



ATTABI

‘**ATTĀBĪ**, one of many names for cloth used by medieval Islamic writers. The specific qualities of ‘*attābī* are not entirely clear from these references, although a general picture of the textile can be deduced from the few concrete phrases occurring in the texts. The word has passed into a number of European languages as a name for cloth, sometimes general and sometimes quite precise: *attabi* in Spanish; *tabis* in French; *tabì* in Italian; *tabyn* in Dutch; and *tabby* in English. In 17th and 18th century England, *tabby*, or *taby*, was understood as being a substantial silk fabric with a watered, moiré-like finish. Dr. Johnson’s *Dictionary* of 1755 not only defines *tabby* as “a kind of waved silk” but notes that cats with brindled markings on the fur are, by extension, tabby-cats.

In contemporary textile terminology, *tabby* is a description of a cloth structure formed by the simplest of weaving techniques, one warp thread passed alternately over and under one weft thread in succession. The usual synonym for *tabby* is now *plain-weave*, although when and where this usage first occurred has not been firmly established. Irene Emery has pointed to a glossary definition of *tabby*, in Luther Hooper’s *Handloom Weaving* of 1910, as “plain weaving,” that appears to be among the earliest recorded uses of the term. She further notes that in modern textile terminology, *tabby* is usually accompanied by at least a parenthetical reference to *plain weave* while the opposite is not generally the case.

To medieval Islamic writers, however, ‘*attābī* was anything but plain. For Ebn Jobayr, in the late twelfth-century account of his pilgrimage to Mecca, the



reḥla, *ʿattābī* was woven of silk or cotton and in various colors. For Ḡarnāṭī, writing in the *Toḥfat al-albāb*, slightly earlier in the same century, *ʿattābī* was “. . . striped cloth (*mokaṭṭaṭ*) with black and white in regular stripes (*koṭūṭ*) . . . of ibrism-silk . . .” Abu’l-Qāsem , at the beginning of the fourteenth century, speaks of a kind of *ʿattābī*, *ʿattābī dabīkī*, as having borders embroidered with gold. That stripes were typical of some kinds of *ʿattābī* is shown by a reference to the quality of *ʿattābī* lying in the fineness of the threads in the stripe. Dozy has described *ʿattābī* as being a sort of heavy silk taffeta with a watered effect. Le Strange provides the fullest explanation for the name: A district of Baghdad just west of the Round City was named after *ʿAttāb*, a companion of the prophet and governor of Mecca, because his descendants, *ʿAttābīyīn*, later settled there. Fabrics woven in *ʿAttābiya* naturally came to be called *ʿattābī*, especially striped and watered ones. Serjeant’s collected references suggest that *ʿattābī* was also produced all over Iran, in Isfahan, Kermān, Nīšāpūr, Hamadān, and Tabrīz; as well as in Antioch and possibly Damascus; and also in great quantities in Almeria. Finally, *ʿattābī* figured in the extensive cloth-trade of medieval Islam, for Ebn Esfandīār, on the basis of a tenth-century reference, says that priceless *ʿattābī* was exported to Ṭabarestān, whence it was then traded “. . . to the most distant countries in the earth.”

See also Textiles.

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