

DRESSING THE CALIPHATES: MATERIAL CULTURE AND EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC FASHIONLilinieta Hj Talib^{1*}, Azwady Hj Mustapha¹, Nor Idayu Ibrahim¹ & Maarof Saleh¹¹*Department of Technology Fashion Design, Faculty of Art and Design, UiTM Perak
Kampus Seri Iskandar, 32610 Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak*neita201@uitm.edu.my (Corresponding Author)DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24191/ejitu.v8i2.9059>**Abstract****E-JITU**Acceptance date:
10 August 2025Valuation date:
25 September 2025Publication date:
01 October 2025

This study examines the complex interplay of clothing, culture, and commerce in medieval Islamic societies (c. 900–1300 CE), with particular focus on regions of sustained contact with Europe. Through analysis of historical texts, material artifacts, and visual sources, the paper investigates how garments functioned as dynamic markers of identity, power, and religious adherence across major Islamic caliphates—Abbasid, Fatimid, Umayyad, and Mamluk. The research highlights three key dimensions: the socio-political symbolism of courtly dress, regional variations in textile production and use, and the mutual influences between Islamic and European sartorial traditions. Findings reveal that luxury fabrics like silk served not only as economic commodities but also as instruments of statecraft, with dynasties employing distinctive colours and toward assert legitimacy. The study

demonstrates how Islamic textiles and tailoring techniques circulated through Mediterranean trade networks, significantly impacting European fashion. Through the combination of material culture studies and political economic and cross-cultural approaches, this paper seeks to counter the naturalization of description of what might be termed as Islamic fashion, rather introducing the idea of medieval dress as a consideration of internal social structures on one hand and as a form of intercultural communication on the other. The study brings novel information about premodern globalization focusing on the role of clothing in forming economic systems, diplomatic relations and a shared identity of people in the medieval world.

Keywords: *medieval Islamic clothing, textile trade, cross-cultural exchange, material culture, fashion history.*

INTRODUCTION

The study of medieval Islamic clothing offers a profound window into the interconnected social, economic, and cultural landscapes of the Islamic world during its golden age. Between the 10th and 14th centuries, garments transcended their basic function as body coverings to become dynamic instruments of visual communication, articulating identity, status, and ideological affiliation across diverse Islamic societies. This paper examines how clothing and textiles functioned as mediums of cultural expression and political symbolism, while also serving as key commodities in the vibrant networks of exchange that linked the Islamic world with Europe during this transformative period. The era from 900 to 1300 CE represents the top of what scholars have termed the Islamic Golden Age – a period of extraordinary intellectual ferment, artistic innovation, and economic expansion that unfolded amidst significant political reconfigurations ((Saliba, 2007). As the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) gradually yielded to emerging regional powers, including the Buyids, Seljuks, and Fatimids, these successor states nevertheless maintained and adapted Abbasid cultural paradigms, particularly in their sartorial traditions (Rodgers, 2008;Gordon, 2011).

The period witnessed the flourishing of distinctive regional styles, from the luxurious court fashions of Baghdad to the practical desert attire of North Africa, all while maintaining fundamental Islamic principles of modesty and propriety. Clothing in medieval Islamic societies served as a powerful political language. The Abbasids and Umayyads strategically employed black garments to signify their revolutionary origins and imperial authority, while the Fatimids adopted white as a dynastic marker (Cortese, 2025). These fashions were not just simple aesthetics decisions but strategically chosen visual indicators of power and legitimacy. In the meantime, the Mamluks formed a unique pattern of military uniforms that embodied their national roots, proving to be the Turkic group, simultaneously portraying local sartorial features, proving the intricate nature of conservational and adaptive processes (Cabrera, 2017).

