

Weaving And Silk Trade in Safavid Iran: Economic Power and A Strategic Tool in International Relations

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How to cite this article: Aykut Kar (2024) Weaving And Silk Trade in Safavid Iran: Economic Power and A Strategic Tool in International Relations, 44(3),418-424.

ABSTRACT

The Safavid Empire's urbanization process led to significant progressions in the textile industry, particularly silk production, and trade emerged as vital elements of the Iranian economy. State-sponsored weaving shops were mostly established in major towns such as Isfahan, Shirvan, and Kashan that wove silk fabrics, producing the most valuable inputs for Iran's economic and political relationships with both Eastern and Western powers. These weaving activities began around Shah Ismail's reign before they fell into a momentary decline on account of an impending threat from Ottomans, but they were later reignited by Shah Abbas I. By monopolizing the silk trade and integrating it into a state-controlled system, he turned into Silk Iran's most important export item, also promoting its production through making Gilan and Mazandaran royal provinces. This enabled firm trading ties with the West while making Iranian silk known globally. In the later periods of the Safavid Empire as well, during the time of Shah Sultan Hussein, production and trade of silk continued to be significant. However, there was a gradual decrease in demand for Iranian silk from bordering nations. Nevertheless, silk trade and textile production in Safavid Iran have left an indelible mark that has made them memorable in the annals of world textile commerce.

Keywords: Safavid Empire, Shah Abbas I, Silk Trade, Textile Industry, State Monopoly, Economic Sustainability, International Diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Safavid Empire was established, weaving has always been one of the basic pillars of the Iranian economy. These activities were started by Shah Ismail and achieved their peak during the reign of Shah Abbas I, becoming key elements in the economic and political strategies of the Safavid state. By placing silk trade under state monopoly, not only did Shah Abbas strengthen the economic infrastructure of his country, but he also used this important commodity as a powerful instrument in international diplomacy. This resulted in the enrichment of the Safavid treasury as well as increasing Iran's status within the worldwide textile industry through strict regulation on production and trade of silk by state.

This article aims at analyzing how textile industry developed within the Safavid Empire, including economic dimensions and political implications of silk trade during this era, especially policies that were adopted by the Safavid administration at that time. It will also look at how this model helped it remain sustainable over the long run while enhancing its presence in the global arena. Therefore, focus shall be made on rich weaving heritage from the Safavid period, which shall not only be seen in terms of Iranian cultural and economic history but also global commerce and diplomacy. This research is aimed at clarifying the way in which an economy founded on weaving and silk trading supported the power of the Safavid state and found its way into the international political context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As urbanization increased in the Safavid Empire, artisans turned to weaving and played a significant role in fabric production and trade. During this period, weaving was regarded as a key industry in Iran, with fabric weavers being among the most skilled artisans.¹ Silk fabrics were particularly notable during this time. The textiles produced during the Safavid era were considered valuable due to their variety in patterns, colors, decorative techniques, and rarity; they earned both domestic and international recognition as prized goods. Weaving centers were established under the patronage of the Safavid court and strongly supported by the Shahs, leading to a significant expansion of this industry. Major cities such as Isfahan, Shirvan, Karabakh, Gilan, Kashan, Meshed, and Esterabad were centers where silk fabrics were woven.² This strategic commodity, silk, played a crucial role in the economic and political relations Iran conducted with Eastern and Western states.

From the early years of the Safavid Empire, particularly during the reign of Shah Ismail, workshops were established in Gilan and Mazandaran for the production of various silk and cotton fabrics³ and sericulture was actively encouraged.⁴ However, Shah Ismail's activities, including the establishment of a state distinct from Sunni Islam, negatively impacted relations with the Ottoman sultan, leading to an economic embargo that halted exports.⁵ This tension escalated when Yavuz Sultan Selim ascended to the throne, deciding in 1512 to launch a campaign against Iran,⁶ and taking stringent measures to prevent the trade of Iranian silk within Anatolia. According to records from Bursa, before the Battle of Chaldiran, Sultan Selim had already traveled to Bursa, where he captured merchants involved in the silk trade with Iran and confiscated their silk goods.⁷

After the Safavids' defeat in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Shah Ismail sought assistance from Western countries. However, in 1517, when the Ottomans conquered Egypt, they disrupted the connections among Christian nations in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Far East, creating a significant obstacle. This new development severely impacted Safavid Iran's ability to export silk, affecting both its economy and foreign policy. Consequently, there was a noticeable increase in diplomatic efforts by Iranian leaders to engage with European counterparts.⁸

As a result of these developments, Shah Tahmasp moved the capital to Qazvin in 1558,⁹ and silk was accepted as Iran's most important commercial product.¹⁰ This situation attracted the attention of the English envoy and merchant Anthony Jenkinson,¹¹ who reported that the Shah tightly controlled the silk trade and maintained that it was primarily conducted in exchange for silver.¹²

¹ Foran, J. (1383). *Direnışin Kırılğanlığı: İran Sosyal Devrimi Tarihi, 1500'den Bugüne*. Trans.: Ahmed Tadin. Tahran: Resa, pp. 61-62.

