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Role and Importance of Izmir on the Silk Trade XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries

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As has been known for many centuries, the silk trade either originates from Central Asia or Middle East goes back a long way. From China in a western direction, state dignitaries working for existing states and economically well-off people seemed to be in great need of silk and silk manufacturers over the centuries in the ancient and Middle Ages. One can easily assume that silk manufacturers were used in large quantities especially in the palaces of the Sasanids, Arab states, Byzantines, Selcuqids, Ottomans as well as European states.

This paper aims to show that in the trade of silk, Izmir as an international commercial center and a busy port has played an important role. The revival of Izmir as a significant trading center goes back to as early as 1620s. Supporting this fact, French historian Paul Masson states the arrival of Iranian silk in Izmir in 1621¹. As a matter of fact in the XVIIth century Iran was the main source of silk production and exporting country in the Middle East. Towards the end of the Ottoman-Iran war of 1615-18, Izmir had already become an important rival of Aleppo which was the center of English merchants in that century for silk originating from Iran.²

It can be said that, due to this war, the silk routes from Iran silk producing areas to Aleppo were continuously disrupted by the armed forces of the belligerent states. This unfavorable condition surely deflected the trade route in general sense, to Western Anatolia by way of Erzurum, Tokat, and Ankara and to Izmir, the port that mediates Anatolian and

¹ Paul Masson, *Histoire du Commerce Français dans le Levant au XVIII Siècle*, Paris, Librairie Hachette Cie, 1897, vol.I, p.101.

² L. Des Hayes de Coumenin, *Voyage de Levant fait par le Commandement du Roy en l'année 1621*, sec. ed., Paris, Adrian Taupinart, 1629, p.343.

European trade goods. There was no doubt that Izmir, as an Anatolian port city on the Aegean Sea, seemed to be more secure and presented more advantages than that of Aleppo and its only port of Alexandretta.

On the other hand, the Ottomans helped to attract trade and merchants to Izmir by constructing the fortress named Sancak Kalesi which provided security for trading ships as well as by building many structures near the port, such as the custom office, hans docks and warehouses in the second half of the XVIIth century.³ A French traveller states about the importance of XVIIth century Izmir in his words as follows:

Smyrne est aujourd'hui pour le négoce, soit par mer, soit par terre la ville la plus célébré de tout le levant, et le plus grand abord de tous les marchandises qui passent de l'Europe en Asie, et de l'Asie en Europe.⁴

According to an eminent Turkish historian Professor Halil Inalcik, Izmir had become, in fact, more important than Aleppo in the trade of Iran silks with the West by the end of XVIIth century.⁵

Trading of silk products in the Ottoman Empire has a long history. Generally speaking, the trade was centered in Anatolia. Such places as Bursa and Diyarbakir and Aleppo in Syria have certainly played an important role in handling the raw silk, which was mainly transported by caravans from Iran. By the beginning of the XVIIIth century, the bulk of silk brought to Turkish ports to be exported to Europe was of Iran origin.⁶ Although both raw and finished silk products were certainly consumed throughout the Ottoman Empire, a good quantity of both silk was exported to the European countries through the trade centers of Izmir, Bursa, Istanbul, as well as Aleppo. No doubt this trade was very profitable both for the Ottoman Empire and Iran due to the low taxes were imposed upon silk goods. It was the fact that silk was, besides being a trade item, an economic and political weapon in the war between the Ottomans and the Persian Safavids; in fact the struggle for the control of the silk trade and its routes was the real reason for the war between the two countries. As a result of

³ Necmi Ülker, *The Rise of Izmir, 1688-1740*, The University of Michigan 1974, Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, pp. 36-39 ; N. Ülker, *Izmir Sancak; Kalesi ve Şehitliği*, "Birinci Askeri Semineri, Bildiriler II, Ankara Gn.Kur.Basımevi, 1983, pp.263-84.

