

Early Modern Cotton
Session IIC
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Chair and Convenor:

Patrick O'Brien (London School of Economics)

Speakers:

Ottoman textiles: a success story that did not end so well
Suraiya Farooqi (Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich)

Cotton textile exports from the Indian subcontinent, 1680-1780
Prasanna Parthasarathi (Boston College)

Empire, ecology and economy: cotton in eighteenth-century Europe
Giorgio Riello (London School of Economics)

Economic historians interested in explaining the dynamics of economic development and technological progress have centred their attention on cotton, with a particular focus on the period starting with the Industrial Revolution. Much less is known about the cotton industry in early modern economies. The presence of cotton as one of the plethora of textiles in early-modern Europe has never been denied. However, historians have paid much more attention to wool, linen and silk, hardly mentioning the relevance of fustian (a fabric made with linen warp and cotton weft). The economic importance of cotton production in Eurasia before the 1770s is still unknown. Even in the case of Britain – where the antecedents and influences that motivated the expansion of the cotton sector have been meticulously searched for – there are still numerous lacunae.

This session aims to analyse the role of cotton textiles in Europe, the Ottoman Empire and India. These were three key areas in Eurasia where cotton textiles played a major role in economic development (or economic decline) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Papers will provide a deeper understanding of how specific regions, nations or macro-areas contributed to the development of such an important sector. Individual papers will highlight specific trajectories and set them within a comparative framework. The papers included in this session consider cotton in its supply-side aspects (as raw material and yarn) and final consumption (as textiles and clothing) and attempt to locate cotton manufacturing within strategies ranging from cultivation to the commercialisation of cotton goods. Raw cotton was cultivated in India and the Ottoman Empire, but was never locally produced in Europe. By converse, Europe and India heavily relied on international markets for the commercialisation of cotton goods, while the Ottoman Empire sold its cotton production mainly on the home market. The seventeenth-century decline of the industry in Turkey was followed a century later by India, leading to the end of a long trend of economic growth. What were the causes? And how was the European development in cotton production connected to such major changes in other world areas? The aim of this session is to revise concepts of 'industrialisation' and 'de-industrialisation' within a global framework.

Ottoman textiles: a success story that did not end so well
Suraiya Faruqi (Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich)

During the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire had a considerable number of textile producing centres. The economic vigour and the variety of production makes us wonder why textile manufacturing did not initiate an industrial revolution in this part of the globe. The work done on the 'economic mind' of the pre-nineteenth century Ottoman elite, as well as a variety of studies on tax-farming, have identified some of the reasons why textile producers, in spite of significant successes, proved unable to break through a certain 'glass ceiling'.

The Ottoman elite believed that supplying the market, and keeping prices low as a consequence of this, was a high priority. This was the only way to ensure military success and render public construction financially feasible. Mercantilist policies were never fully embraced, although there was concern about the outflow of bullion. Thus export was not promoted by the state: if in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Ottoman sultans were interested in the fate of those subjects who traded in foreign territories, this was probably more for political rather than economic reasons.

Secondly the prevalence of tax-farming and life-time tax-farms had dire consequences from an economic point of view. Tax-farmers forced craftspeople to produce in places convenient for tax collection, but these places were not necessarily conducive to the productive processes involved. In addition, tax-farmers' activities tended to exacerbate the lack of capital in all productive branches including textiles. This had been a weakness of the Ottoman economy since the sixteenth century. A further factor affecting the destiny of textiles were the large workshops that during the eighteenth century were frequently promoted by pious foundations anxious to increase their revenues. The close proximity of the artisans working there, and frequently the common investment in costly items, tended to reinforce mutual control and make it more difficult for enterprising artisans to branch out into activities not foreseen or approved by their neighbours. Recent work on Ottoman textile production has tended to give priority to factors from within, rather than those originating outside the sultans' realm. Future scholarship will need to integrate these studies with the work carried out on the textile industry in Europe in the early modern period.

Cotton textile exports from the Indian subcontinent, 1680-1780
Prasannan Parthasarathi (Boston College)

India's central position in the global textile trade of the eighteenth century is increasingly appreciated. Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and West Africa, and even the Americans were major markets for Indian stuff and the trade in Indian cottons was an important link between the commercial worlds of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Despite the importance of this trade, there is little research on the volume of cotton textile exports from the subcontinent. Nevertheless, recent revisionist accounts of Indian economic history, especially found in the work of Tirthankar Roy, have argued that exports represented an insignificant fraction of production. Roy, for instance, believes exports may have been only one per cent of total cotton cloth manufactures.

The purpose of this paper is to assemble some new estimates of cloth production and exports for the subcontinent. In doing this it will build upon and extend the author's estimates for South India, which was one of the major cotton textile exporting regions of the subcontinent.

Empire, ecology and economy: cotton in eighteenth-century Europe
Giorgio Riello (London School of Economics)

In the early eighteenth century cotton accounted for a very small proportion of Europe's textile production. Linens and woollens dominated the manufacturing sectors of most Western countries and in the case of Britain they constituted at least three quarters of the island's exports. A century later the picture had dramatically changed. Cotton was the most important textile in the West, characterised not only by enormous output, but also by a new industrial structure of production.

This paper seeks to analyse the well-known story of the rise of the cotton industry in Europe through a closer analysis of the 'ecologic' potential and impact of such a fibre. Cotton was the only textile fibre not to be produced within Europe. Why, how and how much did Europe rely on such an 'exotic' raw material to further its process of economic transformation? This question implies a clearer understanding of how cotton changed the 'textile mix' of pre-industrial Europe. The paper argues that cotton fitted within a neo-mercantilist view of European overseas economic interests. Using Crosby's notion of 'ecological imperialism', the paper shows the real and perceived limitations of a textile economy heavily reliant on endogenous fibres such as flax and wool.

The unique growth rates of cotton textile production in Europe was not only the result of a dramatic change in the use of fibres. Manufacturing and commercial interests were important in securing new markets for cotton textiles. In the early eighteenth century the European woollen manufacturers successfully protected their markets and products through restrictive legislation on the import of Asian cotton textiles. Economic historians have considered the rise of the Lancashire fustian industry as the by-product of such legislation and as an attempt to substitute a previously imported commodity. This paper argues that the cotton industry grew instead out of a general re-definition of textile production in the second half of the century. Rather than emphasising endogenous factors such as import substitution strategies and the role of technological innovation, this paper examines how one part of the globe (Europe) came to acquire substantial advantages in the production of cotton textiles by underlining the nature of the raw material and the importance of overseas markets.