² Savory, R. (1385). *Safevi Dönemi İran*. Trans.: Kambiz Azizi. Tahran: Merkez Press. p. 137.

³ Ferrier, R. W. (1374). *İran Sanatları*. Trans.: Parviz Merzban. Tahran: Ferzan Rouz, p. 159

⁴ Baker, P. (1385). *İslam Tekstilleri*. Trans.: Mahnaz Şayestefar. Tahran: İslam Sanatı Araştırma Enstitüsü. p. 118.

⁵ Baker, ibid. p. 118.

⁶ Emecen. F. (2011). *İmparatorluk Çağının Osmanlı Sultanları I, S. Bayezid II, Yavuz, Kanuni*. pp. 66-67; Dağlar, M. (2017). *Şah Tahmasb'ın dini siyaseti (1524-1576)*. Doktora tezi. Sakarya: Sakarya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, p. 17.

⁷ **Shabani, R and Rashid, K. Z.** (1389). "Safevi Dönemi Tebriz'in İran ve Anadolu İpek Ticareti Üzerindeki Geçiş Rolü." *Maskuye Bilimsel Yarıyılık Dergisi*, 5 (14), p. 114.

⁸ Cutillas, J. 2016. Şah I. Abbas'ın bir Akdeniz politikası var mıydı? İ. Külbilge, Trans: Cihannüma, Tarih ve Coğrafya Araştırmaları Dergisi, 22, p. 194

⁹ Baharlu, İlgar. (2022). Safeviler'de dönüşüm sembolü olarak başkentler: Kazvin ve İsfahan. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 21(3), 1725.

¹⁰ Ferrier, 1374, p. 159.

¹¹ Jenkinson, A. (1886). *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson*, eds.

E. Delmar M. and Coote, C. H. 2 vol., London . pp. 224-225.

¹² Felsefi, N. "Ticaret-i Ebrîşem-i İran dar Zaman-ı Şah Abbas Evvel", *Mecelle-i Vahid*, sayı: 12, no:1, p. 13.

Shah Abbas I significantly advanced Iran's textile industry, establishing silk as the country's most valuable commodity and marking a turning point in history.¹³ He forged friendly relations with merchants and traders from the West and India, utilizing these commercial ties to strengthen economic and political connections.¹⁴ Additionally, along the Caspian coast, he expanded sericulture, creating employment opportunities for women and children. Furthermore, besides Isfahan, special workshops for weaving silk fabrics were established in cities such as Kashan, Yazd, and Tabriz.¹⁵

By implementing various strategic measures to control silk production, Shah Abbas was able to purchase silk at favorable prices and monopolize the entire silk trade within the country. The revenues generated from this trade were collected through Shah Abbas's appointed officials. Shah Abbas aimed to maintain his power against the Ottoman Empire by forging alliances with European kingdoms. Through these economic policies, he significantly strengthened the state treasury.¹⁶

In a short period, Isfahan became a hub for merchants, travelers, political envoys, and foreign missionaries.¹⁷ The Iranian textile industry in Isfahan and its surrounding areas gained worldwide recognition, particularly for the production of *zeri* (Zerbaft), a fabric woven with silk and gold threads.¹⁸ For diplomatic gifts sent to Europe, Shah Abbas preferred these exquisite fabrics.¹⁹

During Shah Abbas's reign, Don Garcia de Silva Figueroa, the envoy of King Philip III of Spain who traveled to Iran, described the gifts presented to him and his entourage by the Shah. These included two pieces of gold-threaded fabric depicting scenes of Iranian life, several pieces of gold and silver-embroidered cloth, and velvet fabrics.²⁰ Until the early 17th century, Iranian silk was transported overland to the Mediterranean and Aleppo, where it was primarily sold to Italian merchants. However, alternative trade routes to overland trade emerged at the beginning of the century. During this period, silk began to be shipped from the southern port of Bandar Abbas, traveling by sea via the Persian Gulf and the Cape of Good Hope, and by the end of the century, it was also being transported to Europe via Russia.²¹

