

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 derive from *al-Fustāt*, 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 had an old tradition in making cloth of flax.

1. The English word *fustian* and its cognates in some other European languages, mostly Romance, as well as in a number of languages of the Mediterranean basin and farther on¹ belong to the host of terms that did not get until now to 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, in Dutch and in the Romance languages they mean a specific

¹ See French *futaine*, Italian *fustagno*, Spanish *fustán* and *fustaño*, Catalan *fustany*, Portuguese *fustão*, Sicilian *fustanu*, Dutch *fustein*, Arabic *fustān*, Turkish *fistan*, Persian *festān*, Albanian *fustan*, Greek *phoustáni* (φουστάνι), and Esperanto *fusteno*. Rumanian is the only Romance language where a cognate of *fustian* is absent, cf. Balaci 1996:441; 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.

kind of fabric, namely a twilled cloth with a cotton weft and short nap, a fabric known since the Middle Ages, on the contrary in Arabic (*fustān*), Turkish (*fistan*), Persian (*festān*), Albanian (*fustan*) and Greek (*phoustáni*) 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 affected, for instance, English words like *blue jeans*³ and *jersey*.⁴ In Italian I can mention the case of *barracano*, from Arabic *barrakān*, once a synonym of *fustagno*,⁵ 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.⁶ Another good example is Italian *orbace*, from Arabic *al-bazz* "the cloth": a coarse handmade waterproof woollen fabric from Sardinia which gave the name of the Italian fascist party uniform made of black orbace.⁷ But 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 the 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 *fuṣṭān* and its allomorph *fuṣṭāl*, the latter of which is mentioned by Pedro de Alcalá's *Vocabulista aravigo en letra castellana* (Grenada 1505),⁸ are said to have meant "fustian", but it may be that they too meant a less heavy linen or cotton cloth. In any case *fuṣṭān/fuṣṭāl* 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.⁹ Nevertheless the segment *-tūn-* of this word reminds the Persian term *tūne* "fringe, edge, border, salvage",¹⁰ a term tightly associated with a fabric. Moreover, in the jargon of the Iranian carpet-sellers I have consulted, *tūn* means "warp".¹¹

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 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 Cf. Lehmann-Stroux 2011:592. Cf. German *Barchent* "fustian".

⁶ Cf. *Lessico Universale Italiano* 1969:679; De Mauro 2000:258.

⁷ Cf. De Mauro 2000:1699.

⁸ Cf. Dozy 1881:269.

⁹ Cf. Moin 1985/1987:2470; Dehkhoda 1963:20. See also *fāstūnī* in www.farsidic.com.

¹⁰ Cf. Steingass 1892:337. Steingass (1892: 928) translates Persian *festān* "a loose gown, petticoat".

¹¹ See the saying *tūn o pūd-e dūstī-ye mā hast* "the warp and the weft of our friendship hold well".

The shape and the fabric of the woman's dress in question have not been stable and actually changed in time and space, yet it seems that its oldest fashion consisted in a short low-necked gown to wear above the trousers.¹²

The Sicilian cognate of *fustian* too, namely *fustanu*, means a woman's dress, in particular a skirt or a petticoat, but, as in English, it also means the well known fabric.¹³

A peculiarity of the Turkish¹⁴, Albanian¹⁵ and Greek¹⁶ cognates of *fustian* is that they mean at the same time a woman's dress and a particular man's suit, the *fustanella*, once worn by men in Greece and Albania, a light jacket whose inferior hems look like a knee-length pleated skirt.¹⁷ The question is which of the two meanings, woman's dress or man's suit, came first. Early Arabic evidence seems to suggest that in the 14th century some people in Mecca wore garments made of «a cotton fabric called *fustian*».¹⁸ As a matter of fact the famous Moroccan traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-1368/69) tells in his *Riḥla* (I, 351) that in Mecca he saw in a dream a Meccan sheikh «wearing a short white tunic of cotton fabric called *fuṣṭān* which he used sometimes to put on».¹⁹ In reality we do not know whether, at that time, *fuṣṭān* meant a heavy cotton fabric like the current fustian or a lighter and thinner kind of cotton cloth.

Probably the fact that the white cotton tunic mentioned by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was short (maybe it did not reach the knees and was tight-waisted) hints at its being worn by men on a

¹² Dozy (1881:266) translates Arabic *fustān* as “*cotte, jupe, robe pour femme, non ouverte par le milieu*”, i.e. “skirt, petticoat, a woman's dress not open in the middle”. Quoting Marcelin Beausnier's *Dictionnaire pratique arabe-français*, Alger 1871, Dozy (1881:269) ascribes to the Arabic variant *fuṣṭān* the meaning of “*étoffe brodée que les Mauresques mettent par-dessus le pantalon quand elles sortent*”, i.e. “an embroidered cloth the Moresque women wear above the trousers when they go out”. Steingass (1892:928) explains the Persian word *festān* as “a loose gown, petticoat”.