More importantly, this was a time when there was more material and cultural interaction between Islamic worlds and European by a variety of contact zones like Iberia, Sicily, and Crusader states. Silk and brocade fabrics passed as trophies of commerce and diplomatic presents and sartorial novelties made their way along these trade corridors (Contadini, 2011). The exchange of textile skills, such as advanced weaving and dyeing techniques, left permanent influences on European material culture, despite Islamic fashions borrowing some influences of neighbouring cultures. The argument presented in this paper is that the medieval Islamic dress was a form of active cultural signification that was both reflecting inner hierarchies among people, and an enabling cross-cultural communication. It demonstrates how the study of clothing can illuminate complex historical processes of cultural negotiation, while challenging monolithic conceptions of medieval Islamic society. Ultimately, the sartorial history of this period reveals a world of remarkable creativity and connectivity, where threads of fabric became threads of cultural dialogue.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While existing scholar has established that dress in medieval Islamic societies functioned as more than mere bodily covering—serving as a critical medium of social stratification, political authority, and religious identity (Stillman, 2003) there remains a gap in systematically analysing how these sartorial practices interacted with European counterparts during periods of sustained contact (c. 900–1300 CE). Studies have demonstrated that clothing signalled rank, profession, and faith while luxury textiles operated as economic capital and tools of state control ((Cabrera, 2017) . However, less attention has been paid to:

1. Regional variations in Islamic dress across zones of European contact (e.g., Al-Andalus, Sicily, Crusader states),
2. Material exchanges of textiles and techniques between Islamic and European societies, and
3. Comparative social functions of clothing as markers of identity in these cross-cultural contexts.

This paper addresses these gaps by interrogating how clothing and textiles mediated encounters between Islamic and European societies during the medieval period. Focusing on regions of intense interaction—such as Umayyad Iberia, Fatimid Sicily, and the Levant during the Crusades.

This paper examines:

- Distinctive garment forms (e.g., *thawb*, *jubba*, *tiraz*) and their adaptation in borderland societies,
- Production methods and trade networks that enabled textile circulation, and
- Social semiotics of dress as reflected in legal texts, travellers' accounts, and material remains.

The significance of this study lies in its tripartite contribution:

1. Material Culture Studies: Enhancing understanding of clothing as a historical source for Islamic-European relations.
2. Economic History: Tracing how textile production and trade shaped trans-Mediterranean economies.
3. Social History: Revealing how dress codes negotiated identity in multicultural medieval frontier societies.

By centering regions of Islamic-European contact, this research challenges monolithic portrayals of "Islamic fashion" and illuminates the reciprocal influences that defined medieval material culture.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, historical research design, combining textual, material, and visual analysis to explore medieval Islamic clothing between 900 and 1300 CE. The methodology rests on three main components:

1. Primary Source Analysis
 - Historical chronicles, travel accounts, religious texts, and legal records were examined to reconstruct clothing practices and the meanings ascribed to them.
 - Material artifacts—including preserved garments, textile fragments, and inscriptions on tiraz bands—provided tangible evidence of design, fabric use, and production methods.
 - Visual sources such as manuscript illustrations, frescoes, and carvings were analysed to trace styles, colour symbolism, and regional variations.
2. Comparative and Cross-Cultural Approach
 - The research employs a comparative framework, focusing on zones of sustained contact (Al-Andalus, Sicily, Crusader states) to highlight similarities, adaptations, and reciprocal influences between Islamic and European dress.
 - Particular attention was given to the flow of materials (e.g., silk, brocade), techniques (e.g., weaving, dyeing), and dress codes across the Mediterranean.
3. Theoretical Integration
 - Material Culture Studies provided the lens to interpret garments as socio-cultural objects.
 - Political Economy frameworks highlighted the role of textiles in statecraft, trade, and regulation.

- Cross-Cultural Exchange theories enabled the study of fashion as a site of dialogue between civilizations.