Shah Abbas aimed to divert the Silk Road away from Ottoman territories to the Indian Ocean, thereby bypassing Ottoman ports.²² During the negotiations for the Treaty of Nasuh Pasha in 1612, Ottoman delegates insisted on an annual demand of 32 tons of silk from Iran, as revenue from the silk trade was of vital importance to the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans were deeply concerned about Europeans establishing direct connections with Iran and transporting Iranian silk through routes that bypassed Ottoman territories.²³

Shah Abbas I quickly recognized that a country cannot maintain a strong military without a robust economy to support it. With this understanding, he prioritized strengthening the nation's economy, and one of the most significant steps he took in this direction was to monopolize the silk trade.²⁴ Under strict state supervision and

¹³ Savory, 1385, p. 138

¹⁴ Canby, S. (1386). *İran Sanatının Altın Çağı* (عصر طلایی هنر ایران). Trans.: Hasan Afshar. Tahran: Merkez Press. p. 95.

¹⁵ Ballen, L. L. (1375). *Şah Abbas I'in Yaşamı* (زندگانی شاه عباس اول). Trans.: Veli Şadan. Tahran: Esatir. p. 1963.

¹⁶ Dehmeshki, C. and Janzadeh, A. (1366). *İsfahan'da Sanatın Parlaklığı*. Tahran: Janzadeh. pp. 19-20

¹⁷ Muhammed Hasan, Z. (1342). *İslam'dan Sonra İran Sanatları*. Trans.: Muhammed Ali Halili. Tahran: Ighbal. p. 248.

¹⁸ Ruhfer, Z. (2001). *İslam Döneminde Tekstil*. Tahran: Semt. pp. 40-42.

¹⁹ Mohebbi, V.. (2017). "Mütalîe-yı Tahlîlî ve Tosîfî-yî Baznemud-i Tazînat-i Mîmârî der Parçeha-yî Dore-yî Safevî". Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Elm o Ferheng Üniversitesi, Tahran, 2017, p. 26.

²⁰ Don Garcia de Silva Figuero. (1984). *Sefername-i Figueroa*, trc. Gulamrıza Sami', Tahran, p.370.

²¹ Willem Floor. (1996). "The Dutch and the Persian Silk Trade", *Safavid Persia*, ed: Charles Melville, Cambridge University, Pembroke Papers IV, p. 323.

²² Baharlu, 2022, p. 1729.

²³ Aydoğmuşoğlu, C. (2012). *Şah Abbas (1587-1629) devrinde İran'da ticarî hayat. A. Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi (TAED)*, 48, 368.

²⁴ Bastani P. and Muhammed, İ. (1362). *Safevi Döneminde İran'ın Siyaset ve Ekonomisi*. Tahran: Safi Ali Şah. p. 115.

supported by special policies, silk fabrics were produced and became among the most valuable gifts of the royal court. Gold-threaded silk fabrics became a symbol of the Safavid army and were utilized to gain both economic and military superiority over political rivals such as the Ottoman Empire.²⁵

From the foundation of the Safavid Empire, the regions of Gilan and Mazandaran, known for producing the highest quality silk, were elevated to the status of royal provinces during the reign of Shah Abbas I to bring the silk trade under state control.²⁶ This stringent oversight of production significantly enhanced the quality and value of gold-threaded and embroidered silk fabrics during the Safavid period. These rare textiles were generously gifted by the rulers to foreign dignitaries visiting their courts. The valuable silk exported to Europe was used for the vestments of clergy in churches, and today, many examples of these silk fabrics are exhibited in museums worldwide.²⁷ This clearly demonstrates the high artistic level achieved by the artisans and designers of the period in fabric design and patterning.²⁸

Due to the high cost of spices, countries engaged in trade and seeking to capture European markets turned to alternative products, with Iranian silk²⁹ being the most prominent among them. Since the limited quantity of silk from China was monopolized by Portugal, Safavid Iran became the most reliable source of raw silk for Europe. Although Iranian silk was more expensive than Chinese silk, it was preferred due to its superior quality and greater accessibility.³⁰ Shah Abbas's keen interest in trade and commercial activities revitalized the country's textile industry, with weaving workshops in Isfahan showing more rapid development compared to other centers.³¹ It is noted that these looms, established with the Shah's support, spanned approximately half a kilometer between the city center's square and the Chehel Sotoun Palace.³²

At Shah Abbas's request, Giyased al-Din Ali Nakısbend, who was appointed head of the weaving workshops in Isfahan, eventually returned to his hometown of Yazd to revive the craft there. Smaller-scale productions were also carried out in cities such as Kirman, Tebes, Yazd, and in the province of Khuzestan.³³ During this period, talented artists like Reza Abbasi contributed their designs to weavers, and these designs were incorporated into silk fabrics.

