

Bursa misses its silk

Onaylayan Administrator
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Bursa became a center of silk-weaving 1200 years ago thanks to cocoons brought from China and was a silk manufacturing base for many years. However, as a result of poor agricultural policy and migration from rural areas to the big cities, silkworm farming died out and with it, silk production. For centuries the city was known throughout the world for its silk and the silk industry, which also laid the foundations for what has become one of today's most important textile centers. Now there is an effort to revive this historic trade.

The Bursa silk industry began around 520 AD when silkworm cocoons were secretly smuggled from China into the Byzantine Empire. Because the climate was suitable for raising silkworms, it developed in the Ottoman Empire, reaching its zenith in the 15th and 16th centuries. In addition to the royal palace, the largest buyers of Bursa silk were Genoa, Florence and Venice with the historic Koza Han serving as the center of the silk trade. Until the 19th century, artisans continued the silk industry with local technology in houses and small businesses; then, they were introduced to new technology developed in Europe and the number of filatures in the city in the 1860's increased to 90.

Most of these were closed down due to the First World War, but during the days of the Republic 25 silk filatures and 54 silk weaving factories were still in operation. However, in the 1990's there was not a single silk thread filature or silk loom left in the city. The last silk processing facility in Turkey, Kozabirlik Silk Filature and Spinning Factory, locked its doors in 1995. As the silk industry, which had been one of the city's symbols, became a thing of the past, "Bursa Silk" took its place in the dusty annuals of history.

The courtyard of Koza Han used to be filled with sacks of cocoons when the cocoon market was set up, but today, it is a tea garden filled with umbrellas. The word 'silk' is today only found on the signs of shops that sell artificial silk in the historic Koza Han and on Silk Industry Boulevard in the Karaagac section of the city where the silk manufacturing facilities used to be located.