By triangulating these sources and frameworks, this methodology situates Islamic dress not only as a reflection of internal hierarchies but also as an active medium of intercultural communication and economic power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Sartorial Foundations of Medieval Islamic Dress

Scholarship on medieval Islamic clothing converges on its dual role as both practical necessity and cultural signifier. The predominance of loose-fitting garments—long tunics (thawb/qamīṣ), layered cloaks (jubba, burnous), and baggy trousers (sirwāl)—reflected climatic adaptation and modesty norms (Stillman, 2003). Light-coloured fabrics, especially white, were favoured in arid regions for their heat-reflective properties, while darker hues prevailed in cooler areas (Harsh, 2023). This functional baseline, however, was enriched by cross-cultural exchanges: Persian sirwāl (Baker, 1986) and Byzantine-inspired tiraz embroidery (Cabrera, 2017) exemplify the synthesis of indigenous and imported elements.

Head coverings and footwear further underscored social hierarchies. Turbans (‘imāma) and veils (ḥijāb/niqāb) were not merely religious markers but also denoted profession, class, and tribal affiliation (Rugh, 2002): Urban elites distinguished themselves through luxury materials (silk, brocade) and accessories like wooden qabāqib shoes, while rural populations relied on wool and leather (Baker, 1986). Such distinctions reveal how Islamic dress negotiated unity and diversity—adhering to broad modesty principles while accommodating regional needs (Veszprémy, 2023).

2. Regional Variations: Political Legitimacy and Cultural Hybridity

Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE)

The Abbasids institutionalized black (sawad) as a dynastic colour, using it in court garments to symbolize revolutionary legitimacy. Their sartorial system blended Arab and Persian traditions: the qamīṣ and durra’a (long robe) were layered with tiraz-inscribed textiles, which functioned as wearable symbols of caliphal favour (Cabrera, 2017). Abbasid dress codes emphasized fabric quality and ornamentation over structural complexity, allowing subtle class distinctions.

Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171 CE)

In contrast, the Fatimids adopted white linen and gold-embroidered tiraz to project Isma’ili Shi’a identity (Baker, 1986). Their unstructured, multi-layered silhouettes—coupled with elaborate turbans for courtiers—reflected Egyptian textile wealth and eschewed Abbasid austerity. This opulence trickled down to urban elites, illustrating how state-sponsored fashion could shape broader consumption patterns.

Umayyad Al-Andalus (929–1031 CE)

Andalusian dress exemplified Mediterranean hybridity, merging Iberian, Byzantine, and Persian influences. Caliph Abd al-Rahman III’s “splendor policy” promoted silk tīrāz robes and conical hats to rival Eastern caliphates (Georgala, 2024). Yet class divisions persisted: Berber communities retained traditional burnous cloaks, while sumptuary laws restricted non-elite imitation of court styles (Gordon, 2011).

Table 1: Key Garment Types and Regional Variations

Garment Type	Common Names	Regional/Dynastic Associations	Key Characteristics/Notes
Tunic/Shirt	<i>Qamis, Thawb</i>	General Middle East, Abbasid, Fatimid	Loose, long-sleeved, basic inner layer for both sexes; length varied (knee to ankle)
Trousers	<i>Sirwal, Chalvar</i>	General Middle East, Abbasid, Fatimid, Al-Andalus	Loose, baggy, worn by both sexes; believed to originate in Persia
Outer Robe/Cloak	<i>Aba, Jellaba, Jubba, Gallibiya, Dishdasha, Haik, Burnous, Kaftan, Durra'a, Thawb</i>	General Middle East, Abbasid, Fatimid, Al-Andalus	Loose, draped or coat-like outer garment; varied in length, sleeves, and front opening; often signified status
Headwear (Men)	Turban, <i>Kaffiyeh, Agal</i>	General Middle East, Abbasid, Fatimid, Al-Andalus	Wrapped cloth for sun protection and identity; <i>agal</i> holds <i>kaffiyeh</i> in place
Headwear (Women)	<i>Hijab, Khimar, Veil</i>	General Middle East, Abbasid, Fatimid,	Covering for modesty and sun protection; sometimes pulled across face; always required in mosques
Specialized/Courtly Features	<i>Tiraz</i> bands, <i>Khil'a</i> (robes of honor)	Abbasid, Fatimid, Umayyad Al-Andalus,	Embroidered bands indicating honour/caliph's name; ceremonial garments given as official recognition
Dynastic Colours	Black	Abbasid Caliphate	Official state colour, worn by officials and military
Dynastic Colours	White	Fatimid Caliphate	Official dynastic colour, prominent in court costumes