⁴ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six Voyages de Monsieur J. B. Tavernier...* Paris, La Veuve de P. Ribon, 1724, vol. I, p. 101.

⁵ Halil Inalcik, « Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun Kuruluşu ve İnkişafı Devrinde Türkiyenin İktisadi vaziyeti üzerine bir tetkik münasebetiyle », *Belleten*, 15 (1951), s. 674.

⁶ Ralph Davis, *Aleppo and Devonshire Square: English Traders in the Eighteenth Century*, London, Macmillan, 1967, p.143.

the Ottoman-Safavid war, which lasted from 1578 to 1639, silk production within the Ottoman Empire was by and large encouraged and Bursa became an increasingly important silk-producing center especially after 1587.

In the XVIIth century, however, Phocea, located Northwest of Izmir on the Aegean coast, began to challenge Bursa as a silk-trading center. Merchants of Eastern states and Iran began sending their silk to Phocea and later to Izmir to avoid taxes levied on silk in Bursa.⁷

Izmir became an important market in the silk trade because of its location and due to the fact that several European merchant colonies existed and consuls in the second half of the XVIIth century. All these favorable conditions made it easier for the European merchants to buy their silk in Izmir. Hence, Izmir began to rival Aleppo and Sayda (Sidon) in the silk trade with Europe, and the operating caravan route from Erzurum via Tokat became the most extensively used Anatolian caravan route of the XVIIIth century, during which sufficient demand for domestic and transit silk from Iran that there surely was no difficulty in finding buyers at the markets. Warehouses and depots in Izmir, Istanbul, and Bursa also bought silk, and Bursa silk was exported to European ports by merchants of different states residing in the large trade centers, especially Izmir.⁸

The Iran silk trade produced a large income for the Ottoman Empire and on the other hand needed currency for Iran.⁹ Since the silk trade was a dominant factor in the economic stability of each country, the Ottoman-Safavid war of the XVIth century hurt the economic and financial position of both countries.

As for the types and the silk-producing areas of Iran: There were, in both centuries, three types of silk came to Izmir from Gilan, one of the most important silk producing areas of Iran, located at the Southwestern corner of the Caspian Sea. These three types were a very high quality silk called charbassi, carvari, and loge. Two kinds came from the centers of Sarmahi, Gence and Tiflis: charbassi and a coarse, cheap silk known as ardasse or ardace. It

⁷ Halil Inalcik, "Harir," Encyclopedia of Islam, sec. ed. vol. 3, p.217 .1 Fahri Dalsar, Türk Sanayi ve Ticaret Tarihinde Bursa' da Ipekcilik, Istanbul, Sermet Press, 1960, p.360, 178; Jacob Span and George Wheler, Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grece, et du Levant, fait aux années, 1675 et 1676, Lyon, 1677, p. 311.

⁸ Paul Masson, a.g.e., p.522; Tavernier, a.g.e., p.5-70; Dalsar, a.g.e. y p.161 ; Leyla Erder, The Making of Industrial Bursa, Princeton University, 1976, unpublished Ph. D. Diss.; Murat Qizakga, "A Short History of the Bursa Bilk Industry (1500-1900),"journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,23,parts 1 and 2(1963), pp. 142-52.

⁹ Inalcik, a.g.e., p. 214.

was estimated that in the very beginning of the XVIIIth century caravans brought Iran silk to Izmir totaling about 2.000 bales every year.¹⁰

Ardasse and charbassi types of silks were the main ones brought to Izmir and these were among the chief goods sold to the English merchants.¹¹ Ardasse was the type of silk imported mostly by France. Silk importations usually entered through the Mediterranean port of Marseille where accounts about them were kept and relevant documents are still available in the Archives de Chambre de Commerce de Marseille (abbreviated as A.C.C.M.). These rich archives include the records of silk coming from Izmir as well as other Levantine ports, starting with the year 1700 and continue in the XVIIIth century.¹²

