellor John Freeman acquired mohair hangings for three four-poster beds in his London house, which became known as the mohair room and the camlet room.⁸ It was also used for fashionable dress by both men and women. Initially merchants bought the cloth. However, by the seventeenth century merchants preferred to purchase the yarn and fiber to feed looms at home. However, their weavers apparently did not know how to make the slippery mohair fibers into threads strong enough to serve as warp, and so could not weave 100% mohair cloth. Therefore mohair yarn, more than fiber, was exported. The pure Ottoman camlet cloth continued to be in demand until the late 17th century, when the supply of quality mohair could not meet the demand. Increasingly a cheaper cloth known as grogram was woven in Turkey, with a warp of either blended silk and mohair or all silk; occasionally camel hair was substituted for mohair. Camlets woven in Europe always contained at least some fiber other than mohair. Grogram became the term for a blended yarn or cloth that resembled camlet but contained less precious warps and/or was more coarsely woven.⁹ Grogram yarn

³ Busbecq, op. cit., pp.50-51.

⁴ Leiser, Gary. "Travellers' Accounts of Mohair Production in Ankara from the Fifteenth through the Nineteenth Century." *The Textile Museum Journal* 32 and 34 (1994), pp. 14-15.

⁵ Bischoff, James. *A Comprehensive History of the Woollen and Worsted Manufactures, and the Natural and Commercial History of Sheep, from the Earliest Records to the Present Period*. Vol. 2. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1842, p. 300.

⁶ Skilliter, S.A.. *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578-1582*. London: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 137.

⁷ Busbecq, op cit, p. 50

⁸ Anderson, Sonia P. *An English Consul in Turkey: Paul Rycaut at Smyrna, 1667-1678*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 167.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.164.

exported from Ottoman ports in the 17th c. was generally a blend of silk and mohair. Later these terms described various European and American textiles that might or might not contain any mohair fiber, but usually warp faced and striped.¹⁰

Recent history of trade

Throughout their history, Ottoman law forbade the export of the Angora goat, though apparently merchants did regularly attempt to smuggle them out. These attempts came to nothing because, as reported by seventeenth century merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier among others, goats exported to Europe did not produce the same fine silky fiber.¹¹ They also succumbed to diseases in cooler climates.

Successful rearing of mohair goats only took place once they were exported to regions with climates similar to Anatolia. In 1838 official permission was granted by the Sultan to export goats to South Africa. However, not until 1857 were the first Angora goats bred outside of Anatolia. The pure Ankara stock has since been bred in order to improve their adaptability to local conditions¹².

Because goats have long contributed to the deforestation of Anatolia, it has been government policy since the 1960s to discourage the raising of goats. Turkish mohair production has dropped while other countries, notably South Africa, Australia and the US, have greatly increased production. By the beginning of this century Turkey had only 600,000 head of Angora goats, a number that continues to decline. Recently rapid urbanization and industrialization in Turkey has further reduced the rearing of Angora goats.¹³

It has been generally assumed that the camelot production that once brought the world to Ottoman markets had long since ended, as foreign demand lessened and industrially woven cloth replaced traditional cloth domestically. Only in more rural and isolated locations did people rely at all on locally woven cloth. As it happens, these rural areas of Anatolia, where arid summers are followed by cold winters, are where it is most likely to still find mohair goats. In these places some forms of continuing mohair production are well known.

For example, there are the pieces known as Siirt “blankets.” These are plain woven with coarsely spun mohair on a cotton warp. The weft-faced weave is brushed vigorously on one side while still on the loom, to raise a fuzzy pile. After weaving, the panel is dampened and then the pile is brushed in different directions to form a pattern.

¹⁰ Montgomery, Florence M. . *Textiles in America, 1650-1870 : A Dictionary Based on Original Documents, Prints and Paintings, Commercial Records, American Merchant's Papers, Shopkeepers' Advertisements, and Pattern Books with Original Swatches of Cloth* New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1984 *The Textile Museum Journal* 32 and 34 (1994), pp. 188 and 250.