3, Clothing and Textiles in Medieval Islamic Societies (900–1300 CE)

1. Material Foundations and Technological Innovation

Scholar on medieval Islamic textiles reveals a sophisticated material ecosystem shaped by environmental adaptation and cross-cultural exchange. Common fabrics like linen (dominant in Egypt), cotton (ideal for arid climates), and wool (for colder regions) formed the basis of everyday dress (Stillman, 2003). Luxury textiles, however, were engines of economic and political power. Silk—originally imported from China—became a hallmark of Islamic industry, with centres in Baghdad, Damascus, and Al-Andalus producing coveted fabrics like damask and muslin (Cabrea, 2017). The Fatimids' use of linen and gold-embroidered tiraz bands exemplified how materials

projected dynastic legitimacy (Baker, 1986), while Abbasid black robes (sawad) symbolized revolutionary authority (Gordon, 2011)

Technological advancements were equally transformative. The adoption of sericulture from Byzantium (6th century CE) and knitting techniques from Egypt (Stillman, 2003) underscored Islamic societies' role as innovators rather than passive recipients. Al-Andalus emerged as a hub for dye production, exporting vibrant colours like indigo to Europe (Contadini, 2011). Such innovations positioned textiles as a cornerstone of Islamic economic expansion, with fabrics functioning as currency in diplomatic exchanges (Jacoby, 2004)

2. Regional Diversities and Political Semiotics

Clothing styles varied dramatically across Islamic polities, reflecting local identities and imperial ideologies:

- Abbasids (750–1258 CE): Black tiraz-inscribed robes and layered durra'a gowns distinguished court elites, while sumptuary laws restricted non-Muslim imitation (Gordon, 2011)
- Fatimids (909–1171 CE): White linen and gold tiraz conveyed Isma'ili Shi'a identity, with caliphal turbans replacing crowns (Cortese, 2025)
- Umayyad Al-Andalus (929–1031 CE): Hybrid styles merged Iberian, Byzantine, and Persian influences, with silk tirāz robes projecting caliphal splendour (Cabrera, 2017)

These regional distinctions highlight how dress mediated between unity (shared modesty norms) and diversity (localized aesthetics). The Mamluks' Turkic-inspired military attire (Baker, 1995) and Berber burnous cloaks in Al-Andalus (Harsh, 2023) further illustrate this tension.

3. Socio-Religious Dimensions and Sumptuary Practices

Clothing was a visual language of social hierarchy. The khil'a (robe of honor) system reinforced loyalty to rulers (Gordon, 2011) while sleeve length in Mamluk courts signaled rank (Harsh, 2023). Religious directives (Al-Quran et al., 2023) and prohibitions on silk for men (Laila & Dzulkarnain, 2020), coexisted with pragmatic adaptations. For instance, while veiling was widespread, its enforcement varied; urban elites often adopted face-covering niqāb, whereas rural women prioritized functionality (Rustow, 2002)

Sumptuary laws (hisba) regulated these boundaries, delegating distinct attire for non-Muslims (e.g., belts for dhimmis in Al-Andalus) and curbing elite imitation by commoners. Such regulations reveal clothing's role in stabilizing social order—a theme contested in modern scholarship to

4. Islamic-European Exchange: A Dialectic of Influence

The Crusades (11th–13th centuries) catalysed a textile dialogue between Islamic and European societies:

- Islamic → Europe: (Riley-Smith, 2011). Luxuries like Baldacci (Baghdad silk) entered European markets, inspiring brocades depicted in Madonna paintings (Timeless Fashion Hub, 2023). Crusaders adopted the surcoat from Islamic armies (Wilcox, 2008).
- Europe → Islam: Influence was asymmetrical but evident in frontier zones. Hungarian Muslims under Christian rule assimilated local dress (Veszprémy, 2023), while Sicilian textiles blended Arab and Norman motifs (Cabrera, 2017). This exchange challenges

narratives of unidirectional "Recentralization," instead revealing a mutual material lexicon (Jacoby, 2004)

