



KORK

KORK, soft wool, also called Kermān wool. Goat's wool from Kermān has long been known as a valuable product for the manufacture of fine clothing and felt hats. *Kork* is produced by Rayen goats, a local variety of the Central Asian mountain species (*capra ibex*) whose fleece was used to make the original Kashmir shawls. The staff consists of the down undercoat of the goats, which has developed as a natural adaptation to the cold winters in the mountains. It has to be shorn in the early spring, for with the approach of summer the goats shed this protective layer (Sattāri, pp. 198-205; Irwin, pp. 4-5; English, p. 131; Schaller). The colors range from various shades of brown and red to white, black and gray. Considered the best variety by foreigners in the 17th century, red was also the most expensive.

The spread of the goats that produce *kork* seems somewhat vague. In the 18th century the area of production is said to have stretched from Rāvar, 70 miles northwest of Kermān, to Sirjān, at an equal distance southwest of the city (Dillon, p. 237). The Dutch and English East India Companies distinguished between real Kermān wool and so-called "Persian" wool, which may have been sheep wool. As the Kermān area may not have produced enough to satisfy the demand, they occasionally went as far as Herat to procure goat's wool; English East India Company sources speak of wool coming from the "Tartars country" and from Yazd, but conceded that the *kork* from Kermān was the best (India Office, E/3/88, 10 Mar. 1691). Lumsden mentions "*kurak*" as being "procured from goats in the Herat, Gazak, and Hazāra districts." (Lumsden, p. 99).



Europeans were long confused about the true nature of *kork*. Tavernier, who was shown a sample in Isfahan in 1647, is the first foreigner to describe *kork* as sheep wool (I, pp. 95-96), and he was followed by John Bell (I, p. 126), and Jonas Hanway (I, p. 71). The Dutch merchants, who got their first information about *kork* from Tavernier, followed him in this error, too, until they themselves entered the trade in Kermān (*Algemeen Rijksarchief*, The Hague, Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie [=VOC] 1226, 16 Sept. 1658, fol. 801v.). Chardin (IV, p. 154) confused *kork* with camel wool, a misunderstanding that lingered until the late 19th century (Orsolle, p. 232).

In the Safavid period *kork* was used in the 17th century to manufacture shawls, and “pieces of serge” (pictures in Scarce), while the white variety was used for the “girdles and veils” of high-ranking mullahs (Tavernier, [Paris], I, pp. 95-96; see also Courbé, p 143; von Poser, unpag.; and Kaempfer, V, p 103). Raphael du Mans’ reference (pp. 248-49) to the use of *kork* in the form of fine felts in decorating the home of courtiers, is confirmed in a VOC mention of Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn using it to furnish his new palace in 1710 (VOC 1798, 1 Aug. 1710, fol. 6; VOC 1812, 10 Oct. 1710, fol. 137. The finest rugs were also made with *kork*; and in the 19th century the material was said to be “used for making warm underclothing for people of rank” (von Poser, unpag.; Lumsden, p. 100). In Europe, finally, *kork* in the 17th century came to be used as an alternative to expensive beaver wool for the expanding felt hat industry.

Trade and Production in the 17th and 18th centuries

Little is known about the trade in *kork* prior to the arrival of the Dutch and English East India Companies (VOC and EIC) on the Persian Gulf coast in the 17th century. The earliest reference to Kermān as a center of goat wool production dates from the Buyid period (Bāstāni-pārizi, p. 202). *Kork* was also exported long before the Safavid period (Haussig, pp. 96, 107, 140, 242). Of the 17th-century European travelers who visited Persia before the maritime Companies became involved in the trade only Courbé, 1598-99, von Poser, 1621, and della Valle, 1618-21, mention wool being used in clothing. *Kork* occasionally figures in the contemporary Persian sources (cf. Šāmlu, p. 72, talking about felts made from Kermān *kūr*k), and it is also mentioned as a product in the 16th and early 17th century commerce with Venice (Berchet, p. 66), but none of these sources offers substantial information.

The Dutch entered the Kermān wool market in 1657/58, when one Gerardt

Tersteegh was sent to Kermān and bought the first sample of 1,000 *man-e Tabriz* (2900kg). The English learned about *kork* in 1659 and joined the Dutch in 1660 in purchasing it. This company involvement inaugurated a lively trade from Kermān via Bandar ‘Abbās to Batavia, Surat, and Bombay, and eventually to London, and Amsterdam, which continued until the Companies abandoned Bandar ‘Abbās in the 1750s and 1760s. Meanwhile *kork*, which became the most important of Persia’s export products in the late 17th century, was also carried to the Levant entrepôts, Aleppo and Izmir, with 500 bales going to the later port (*Archives Affaires Etrangères*, Paris, Perse, 5, fol. 22; Algemeen Rijksarchief, Aleppo, 162/ii, 1699-1700; Savary, p. 721).

The *kork* trade was done through local (Bāniān) merchants who would receive credit from the Company brokers—Bāniāns or Armenians themselves—to buy the wool with advance payments in the villages surrounding Kermān. After the cleaning of the wool by Zoroastrian cleaners, the wool would be packed in bales of 90 lbs. and transported to the coast (for further details, see Matthee, pp. 353-57).