¹¹ Tavernier, Jean Baptiste. *The Six Voyages of Jean Baptiste Tavernier...Through Turkey into Persia, and the East Indies, Finished in the Year 1670*. London, 1678. *Museum Journal* 32 and 34 (1994)

¹² Westhuysen, J.M., Wentzel, D., Grobler, M.C., 1981. *Angora Goats and Mohair in South Africa*. South African Mohair Grower's Association. Port Elizabeth; Davasligil, Ş. 1966. *Türkiye Tiftiklerinin Kıymetlendirilmesi*. TÜBİTAK Araştırma Projesi: MAG-55.Kısım 1. Ankara.

¹³ Erdogan, Zeynep and Jirousek, Charlotte. “Ankara (Angora) goat hair: The Turkish Mohair Tradition.” C. Jirousek, translation. In *The Fabric of Life: Cultural Transformations in Turkish Society*. Global Publications, State University of New York, Binghamton, 2005

In Tosya in Northern Turkey the weaving of a very dense plain weave mohair cloth is used to make small bags, called *kese*, and also a softer twill cloth for *kusak* or sashes, both part of traditional dress in this region. Knitwear is also still found, usually heavy, soft socks and the winter hats we call *balaklava*, made with the undercoat of the mohair goat.¹⁴ But none of these items corresponds to the camlet or *sof* that was in such demand in the seventeenth century. But one day in 2005 I happened upon a craft fair organized by the Ministry of Culture to showcase relatively unknown crafts. These fairs were a new project of DOSIM, a branch of the Turkish Ministry of Culture. One of the presentations included a group of weavers from Şırnak, a town and province located in Southeastern Turkey on the border with Iraq (Fig. 1). I subsequently met representatives of the same Şırnak government sponsored cooperative at two other fairs in 2007. The cloth they were weaving was 100% mohair, in a warp face plain weave. The finished cloth also has the watered finish we call *moire*, the signature feature of camlet, from the old descriptions. The name given for this cloth was *şal şepik*, however, not the Ottoman term *sof*. But since the old international trade in *sof* is long gone, it is not so surprising that this term is not in local use in this place far removed from the old trade centers. In fact the term *şal şepik* also refers to its primary local use, which is the local men's traditional dress (Fig. 2). This is a Kurdish region, and the informants I have met have all been Kurds, although secondary sources have indicated that this cloth is also being produced by Syriac Christians, who can still be found in this area. Some secondary sources, usually dealers, have also asserted that this cloth is being woven across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan and/or Syria, and not in Turkey.



Figure 1 (left). Mohair cloth loom from Şırnak. The weaver is the Director of the Şırnak Community Development Bureau, which has organized a cooperative to promote the weaving of their traditional mohair cloth. This is a typical Anatolian textile loom, characterized by the wrap-around tensioning system. Photo by author.

Figure 2 (right). The weaver is wearing the traditional men's costume of this region, which is referred to by the same name as the cloth: *şal şepik*. The jacket can be seen most clearly in this photo but the typical loosely fitted trousers are better seen in the previous image. Photo by the author.

¹⁴ Ibid.

However, since the government has a cooperative in Şırnak, and I know of an EU project and a third government project that is attempting to preserve this production, it seems there is production on the Turkish side of the border.

The term *şal* is well known as a term for traditional fine cloth, either very fine wool or mohair. It is usually twill and perhaps in a more elaborate pattern weave, to be used as shawls or sashes. This term is used for the sashes woven in Tosya described earlier. I have looked for the term *şepik* in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab dictionaries without success. Since my Kurdish dictionary is rather limited, it is still most likely that this term is Kurdish.

The cloth is smooth and silky to the touch, not unlike a gaberdine, and would certainly be suitable for outer garments and bed hangings as described above. The structure is warp faced plain weave, and weaving width is 21.5 inches. Whether the quality of this cloth matches the best quality of the old *sof* is questionable, since they shear, not pluck, the fiber from the goats. However, it seems that the process is similar.

