On the Semitic Origin of the English Word *fustian*

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The English word *fustian*, together with its cognates in Romance languages, belongs to the host of terms that as yet did not get to a certain etymology. At least three different ways of explaining its origin have been proposed.

Being a technical term for a twilled cloth with a cotton weft and a short nap—a fabric known since the Middle Ages—the word *fustian* is said on one hand to be derived from *al-Fustāṭ*, the oldest Arabic name of Cairo, the capital of Egypt, in its turn the land where the cotton textile industry first developed. On the other hand *fustian* is said to derive, via Old French *fustaigne* and Anglo-French *fustayn*, from Medieval Latin *fustaneum*, an adjective meaning “wooden, ligneous” and referring to cotton as “woody wool.”

A third opinion maintains that *fustian* is a word of Persian or Turkish extraction. Yet the fact that the original medieval fustian had a linen warp may steer the research for the etymology of its English name in the direction of a Semitic word used by the Canaanite languages. The area where these languages have been spoken has an old tradition of making cloth out of flax.

1 Words without a Certain Etymology

The English word *fustian* and its cognates in some other European languages, mostly Romance languages, as well as in a number of languages of the Mediterranean basin and farther on¹ belong to a host of terms that did not, until now, reach a certain etymology.²

It is suitable to state in advance that not all the cognates of the word *fustian* share the same meaning. While in English, Dutch, and in the Romance lan-

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¹ See French *futaine*, Italian *fustagno*, Spanish *fustán* and *fustaina*, Catalan *fustany*, Portuguese *fustão*, Sicilian *fustamu*, Dutch *fustein*, Arabic *fustân*, Turkish *fıstan*, Persian *festân*, Albanian *fustan*, Greek *phoustáni* (φουστάνι), and Esperanto *fusteno*. Rumanian is the only Romance language where a cognate of *fustian* is absent, see Balaci 1996: 443; Ciorănescu 2001: 15, s.v. *aba*.

² An authoritative opinion on the uncertainty of the etymology of the Italian cognate of English *fustian*, i.e. *fustagno*, has been couched by De Mauro 2000: 1008.
guages they mean a specific kind of fabric, namely a twilled cloth with a cotton weft and short nap, a fabric known since the Middle Ages, in Arabic (fustān), Turkish (fıstan), Persian (festān), Albanian (fustan), and Greek (phoustānī) the cognates of fustian mean a light woman’s dress.

By the way, the semantic shift from a fabric to a garment tailored with that fabric is not unusual. This kind of metonymy has affected, for instance, English words like blue jeans3 and jersey.4 In Italian, I can mention the case of barracano, from Arabic barrakān, once a synonym of fustagno (see Lehmann-Stroux 2011: 592; cf. German Barchent “fustian”), now a word meaning a heavy goat-wool or camel hair fabric and by extension a long woollen, but also cottony or silken, garment used in North Africa (see Lessico Universale Italiano 1969: 679; De Mauro 2000: 258). Another good example is Italian orbace, from Arabic al-bazz “the cloth”: a coarse handmade waterproof woollen fabric from Sardinia which became the name of the Italian fascist party uniform made of black orbace (see De Mauro 2000: 1699). In reality, no one would ever find a garment called fustian or the like that has been tailored with a heavy fabric such as fustian. That means that a woman’s dress, called fustān or the like, in North Africa and in the Middle East was and still is tailored with another kind of cloth.

Only the Andalusian Arabic word fušṭān and its allomorph fušṭāl, the latter of which is mentioned by Pedro de Alcalá’s Vocabulista aravigo en letra castellana (Grenada 1505, see Dozy 1881: 269), are said to have meant “fustian,” but it may be that they too meant a less heavy linen or cotton cloth. In any case fušṭān/ fušṭāl lives on in Spanish as fustán and fustal with the meaning of “fustian.” The Persian language, in its turn, presents the problematic word fāstūnī “serge, worsted, a strong material of combed wool used to make jackets and trousers,” a term which is believed to have come from Russia along with the concerned material (see Moin 1985/1987: 2470; Dehkhoda 1963: 20).5 Nevertheless the segment -tūn- of this word reminds the Persian term tūne “fringe, edge, border, salvage” (see Steingass 1892: 337), a term tightly associated with a fabric. Moreover, in the jargon of the Iranian carpet-sellers I have consulted, tūn means “warp.”7

3 Blue jeans is the name of a rough blue-coloured cotton cloth once exported from Genoa that became the name of well-known practical and resistant style of working trousers with five pockets.
4 Jersey is the name of a soft combed-wool knitted fabric that became the name of a kind of pullover.
5 See also fāstūnī in www.farsidic.com.
6 Steingass (1892: 928) translates Persian festān “a loose gown, petticoat.”
7 See the saying tūn o pūd-e dāstī-ye mā hast “the warp and the weft of our friendship hold well.”