In the face of the difficulties about the buying Iran originate silk due to the various reasons; the foreign merchants in Izmir and Aleppo had to seek their supplies from other silk-producing areas in Anatolia especially around Bursa, Tokat and in Northern Syria. Although the total supply of Levantine silk was more or less maintained, there was a general tendency of changing from Iran silk to Syrian silk, especially after 1727.¹³ According to an English Professor Ralph Davis, after 1700 ardasse silk increasingly began to be replaced by inexpensive Bengal silk in the English market.¹⁴ I personally accept his view concerning the decline of the ardasse silk trade. The evidence suggests, however, English Levant merchants had no intention of quitting the silk trade. They wanted to keep buying clean ardasse silk and they struggled to keep its wholesale price low at the port of Izmir so that it could compete with Bengal silk on the English market.

European merchants sometimes had problems in purchasing or bartering the silk from the native merchants. In the XVIIIth century the Armenians had significant control of the silk trade, especially of Iran silk. The French and English merchants, from time to time, tried to agree among themselves on the prices to be paid to the Ottoman silk-selling merchants. The earliest knowledge available on these attempts at price control comes from an English source. The documents show quite clearly the problems of buying Iran silk. The French colony in Izmir was the initiator in trying to muster support from the other merchant colonies in Izmir

¹⁰ Tavernier, a.g.e., p. 101, Tournefort, a.g.e., pp.335-6.

¹¹ A. C. Wood, A History of the Levant Company, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1935, p.129.

¹² N. Ülker, a.g.tez., pp.82-6 the information depended upon A.C.C.M, Serie I-26 Statistics of goods imported to Marseille from Izmir. Also see S.Yilmaz; « La Soie dans les relations commerciales entre la France et l'Empire Ottoman au XVIIIe siècle (1700 à 1789); Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1985, unpublished. Dissertation.

¹³ Ralph Davis, "English Imports from the Yd. Middle East, 1580-1780," Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East, ed. M. A. Cook, London, Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 197-8.

¹⁴ R. Davis, Aleppo and Devonshire Square..., p.140

for a boycott of the silk prices. It seems that a common action was agreed to by all the European resident merchants late in the year of 1698. They decided not to purchase any ardasse silk after January 1699.¹⁵ In applying or forcing this resolution, all the European merchants including the English, the French, the Dutch and other merchants expected that the boycott would force the native silk merchants to drop their prices. It seems that this boycott did not give good results expected by the foreign merchants.¹⁶ The commercial rivalry between the French and the English in Izmir made it very difficult to apply and keep in force these agreements for any length of time.

Conclusion

From the XVIIth century through to the year 1740, in which the French was accepted as a “most favored nation in the Ottoman Empire”, Izmir was the stage upon which the intense rivalry between the rising French commercial interests in Mediterranean area and the long-established English domination of their trade in the Ottoman Empire through the agency of the Levant Company was acted out. The French first organized the commercial possibilities of Izmir and decided to concentrate their attention on building their trade in this flourishing Ottoman port, while searching as well as to extend their control over the trade in the Levantine markets in general. Available evidences clearly show that the French eventually triumphed against the English especially by focusing their efforts through Izmir.

The French, as a result of a long-discussed, centralized trade policy eventually became the leading commercial power among Western European nations trading in the Levant. Izmir served the French merchants as a major trading center for their activities in the Levant. The rise of Izmir to its essential position as a Levantine trading center was, in large part, the result of the Anglo-French commercial rivalry in the Levant in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries.

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¹⁵ Public Record Office, State Papers, p.4, Letter from London to Consul Raye, dated 30 August 1698; see also A.C.C.M. Serie j-434, 17 April 1698 and A.C.C.M. Serie J-434, 11 November 1698.

¹⁶ Public Record Office, Custom Ledgers of Imports, Custom 3/1698-99, 1700-1701; A.C.C.M. Serie j-26, Silk Importation from Izmir in 1702.