¹³ Cf. Tropea 1985:166.

¹⁴ Cf. Zenker 1866:666: “*Weiberrock*”, i.e. “a woman's skirt”, and “*die Fustanella, der weite Rock (wie die Arnauten tragen), auch eine Art Beinkleid*” or, with Redhouse's words (1890:1384) ‘a kilt-like skirt of white calico, worn by men in Albania’.

¹⁵ Cf. Fjalori 1980:520.

¹⁶ Cf. Andriōtē 1971:410; *Dizionario Greco Moderno - Italiano* 1993:1070.

¹⁷ The *fustanella* has become the uniform of the Greek presidential guard, the Evzones.

¹⁸ So is written in three manuscripts of Ibn Battuta's *Riḥla*. Other manuscripts present the word *quṣṭān* “kaftan”, cf. *Kitāb riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* 1904:92–93; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 2008:168.

¹⁹ Cf. Gibb 1995:218: *wa-kunt arā-hu ḥin dhālik lābis jubba bayḍā qaṣīra min thiyāb al-quṭn al-mad'ūwa bi-l-fuṣṭān kān yalbasu-hā fī ba'd al-awqāt*.

pair of trousers, just as the jacket of the Evzones. Anyhow I do not believe that those trousers looked like the white tights of the Greek Presidential Guards.²⁰

A similar tunic, also called *fustān*, worn on a long skirt or loose-fitting trousers, keeps on being fashionable among ladies, from Morocco to Turkey and Iran.

2. One can number at least three different opinions concerning the origin of *fustian* and of its cognates.

(a) Being a technical term for a twilled cloth with a cotton weft and short nap, the word *fustian* is said to derive from al-Fuṣṭāt, the oldest Arabic name (from Latin *fossatum*) of Cairo, the capital of Egypt, the land where the cotton textile industry first developed in the Mediterranean area. This etymology is maintained by, among others, Dauzat 1938:348; Hatzfeld - Darmesteter 1964:1135; Andriōtē 1971:410; *Oxford English Dictionary* 1989:292; *Diccionario* 1992:711.

(b) On the other hand *fustian* is said to derive, via Old French *fustaigne*, from Medieval Latin *fustaneum*, an adjective meaning “wooden, ligneous” (from Latin *fustis*) and referring to cotton as a vegetable wool, cf. German *Baumwolle* and Swedish *bomull* “cotton”.²¹ This etymology has been sided by, among others, Wartburg 1934:920; Devoto - Oli 1971:969; *Trésor* 1980:1350; Mpampiniōtē 2010:1555.

(c) As for the Arabic cognate of *fustian*, namely *fustān*, the Arabic lexicon *al-Munğid* (1966:581) maintains that it is a word of Persian origin, as often the Arabic lexicographers do when they are confronted with words they consider of foreign extraction. Actually neither Freytag (1835) nor Lane (1877) enter *fustān* in their dictionaries, for it is not among the words that the Arabic traditional lexicography regarded as authentically Arabic. In their turn Belot (1952:272), Corriente (1970:226), Wehr (1979:833) enter Arabic *fustān* without giving any etymology. Instead Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi (1986:655) link *fustān* with *fiston*, a conjectural Turkish word. Evidently it is a misinterpretation of the French word *veston* “jacket”. To this latter refer Traini (1966:1085) and Baldissera (2004:415). Dozy (1881:266) had already asserted that Arabic *fustān* is of Turkish origin, but he did not link the Turkish cognate with a presumable loanword from an European language. On the contrary Dauzat (1938:348) maintains that Andalusian Arabic *fuṣṭān* has a Romance origin.

²⁰ The close-fitting breeches under a long jacket appear in the figurative arts as the most popular man’s suit in Medieval Europe.

²¹ Cf. *Trésor* 1980:1350: Septuaginta Greek *xúlina lína* “cotton cloths”, from *xúlon* “wood; tree, plant; stick”.

3. I set aside the etymologies (a) from Arabic [*al-ʔustāt*] and (c) from French *veston*, which I deem untenable for both historical and phonetical reasons, and I take into account only the etymology (b) from Medieval Latin *fustaneum*. With regard to this etymology I think that it is based on an ingenious hypothesis, but that, nevertheless, it is the outcome of an erudite but incorrect medieval explanation. This latter consisted, in my opinion, in identifying the segment *fust-* of *fustian* and its cognates with the root of Latin *fustis* “stick; pole; perch”, and in considering *fustis* as a synonym of “tree”. Hence cotton became the “wool of a tree”.