It is unclear to what extent the fierce competition caused by the western involvement in *kork* stimulated the expansion of the indigenous weaving industry. The overall production of *kork* greatly increased, however, and export reached the zenith in the first quarter of the 18th century (for export figures until 1730, see Matthee, pp. 367-69; for those between 1732 and 1763, see Floor, p. 381). The upheavals that struck Kermān from 1716 onwards disrupted the trade numerous times, but its resilience was never broken and the trade resumed rather quickly even after the Afghan invasion in the 1720s. Indeed, the EIC procured its largest quantity of *kork* in 1733.

As a result of the continuing unrest and insecurity under Nader Shah prices reached astronomical heights in the 1730s and 40s. To curb the price spirals the two European companies in the 1730s made several agreements not to outbid each other. Yet prices continued to be high as impoverishment and invasion decimated the number of goats. Nader Shah’s order for large quantities of *kork* for the manufacture of military coats and caps (India Office G/29/16/2460, 1740, and VOC 2477 and 2511, 1740), and the turmoil following his death equally contributed to scarcity and extremely high prices (for a price chart in this period, see Ricks, p. 238).



19th and 20th Centuries

During and following the rule of Karim Khan Zand the trend of a growing shawl-making industry, noticeable already in the 1750s, seems to have continued. In the 1780s Ja'far Khan, governor of Kermān, banned the export of *kork*, presumably with the intent of protecting his own nascent industry, as a result of which it became more difficult to procure for export purposes (Lorimer, I/2, p. 1855; Greaves, p. 369). Pottinger estimated that by the early 19th century, one-third of the population of Kermān, i.e. ca. 10,000 people, were employed in the textile manufacture (Pottinger, p. 225). Abbot, in the mid 19th century, found ca. 2,400 looms that produced shawls, and estimated the annual production at 40,000 to 45,000 pieces (Amanat, p. 151). In Yazd, too, *kork* was sold and shawls were produced (Amanat, p. 151; Truilhier, p. 97). Mašhad produced shawls as well, from wool that most likely came from Kermān (Schneider, p. 340).

This is also the period when the sources provide more detailed information on the production process. Shawls measured 10 feet 6 inches by 3 feet 6 inches in width, and were woven in specially built rooms that were low, dark and without ventilation, each containing four to ten looms. Shawls commanded prices from 30 to 1,000 *qerāns* each. *Kork* was also used for the wool of fine carpets (Preece, p. 30). The extent to which textile weaving in Kermān permeated popular culture in the 19th century can be gauged from the abundance of popular poems with textile terms in Qāsemi Kermāni.

Kork was exported to many places in Asia and Europe in the 19th century. One was India, despite the fact that in 1800 the government of Bombay declared that it was no longer interested in wool from Kermān (Jaubert, pp. 288-89; Pelly, p. 253; Kelly, p. 56). A lively trade in shawls existed with the Ottoman Empire as well (Dupré, I, p. 433; Preece, p. 30). The Ottomans lands also received *kork* via Baghdad, but this may have included goat's wool garnered in Kordestan (Olivier, V, p. 320; and VI, p. 269; Lyclama van Nijeholt, III, p. 199; Hagemester, p. 54). *Kork* was taken to Russia via Tabriz (Ouseley, III, pp. 293-94; Amanat, pp. 146-47; Kukanova, p. 216; Schneider, p. 340), as well as to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe (Khanikoff, p. 224; Samsonadze, p. 112).

The Qajar government, strapped for money and concerned about the outflow of precious metal and the decline of Persia's domestic industry, frequently took measures involving Kermān's *kork* manufacturing. Fath 'Ali Shah confined the use of cashmere shawls to people of high rank so as to improve

the manufactures of Kermān (Brydges, pp. 101-02). Moḥammad Shah in 1835 ordered his courtiers to substitute the use of Kerman shawls for European manufacturers (Lambton, p. 132; Natiq, p. 214). Mirzā Taqī Khan Amir Kabir, more directly tried to encourage the development of a woolen industry in Kermān (Ādamiyat, p. 220). After his death the improvements in production techniques and quality appear to have been lost, however, and, instead of selling shawls, Kermān in the 1860s was said to sell much raw wool to Kashmir. Kermān's governor, the Vakil al-Molk, assumed the monopoly of this trade (Polak, II, p. 168; Major John, p. 100). In 1882 Nāṣer al-Din Shah ordered that all robes of honor (*kal'at*) should henceforth be manufactured from Kermān shawls (E'temād al-Saltana, III, p. 2045). Yet government intervention was unable to protect the shawl factories of Kermān against foreign competition, and by 1879 they had gone down from 300 to 100 (Houtum-Schindler, p. 331; Busse, p. 305).

In the 20th century the manufacture of shawls further dwindled. At the turn of the century the industry in Kermān still knew an annual output of ca. 60,000 (*Historical Gazetteer of Iran*, IV, p. 257). Yet the lack of demand among European traders and the parallel availability of cheaply imported substitutes caused many manufacturers to switch from shawls to carpets. Reza Shah's discouragement of traditional Persian dress further contributed to the demise of the shawl industry (Stober, p. 222). Between 1960 and 1970, the production fell from 7,000-8,000 to some 3,000 to 4,000 tons (Digard, "boz," *EIr.* IV, pp. 421-23). According to Badi'i the Kermān area still produces 1,500 to 2,000 tons of *kork* every year (Badi'i, III, p. 261).

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