



Book Reviews

PREHISTORIC, ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN AND AEGEAN TEXTILES AND DRESS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANTHOLOGY BY MARY HARLOW, CÉCILE MICHEL AND MARIE-LOUISE NOSCH (EDS)

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Recent years have seen a rising tide of interest in the study of early textile production in the Old World; research has been focused not just on the archaeology of surviving textiles and textile tools, but on the multifarious written and iconographic sources which shed light on the context of ancient textile making. The Centre for Textile Research (CTR) of the University of Copenhagen (funded 2004–2014 by the Danish National Research Foundation) has been a high-profile beneficiary of this trend, and a major contributor to it, in co-operation with partners and funding bodies across Europe – and indeed the world. In a conference held in 2003 in Lund and Copenhagen, initiated by the group who were to become the leading lights in CTR the problems of handling the uneven spread of types of source material across Europe and Western Asia and hence the disparate approaches of scholars were recognised. In the CTR's research program such issues were explicitly addressed from a variety of angles.

Stated baldly, scholars in northern Europe extract and interpret what information they can from excavated textile remains, aided increasingly by DNA and stable isotope analysis *inter alia*, while corresponding research in later prehistoric Greece and Mesopotamia seeks information primarily from extant texts on Linear B and cuneiform tablets and contemporary iconography, given the virtual absence of textile remains. Can fruitful cross-fertilisation be achieved?

The volume under review is an outcome of a joint research enterprise by the CTR and the CNRS research group Histoire et Archéologie de l'Orient Cunéiforme concentrating on the Bronze Age societies of the Aegean and Mesopotamia. The 13 papers included offer a pot-pourri of attempts by mostly early-career scholars to wrestle with recalcitrant primary sources across the research spectrum and extract some meaning from them. There is some – but not much – scope for adopting a theoretical perspective.

No contributor is concerned primarily with archaeological textiles, even where they exist. (The HERA research project 'Creativity and Craft Production in Middle and Late Bronze Age Europe' (CinBA) (2007–2013) provides the broader European perspective through its publications.) Textile tools are the substitute. P. Mazăre (Chapter 1) presents an exhaustive corpus of textile impressions, spindle whorls, loom-weights and 'spools' from 54 sites in Transylvania (Romania) dating to c. 6000–3500 BC, while S. Vakirtzi and colleagues (Chapter 2) catalogue, compare and contrast the spindle whorls from two Late Bronze Age sites on Thassos. Both articles are supported by multiple summary tables, and, to bring life to the rather arid statistics, both quote the results of the spinning experiments conducted at the CTR to suggest what qualities of yarn and woven cloth their finds might represent. Some more elaborate ivory and bone shafts from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean are reviewed by C. Sauvage (Chapter 9): she argues that those with a pomegranate-shaped terminal served as distaffs, those with a whorl affixed (in 'high' or 'low' position on the shaft) were spindles – though there is much variation, and some practical difficulties with the interpretation.

Students of textile implements by themselves are spared one problem familiar in historical textile research: matching the evidence provided by one type of source with that of another. Textile remains and tools, representations in iconography, documentary records and their linguistic content may present a coherent picture as individual topics, but combining them into a seamless story is fraught with challenges. G. Baccelli and her colleagues (Chapter 5) were acutely aware of the issue in offering an account of textile production in second-millennium (Hittite) Anatolia, but rather optimistically suppose that more specialist research can provide the solution.

Most scholars of ancient Mesopotamia concentrate on the cuneiform tablets in Sumerian and Akkadian. R. Firth in a densely argued paper (Chapter 3) examines what can be learnt about the character of the royal textile industry from the written records from Girsu (Sumer) (c. 2200–2100 BC: it was clearly important to the clerks to note the weight of a textile, but the terms with which they denote textile quality are barely understood. By contrast L. Quillien's discourse on flax and linen in first-millennium Babylonia (Chapter 12) based on Sumerian texts from Uruk and Sippar finds insights into the textile *chaîne opératoire* revealed by the otherwise largely administrative documents. She is able to place flax/linen – an archaic textile material in a world of wool – into its religious and social context.

Four papers are devoted to topics in the costume history of the Aegean and Mesopotamian worlds. In this field it has proved more rewarding to study the iconography of Bronze Age societies rather than the documents with their semantic uncertainties. The art of Mari (third to first millennium BC) rather than the well-known texts provides a

platform for A. Thomas (Chapter 4) to define the local royal attire: the repertory included both wrap-around rectangular garments supported by a belt at the waist and sewn tunics slipped over the head. In Chapter 11 T. Boloti muses on what *e-ri-ta*, a well-known priestess at Pylos, might have worn officially. It was not the familiar flounced dress of Mycenaean ladies, but a full-length apparently plain tunic decorated with a vertical band and coupled with a cylindrical cap. Much depends of course on whether representations of priestesses can be correctly identified.

In societies where clothing was enhanced by metal applied ornament, another approach to costume history is feasible. E. Konstantinidi-Syvidi (Chapter 6) reviews succinctly what may be concluded about the often enigmatic metal fittings found in graves – buttons, rosettes, gold foil, ‘tubes’ and so on. It is plausible to regard them as accessories sewn to or suspended from certain Mycenaean garments. S. Gaspa (Chapter 10) offers some parallels from a Babylonian and Assyrian milieu where such appliques adorn bedclothes and soft furnishings as well as clothing. His critical treatment of the material taps into the evidence of the texts, art and –exceptionally – the grave furniture of Nimrud Tomb II, a late 8th-century royal burial in which some 700 gold ornaments were associated with surviving linen textiles.

Three further chapters stand somewhat aside from the rest. V. Gasbarra (Chapter 7) considers the issue of *Wanderwörter*, migrating loanwords of Semitic origin occurring in Mycenaean Greek – and implying migrating textiles or textile technology. As an exercise in theory A. Garcia-Ventura (Chapter 8) makes a valiant attempt to elucidate how ‘masculinities’ might be constructed in textile production in the ancient Near East. There is some special pleading, and the exercise holds more interest than its conclusions. Finally, O. Shamir (Chapter 13) examines how the Jewish legal prescriptions against mixing wool and flax, and promoting the addition of tassels to the corners of mens’ cloaks, is reflected in the extant archaeological textiles. Potential attested infringements seem to be rare.

It has to be admitted that this volume is hard reading, particularly for a reader with limited knowledge of Aegean and Near Eastern archaeology and prehistory, and the sources on which they draw. There is no map of the sites mentioned and no chronological table or the equivalent for orientation. Moreover, the determined reader might fairly ask; what was the point of this ‘anthology’? There is no preamble to set the scene, nor epilogue to draw the threads from the juxtaposed studies together. There are no cross-references from one contribution to another. Admittedly, the companion volume (*Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited again by M. Harlow and M-L. Nosch) which was published later in the same year, has a lengthy introductory chapter, some of which is obliquely relevant to the present volume; but a specific editorial contribution to the prehistoric volume might have been helpful. The scholarly qualities of the work by the 17 contributing authors, however, and its long-term value, is not to be denigrated. The collected papers with their extensive bibliographies and revelation of multifarious outstanding problems inherent in the research field offer a pressing stimulus to further enquiry.

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