The first encounter with these weavers included the preparation of the warp in an outdoor park, where the fair was being held— unfortunately on a day when my camera developed a dead battery. But the process of preparing the warp answered the question that early European mohair weavers could not solve: how do you make slippery mohair fibers hang together under tension in the warp? The answer, was sizing. The warp was spread out full length between two rods, but already threaded into its reed.. This arrangement was supported at waist height by posts at each end. I was told that before winding the warp the handspun yarn was simmered in hot water to set the twist. A special mixture that includes apricot pits and asphodel root (*çirîş*) is boiled to a syrupy state, strained and then painted onto the stretched warp. The reed can be run back and forth to prevent the warps from sticking to each other. The resulting glossy, smooth finish can withstand the friction and stress of the loom, and may also contribute to the glossy surface of the finished cloth, with its moire patterning (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Detail of *şal şepik* cloth, in which the moiré effect can be seen, particularly on the lower left. Two lengths of cloth are overlapped, showing the selvage. The characteristic creases that result from the pressing are also visible. Note that one crease is sharper than the other; the length of fabric is rolled, so that on inner layers the creases are sharper and closer together, while outer layers have softer creases that are further apart.

Photo by author.

I did not see the moire watering and pressing of the fabric, but was assured that it was like the descriptions I had read. I had also seen this done to the warp faced silk (these days rayon) cloth that is known as *alaca*, not far away in Gaziantep.¹⁵ Again in that instance sizing was used on the warp. The woven cloth was finished by sprinkling it with drops of water, then folding it up and placing it under a weight. After 24 hours it was run through a cylinder press. The variable dampness resulted in varying compression, hence the watered effect, in a non-repeating pattern. However, apparently the mohair moire is accomplished by simply pressing the cloth while it is still folded, in the old way. The result is deep crosswise creases in the cloth. This has apparently always been a characteristic of mohair cloth, and was once valued as a sign of its authenticity.¹⁶ Historically, white mohair was preferred, clearly because it would take dye colors clearly.

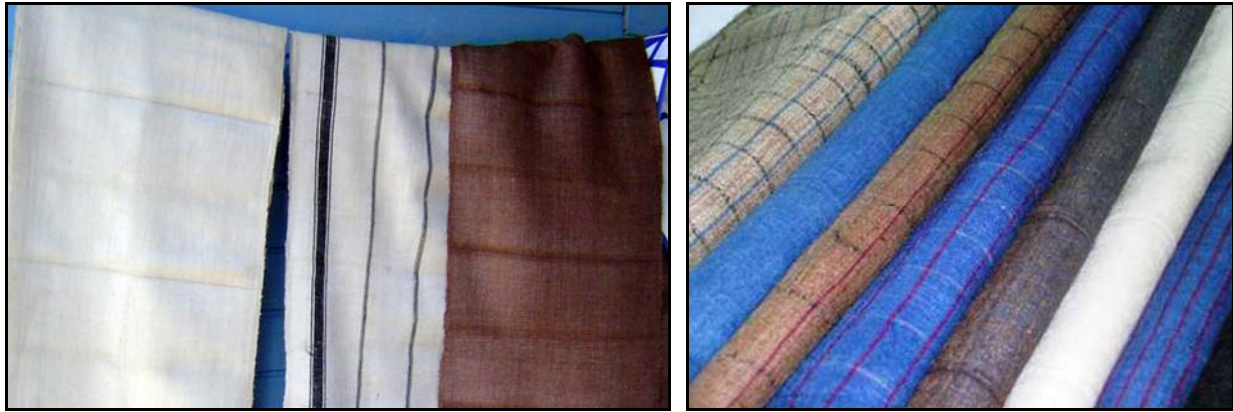


Figure 4 (left). Lengths of undyed şal şepik mohair cloth in natural white and brown. The yardage in the center has dyed black stripes that resemble the stripe sequence seen in some loose Arab coats; there is a substantial Arab speaking population in this region, as well as Kurds and Turks. Photo by author.