The portrait of the English traveler Robert Shirley³⁴, who visited Iran in 1598 and is depicted wearing an elaborate silk garment, vividly illustrates the splendor of this period.³⁵ Safavid Iran established strong ties with the Western world through these valuable silk fabrics, using them as a means to demonstrate power against the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. The reign of Shah Abbas coincided with the rule of prominent leaders such as Philip II of Spain, Elizabeth I of England, Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire, and Akbar the Great of India. This synchronicity provided Iran with the opportunity to establish and strengthen its relations with these states, leading to the widespread recognition of Iranian textile products across borders.³⁶

²⁵ Dehghan Nejad. M. (1383). *İsfahan ve Safeviye Sempozyumu Makaleleri*. İsfahan: İsfahan Üniversitesi. p. 36.

²⁶ Navidi, A. H. , and Fard, A. G. Fard. (1388). *Safevi Döneminde İran'ın Siyasi, Sosyal, Ekonomik ve Kültürel Değişimleri*. Tahran: Samt. p.169.

²⁷ Gheibi, M. (1378). *İran Halklarının 8000 Yıllık Giyim Tarihi*. Tahran: Hirmand. p. 446.

²⁸ Muhammed Hasan, 1342, p. 125.

²⁹ Matthee, R. (1999). *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran Silk for Silver 1600-1730*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, Cambridge. p. 24.

³⁰ Steinmann, L. K. (1987). "Shah Abbas and the Royal Silk Trade," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1. p. 68.

³¹ Tajbakhsh, A. (1378). *Safevi Tarihi*. Vol. 2. Şiraz: Navid Şiraz. p. 176.

³² Savory, 1385, p. 137.

³³ Navidi, D. (1386). *Tağyirat a Ectimai-Ektisadi dar İran dar asr a Safavi. terc.: Haşim Ağaçeri*, Tahran: Neşreny. p. 169.

³⁴ Mehdevi, A. H. (1379). *Tarih-i Revabit-ı Harici-i İran*, Tahran, pp. 39–40.

³⁵ Petworth House and Park, West Sussex. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/486169

³⁶ Baker, 1385, p. 12.

Shah Abbas I relocated a new group of Armenians from Azerbaijan to the New Julfa district in the south of Isfahan, appointing them as "representatives of the Shah" in the silk trade. These Armenians took the silk accumulated in the royal warehouses and transported it to India and Europe via Ottoman territories.³⁷ This Armenian community, traditionally merchants, successfully maintained the ancient trade routes between East and West for generations.³⁸

When Shah Abbas monopolized the silk trade, there were several strategic reasons for entrusting foreign trade to the Armenians. He understood that trading with Christian countries in Europe required specific skills and conditions that Iranian merchants did not possess. Therefore, he relied on the Armenians for these external trade relations. For instance, in 1609, he sent the renowned Qizilbash commander Dengi Bey Rumlu as an ambassador to King Philip of Spain to establish an alliance against the Ottoman Turks and to strengthen commercial ties. Along with this diplomatic mission, Shah Abbas also sent 50 bales of silk to Spain; however, under the influence of his Portuguese escort, the envoy presented all the silk as a gift to the king, thereby nullifying the anticipated economic benefit of the trade. This incident highlights the critical role Armenians played in achieving Shah Abbas's political and economic objectives.³⁹

Upon ascending to the throne, Shah Abbas II faced the challenge of an economic crisis. Like Shah Abbas I, he continued the policy of supporting local merchants and advocated for its application, particularly in the barter trade with the Portuguese. Shah Abbas II emphasized to the administrators of the time that every merchant should export a product from Iran in exchange for any goods imported from foreign traders.⁴⁰ This new economic approach led to most transactions with foreign countries being conducted through barter, with silk becoming one of the most important export commodities in this trade. As a result, the quality of silk was preserved, and its value increased further.⁴¹

Like his Safavid predecessors, Shah Abbas II presented gifts to Western envoys and travelers visiting the country, thereby ensuring the recognition of Iranian textiles in Europe and creating a vibrant market.⁴² The policy of promoting exports was meticulously implemented, leading to the development of industries in Iran and an increase in public prosperity. As exports grew, the country was able to avoid the need for borrowing, despite the luxurious expenditures and military campaigns of the Safavid state.⁴³

The French traveler Jean Chardin, who visited Iran during the reign of Shah Abbas II, highlighted the quality of weaving during this period by stating, "The finest *zeri* and gold-threaded fabrics are woven in the workshops of Yazd, Kashan, and Isfahan."⁴⁴ Thanks to the Safavid rulers' emphasis on the textile industry, silk fabric production reached its peak. Another French traveler, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, met with Shah Abbas II and received valuable gifts from him. Describing these gifts, Tavernier wrote, "The gifts given by the Shah to the nobles consist of a valuable and expensive garment."⁴⁵ Such gifts significantly contributed to the promotion of the Iranian textile industry in Europe and facilitated the education of Europeans in Iran, allowing them to learn the intricacies of this art.

