

Title: *Kamka Silk Textiles in the Fifteenth-Century Black Sea Region*

Date: 15th century

Geography: Eastern Europe, Near East, Middle East

Culture: Various

Medium: Silk

Dimensions: Image 1: dimensions not known; Image 2: L. 44 in. (111.8 cm), W. 26 3/4 in. (67.9 cm); Image 3: H. 56 1/2 in. (143.5 cm), W. 23 1/4 in. (59.1 cm), Mount: H. 47 1/8 in (119.7 cm)

Current Institutions: Image 1: Formerly at Paris, Galerie Benli Arts de L'Islam; Images 2-3: New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Inventory numbers: Image 1: no inventory number known; Image 2: 52.20.19; Image 3: 17.22.6a–d.



Fig. 1. Late 15th-century luxurious Ottoman *kamka* from Bursa featuring intricate Oriental motifs and interwoven metal threads. The image, taken from the study by Frédéric Hitzel (see bibliography), is reproduced in this publication with the generous authorization of the journal *Rives méditerranéennes*, to which we extend our sincere gratitude for permitting its use.

alt="A fragment of a textile featuring alternating sections of red and blue, adorned with interwoven metal threads and Oriental motifs"

Keywords: silk textiles, *kamka*, Genoese Caffa, fabrics, Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, Persia

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The extensive commercial networks established between communities of Italian merchants and mercantile cities within the Mongol Empire during the second half of the thirteenth century significantly increased the circulation of Asian goods in the Black Sea basin. For over two hundred years, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, during which the basin served as a pivotal point of convergence in international trade, silk was one of the principal goods that reached Europe by

travelling along this route. One particular type of silk textile came to be known around the Black Sea under several names, which were in fact the phonetic and graphic variants of the same word whose eastern origins have not yet been fully clarified (a possible Chinese etymology is mentioned in most dictionaries). An examination of records in several of the languages most frequently employed along the littoral and in the hinterland of the Sea reveals that, this silk was referred to as: *camocatus* (in Latin), *camocato* (in Italian), *camhă* (in Romanian), *kamcha* (in Polish), *kamka* (in Ukrainian and Russian), *kamuha* (in Bulgarian), *καμουχάς* (in Greek), and *kemha* (in Ottoman-Turkish). These different versions of the same word point to the wide dissemination within the region of this highly valued commercial product within the mercantile, noble, and princely milieux of the time. Beyond functioning as a mere transit area for silk goods heading to Western markets, the trade routes traversing Eastern and South-Eastern Europe also allowed local elites to procure silks.

One of the main reasons for the popularity enjoyed by this type of textile in the affluent circles of temperate regions of Europe resides in the fact that *kamka*, as we shall name it henceforth, was one of the thickest and heaviest types of silk produced in the period. From a technical standpoint, it was a multiweave textile that was generally produced as a compound weave incorporating two different woven structures. Although some of the most elaborate pieces displayed colorful patterns that were often embellished with metal-wrapped threads, monochrome examples were the most widespread. Despite their lack of detail, surviving written descriptions provide an overall picture of the most prevalent colors and patterns, and also allow a better grasp of the ways in which such fabrics were commonly utilized. In the vicinity of the Black Sea, the most common colors in which *kamka* was sold seem to have been bright green, pale green, brilliant blue, light blue, red, purple, and white. The patterns could include naturalistic (e.g. floral motifs) and geometric (e.g. stripes) designs, as well as incorporate gold thread. These silk textiles were highly appreciated as diplomatic gifts, but were also used to endow churches and monasteries, as well as to produce lavish hangings and altar cloths, book covers, ceremonial garments for both clergy and laity, various other sartorial accessories, and even soft furnishings such as bed quilts and pillows.



Fig. 2. Late medieval fragment of an Ottoman *kamka* ceremonial garment produced in Bursa. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal License. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

alt="A fragment of a textile with a red background, featuring large, stylized floral motifs in gold, accented with blue and red details, interwoven with metal threads."

Identification of the production centers that created these silk cloths during the fifteenth century remains inconclusive. According to the traditional view of scholarship, Tamerlane's bloody wars (1370–1405) put an end to commercial ties between Central Asia and the Black Sea region. As a consequence, it has been generally inferred that the silks sold on the markets of Eastern Europe might have come almost entirely from the Ottoman Empire, either produced in

Bursa and Constantinople or brought along the southern branch of the Silk Route to Syria and Egypt and then re-exported northwards. Be that as it may, a closer examination of some fifteenth-century Russian sources and of the recently published Genoese registers of the financial administration of Caffa offers us more comprehensive insight into the commercial networks through which these goods passed. The fact that several types of *kamka* repeatedly appear in the registers of the Massaria of Genoese Caffa under names (such as *camocatus besdobes* and *camocatus saranchi*, and probably *camocatus sepai*, *camocatus cogori* and *camocatus giangari* as well) indicating origins from Central Asia convincingly suggests that the trade links established between the historical region of Turkestan and the Black Sea basin during the fifteenth century should be reconsidered. By the same token, Persia can be shown to have supplied Ottoman markets not only with raw silk, but also with finished silk products, and some of these silks were afterwards re-exported to the northern regions of the Pontic basin. A major production center that played a significant part in providing silk fabrics to the Black Sea commerce was, needless to say, the Ottoman city of Bursa. Therefore, the principal sources of supply for this type of silk cloth appear to have been the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Central Asia.



Fig. 3. Late medieval fragment of Turkish kamka silk showcasing the use of metal-wrapped thread in its design. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal License. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

alt="A textile fragment featuring a central floral motif in red, surrounded by intricate gold and green leaves and small blue flowers, interwoven with metal threads."

Biography

Andrei Mirea is a PhD student at the “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest. His main fields of interest are medieval Moldavia (with an emphasis on social history, economic history, and taxation), the history of the medieval Black Sea, and more generally the Romanian Middle Ages.

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