Instead, relying on the Andalusian Arabic evidence, that is *fuṣṭān* and its allomorph *fuṣṭāl*, I believe that the theme **fust-* of present-day English *fustian* goes back to an original theme **pišt-* of Semitic provenance. It is known that the fustian fabric in former times had a warp of linen and a weft of cotton, that is to say it was not exclusively made of cotton as it is nowadays.²² Now, I deem it probable that the theme **fustān-* originally would refer to the flax component of the fabric rather than its cotton component, which later got the upper hand. By looking at the languages of the Mediterranean basin we find that linen was called <pšt> in Phoenician.²³ Since the 3rd millennium BC we have evidence that Egyptian linen was imported into Lebanon and Syria.²⁴

In Biblical Hebrew, a sister language of Phoenician, *péšet* means “flax” as well as “linen”²⁵ and *pištā* means both “flax” and “wick”.²⁶ In Modern Hebrew too flax as well as linen are called *pištā*.²⁷ Linen as material is also called *pištān*²⁸, while *pištānī*²⁹ means “linen” as an adjective as well as “a linen manufacturer” or “a linen seller”.

It is significant that in Modern Hebrew the English word *fustian* is translated *pištān gas* “rough linen” or *ša ‘aṭnēz šel pištīm we-kūtnā* “mixture of flax and cotton”³⁰, where *ša ‘aṭnēz* means “mingling of fabrics”, i.e. the prohibited mixture of fibres according to the Jewish precept no. 238 ‘You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen’ (Deut. 22:11).

²² *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1971:1059–1060.

²³ Cf. the Carthaginian inscription *CIS*, I°, no. 4874: *b’lyḥn bn m.../ mkr h-pšt* “Ba’alyaḥon son of M... / linen dealer”.

²⁴ Cf. Biga - Roccati 2012:28, note 34.

²⁵ Cf. Brown - Driver - Briggs 1977:833.

²⁶ Cf. Brown - Driver - Briggs 1977:834.

²⁷ Cf. Artom 1965:715; Achiasaf 2010:215.

²⁸ Cf. Artom 1965:715; Sivan - Levenston 1967:576; Levenston - Sivan 1968:638.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cf. Artom 1965:882; Levenston - Sivan 1968:458.

Therefore the history of *fustian* and of its cognates in different languages can be reconstructed, in my opinion, in the following way. The Hebrew and probably also the Phoenician word *pištān*, meaning “linen”, seeped into Spain long before or during the Arabic occupation of Andalusia, been brought there by Jewish weavers. In Spain *pištān* conformed itself to the Arabic pronunciation, so that it became **fištān*³¹ and, at the same time, its theme **fišt-* merged into the theme of the Spanish word *fuste* “shaft” becoming that way **fušt-*: we get so *fuštān*, a dialect word that the Andalusian grammarian Ibn Hishām al-Lakhmī (d. 1182) already defined *thiyāb al-rūm* “a Roman garment”³², in his treatise *al-Radd ‘alā Zubaydī fī Laḥn al-‘awāmm*.³³ Probably the phonetic coincidence of *fuštān* with Spanish *fuste* is the circumstance that triggered what I deem a false etymology: the derivation of *fustian* and its cognates from Latin *fustis* “stick; pole; perch” through the Medieval Latin *fustaneum*. Owing to that merging, Hebrew *pištān* became that way *fuštān* and later *fustán* as it reads nowadays in Spanish. The spreading of the Andalusian word *fustān* in all the countries of North Africa, in the Middle East as well as in Turkey and Persia might have been enhanced by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and by the exclusion of the Moriscos between 1609 and 1614. It could well be that the old pronunciation with the vowel *-i-* has been preserved in Turkish *fistan* and in Persian *festān*.

What possibly happened in the meantime at the semantic level? I think that the original meaning of *pištān/fuštān/fustān* “linen cloth” shifted in Spain to “cotton cloth”. An evidence of this semantic change could be the meaning “petticoat, slip” that Spanish *fustán* preserves nowadays in South America as an archaism.³⁴ I do not know when (perhaps since the 14th century?) and where the weaving technique for the production of fustian by combining a linen warp with a cotton weft was first introduced. Maybe it has been worked out somewhere in Europe outside Spain, for only in Europe, present-day Spain and Portugal inclusive, the word *fustian* and its cognates mean “a twilled cloth with a cotton weft and a short nap”.

³¹ In Hebrew [p] and [f] are allphones of the same phoneme /P/, while in Arabic /P/ is pronounced only [f].

³² With the meaning of “European or Western garment”.

³³ Cf. Ahwānī s.d.:202: www.almaktabah.net/vb/showthread.php?t=100070.

³⁴ Cf. *Diccionario* 1992:711. In the same page of the *Diccionario* appears also *fusta* with the meaning “*cierto tejido de lana*”. See also Greek *phousta* “petticoat”, cf. *Prōias* s.d.:2559, and *fustē* “petticoat”, cf. Leotti 1937:237.

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