During the reign of the last Safavid ruler, Shah Sultan Hussein, the textile workshops in Yazd, Kashan, and Isfahan became even more vibrant. In Shah Sultan Hussein's court, there was a long-standing tradition: every seven years,

³⁷ Aydoğmuşoğlu, C. (2012). Şah Abbas (1587-1629) devrinde İran'da ticarî hayat. A. Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi (TAED), 48, p. 369.

³⁸ Ferrier, 1374, p. 159.

³⁹ Savory, 1385, p. 100.

⁴⁰ Beheştî Pur, M. (1343). İran Tekstil Endüstrisinin Tarihçesi. Tahran: Ekonomist. p. 15.

⁴¹ Ferrier, agp. p. 168.

⁴² Alvand, A. (1342). İran Tekstil Endüstrisi: Geçmişten Bugüne. Tahran: Politeknik Tahran Endüstri Fakültesi. pp. 32-33.

⁴³ Behştî Pur, 1343, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Chardin, Jean. (1374). Chardin Seyahatnamesi. Trans.: İkbâl Yaghmai. Tahran: Tus. p. 42.

⁴⁵ Tavernier, 1369, p. 618.

the royal wardrobe collection was burned and replaced with new garments; however, the gold threads of these exquisite fabrics were carefully collected and reused.⁴⁶ However, during this period, neighboring countries began to show less interest in Iranian silk fabrics than before.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

With the urbanization of the Safavid Empire, the weaving industry experienced rapid growth, and particularly the production and trade of silk fabrics became central to Iran's economy. The weaving workshops established in cities such as Isfahan, Shirvan, and Karabakh became foundational to the economic and political strength of the Safavid state. The silk fabrics produced in these workshops gained significant attention and demand, both in local markets and on the international stage. While the foundations of the weaving industry were laid during Shah Ismail's reign, the sector experienced limitations due to the perceived threat from the Ottoman Empire. The economy of the Safavid Empire was greatly improved by this transformation, but it needed to be revitalized under Shah Abbas I. Shah Abbas I took complete control of trade in silk and increased sericulture in places like Gilan and Mazandaran, thus growing the amount wholly produced from silk in Iran, the country's greatest sort of export. Cities like Isfahan, Kashan, and Yazd had their own specialized weaving workshops, which made Iran one of the leading nations for textiles on earth. This way he not only filled the state treasury but also raised the reputation of the Safavid dynasty in international circles when he monopolized the silk trade on behalf of his government. The Safavid position against the Ottoman Empire was further enhanced through established commercial relations with European kingdoms that included Iranian silk as especially important diplomatic gifts.

In the period after this time of prosperity, Shah Sultan Hussein's rule posed grave threats to the Safavid state both economically and politically. Iranian silk began to lose its former appeal in international markets, and with neighboring countries' interests declining, so did the economic structure of the Safavid state. These worries raised questions on how steady the Safavid economy was going to be and ultimately led to its collapse.

Finally, we should acknowledge that the economic framework predicated on carpet weaving and silk trading adopted by the Safavid Empire was a remarkable achievement towards state building and strong presence internationally. Some experts argue that the gains made by magnetic silk controls held by Shah Abbas are what maintained the political power of the Safavid empire throughout these years but were only momentarily cased in trade matters. They doubted whether they would survive them for much longer since everything depended upon changing circumstances at home or abroad. The Safavid Empire is a case study of how political as well as economic success can be fragile or even precarious; noting this relationship between changes in trade patterns and fluctuating fortunes of empires was also a factor. Irrespective of this fact, silk trade and weaving have played a superior part in global textile history, hence leaving the Safavid era with a more legacy. The impact of this heritage is significant since it does not only give an insight into the cultural and economic history of Iran but also helps to comprehend how both international trade and diplomatic relations were formed.

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⁴⁶ Tavernier, J. B. (1369). *Tavernier Seyahatnamesi*. Trans.: Ebu Turab Nuri. Düzenleme: Hamid Şirazi. Tahran: Sanai. p. 168.

⁴⁷ Sanson, M. (1346). *Safevi Şahı Süleyman Döneminde İran Krallığı Durumu (Sanson Seyahatnamesi)*. Tahran: Ibn Sina. p. 191.

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