Figure 5 (right). Folded lengths of şal şepik mohair cloth. The warp direction runs from lower left to upper right. Here an assortment of pure white, natural brown, and blended brown and white (top left) can be seen, in which, unlike the previous examples, some of the yarns have been dyed previous to weaving in order to create stripes and checks. Striped and checked weaves were very common in traditional Ottoman era dress of all classes, but there is little mention of stripes in connection with the European camlet trade. Photo by author.

However, there are also brown mohair goats, and natural brown is woven into this cloth (Fig. 4). Dyeing is done after weaving, and that was also the case in the past, according to the historical sources. Stripes seem to be used widely in this cloth, as well as checks. The historical accounts make no mention of this, but it is interesting to note opportunities for *şal şepik*. However, there is little expert advice regarding the later European and American “camlets”, frequently done in warp-faced stripes. Also warp stripes are a notable feature of traditional dress in Turkey (Fig. 5).

The production of *şal şepik* is clearly very limited, and in need of support and markets for this cloth. Several organizations have been attempting to provide marketing design of marketable products. If there is to be success in finding markets for this cloth, there are some serious design difficulties to be faced from the point of view of modern designers and their customers. The first of these is the creases. Although they may have once been accepted as a prestigious feature of

¹⁵ Jirousek, Charlotte. “The Gaziantep Cloth Trade: a Study of a Putting-out System of Cloth Production in Southeastern Turkey.” *Proceedings*, Seventh Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, September 2000.

¹⁶ Sophie Desrosieres, personal communication, Sept. 27, 2008.

this once fashionable luxury textile, to modern designers they are an impediment. It should be possible to have the cloth pressed using a mangle, or cylinder press, providing access to one can be arranged. They can be found a few hours away in Gaziantep. On my own I attempted to remove creases from the fabric samples I have. It is possible to get the creases to flatten out enough so that they do not interfere with the drape of the fabric. However, getting the creases out even minimally had some effect on the moire finish. I first steamed and pressed the cloth, which had a minimal effect on the creases and the moire finish. I then washed a sample in warm, mildly soapy water which did a better job of reducing the creases, but removed much of the moire patterning. Therefore if designing with the creases is not satisfactory, then changing the method of pressing would be the best option.

In talking with people involved with efforts to market this cloth, it was clear that they could use help from someone with apparel design experience. The two main limitations I saw in the designs they had attempted were fabric width and an unwillingness to cut into the fabric. The garments, jackets or vests they had made were boxy and completely unfitted, with only straight seams. The creases, which are about 8 - 11" apart, tend to make the shape of these boxy garments even stiffer.

The fabric width does have limitations, but with the help of a graduate student, we developed some workable designs, mainly for coats and jackets. That could be done within the limitation of 21.5" loom width and do have curved seams and arm seams. All my contacts said that it was impossible to cut this fabric because it would ravel; however, they had no experience with sergers, which solved that problem. To emphasize the uniqueness of the traditional cloth, we also recommended use of another traditional fabric as a lining, the colorfully striped *kutnu* cloth woven in Gaziantep

It may also be possible to weave this cloth wider and still get a warp face weave, although the people from Şırnak vehemently denied that it would work; apparently someone did try without success. But this is an experiment I will try once I get back to Turkey and can get yarn.

It was my intention to go back to Turkey during summer 2008, before this symposium, to confer with organizations attempting to support mohair weaving in Şırnak, and show them my samples and designs. I also planned to go to Şırnak to document the aspects of the production I have not yet been able to observe. However, last winter the Turkish army moved into that region to conduct raids into Iraqi Kurdistan to remove PKK guerilla camps, from which the PKK had been conducting attacks and bombings in SE Turkey. The Turkish army completed the initial mission and withdrew back into Turkey, but continues to be in place in this area. Travel to this region currently requires military escort and permission, and so was not an option this year. I do intend to follow up this coming summer if possible.

Whether the production can be supported economically remains a serious question, in a region where both violence and rapid industrial development is occurring. But at the least I hope to document what remains of a textile production that was once so important in world trade.