While existing research has ably reconstructed garment forms and courtly regalia, three gaps persist:

1. Transregional Exchange: Few studies compare how Islamic-European contact zones (e.g., Sicily, Crusader states) influenced sartorial practices (Jacoby, 2004).
2. Material Flows: The economic networks enabling textile trade (e.g., Andalusian silk to Genoa) remains underexamined (Contadini, 2011). Social Mobility: The tension between sumptuary laws and aspirational dressing merits deeper analysis (Gordon, 2011).

This paper addresses these gaps by analysing clothing as a medium of cross-cultural dialogue—particularly in regions of Islamic-European interaction—while foregrounding material culture's role in shaping identity and power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs three interdisciplinary theoretical lenses to analyse medieval Islamic clothing as both a cultural practice and an economic commodity. First, Material Culture Studies (Georgala, 2024), frames textiles as "social objects" whose meanings shifted across time and space. This approach reveals how garments functioned beyond mere utility—serving as carriers of identity, piety, and political messaging, evidenced by inscribed tiraz textiles and sumptuary laws. Second, Political Economy (Gordon, 2011) examines clothing as an instrument of state power, highlighting how dynasties like the Abbasids and Fatimids monopolized luxury textile production to reinforce hierarchy and fund governance. The khil'a (robe of honour) system, for instance, demonstrates how dress materialized loyalty and statecraft. Third, Cross-Cultural Exchange (Jacoby, 2004) contextualizes Islamic dress in terms of Mediterranean and Eurasian trade circles, the movement of silks, tailoring, and interconnection between trade, diplomacy and warfare. This mutuality is reflected in Crusader use of Islamic surcoats and in European demand of Baldacci silks. Synthesising these frameworks, the paper proposes a more delicate explanation of the medieval Islamic fashion as both:

1. Localized--adjusting to local climate, materials, religious standard;
2. Globalized-incorporated in commerce and cultural exchange.

This two-divided approach questions monolithic interpretations of Islamic dress, and instead portrays it as a dynamic system, dependent as it is created on systems of internal social organization and external interchanges. The combination of material, economic, and transnational approaches provide a paradigm through which to analyse premodern fashion as a platform where tradition and innovation negotiate with one another.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that clothing in medieval Islamic societies was far more than utilitarian—it was a cultural marker, political instrument, and economic resource. Through analysis of Abbasid, Fatimid, Umayyad, and Mamluk sartorial traditions, the research has revealed how garments mediated between religious principles of modesty and regional aesthetic diversity, while also operating within the circuits of trade and diplomacy that linked Islam and Europe.

Key findings highlight that:

- Luxury textiles such as silk were not only symbols of authority but also drivers of Mediterranean economic systems.
- Court dress and dynastic colours functioned as tools of legitimacy and political messaging.
- Zones of contact (e.g., Al-Andalus, Sicily, Crusader states) served as laboratories of hybrid fashion, where Islamic and European styles mutually influenced one another.
- Sumptuary laws and religious regulations both reinforced hierarchies and occasionally allowed aspirational dressing that blurred social boundaries.

This paper ultimately reframes medieval Islamic dress as a dual phenomenon: deeply local in its reflection of internal hierarchies, yet profoundly global in its role within premodern cross-cultural exchanges.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Gendered perspectives: Explore how women's dress practices, often less documented, shaped cultural and economic interactions.
2. Everyday dress and labour: Move beyond elite and courtly clothing to study artisans, traders, and rural populations.
3. Technological studies: Integrate textile science (weaving structures, dye analysis) to complement historical interpretations.
4. Comparative studies: Expand to non-Mediterranean frontiers (e.g., Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa) to see how Islamic fashion interacted with other cultural zones.

By broadening the scope in these directions, future scholarship can further illuminate how dress operated at the intersection of faith, power, and global connectivity in the medieval world.

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