Textiles in a social context and First Textiles
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Contents

Editorial 2

Articles

Bronze Age Moss Fibre Garments from Scotland - the Jury’s Out 3
Susanna Harris and Margarita Gleba

Textiles from the Chalcolithic Period, Early and Middle Bronze Age in the Southern Levant 12
Orit Shamir

Brocaded in Gold: Two Tablet-Woven Baldrics at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Germany 26
Claudia Merthen

Textiles of the 17th and 18th Centuries from the Excavations at Tara Fortress, Siberia, Russia 31
Tamara N. Glushkova, Sergey S. Tataurov and Sergey S. Tikhonov

Iron Age Finger-Loop Braiding: Finds from the Hallstatt Salt Mine 39
Karina Grömer, Katrin Kania and Joy Boutrup

Preliminary Analyses of Silk Flowers from Modern Graves in Poland 47
Małgorzata Grupa

Exploring a Medieval Patterned Silk Weaving in Honour of its Master Designer 54
Irene Skals

Standardised Mapping System for the Digital Documentation of Organic Materials on Metal Finds and In-Situ-Blocs 60
Britt Nowak-Böck and Helmut Voß

Transparent Textiles: Experiments in Plain Gauze Carried Out on a Small-Frame Loom 70
Ulrikka Mokdad

Archaeological Textiles from an Ore-Washing Workshop in the French Alps 75
Emeline Retournard

Preliminary Approaches for the Identification and Classification of Mediterranean Murex Dye Production Sites 89
Natalie M. Susmann
Further Textile Artefacts from the Royal Crypt at Prague Castle (CZ): A Tablet-Woven Silk Band and Fragments of a Child’s Funeral Tunic
Milena Bravermanová and Helena Březinová

Projects

TexSEt: Textile Technology in Central Tyrrhenian Italy from Late Prehistory to the Etruscan Period
Romina Laurito

Leather, Fur and Skin Technology in the Iron Age Salt Mines at Dürrnberg near Hallein, Austria and Chehrābād, Iran
Gabriela Ruš-Popa

Early Iron Age Tablet Weaving in Denmark
Lise Ræder Knudsen

The Textile MATRIX Exhibition
Ellen Harlizius-Klück

Reflections on an International Collaboration on a Corpus of Early Anglo-Saxon textiles from the RAF Lakenheath Cemeteries, Suffolk, England
Sue Harrington and Susan Möller-Wiering

Reviews

Textiles in a Social Context and First Textiles - Two Conferences on Prehistoric Textiles
Malgorzata Siennicka

A New Look at Textiles in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages
Rebecca Peake and Yann Lorin

Silks from the Silk Road: Origin, Transmission and Exchange.
International Symposium
Marie-Louise Nosch

The Fabric of Life: Approaches to Textile Resources, Economy and Production in Ancient Italy
Jacobo Tabolli

Textiles at the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) Meeting 2015
Sophie Bergerbrant

Resources

News
Małgorzata Siennicka

Textiles in a Social Context and First Textiles – Two Conferences on Prehistoric Textiles

13 September 2014, Istanbul, Turkey and 7-8 May 2015, Copenhagen, Denmark

In 2013 the collaborative research project First Textiles, The Beginnings of Textile Manufacture in Europe and the Mediterranean was initiated by Małgorzata Siennicka at the Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen, Denmark (http://ctr.hum.ku.dk/economy/first_textiles/).

The project focuses on the beginnings of textile manufacture, tools and techniques, principally in the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in Europe and the Mediterranean. One of the main objectives is to review and systematise recent achievements in the field of research into the most ancient textiles and textile techniques and to set the agenda for further work. A main activity of the project is the organisation of two international scientific meetings and the subsequent publication of their proceedings.

The session Textiles in a Social Context. Textile Production in Europe and the Mediterranean in the 4th and 3rd Millennia BCE at the European Archaeologists Association (EAA) conference in Istanbul in 2014 was organised by Małgorzata Siennicka together with Lorenz Rahmstorf from the Institute for Pre- and Protohistory, University of Mainz, Germany, now at the SAXO Institute, University of Copenhagen, Denmark and Agata Ulanowska from the Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, now at the Centre for Research on Ancient Technologies at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences. The session aimed to explore the social context and cultural aspects of textile manufacture and to present recent research on textiles based on archaeological, ethnographic, textual, iconographic and experimental evidence. The meeting comprised of 18 oral and three poster presentations (for a detailed summary of the presentations see also The European Archaeologist 43 (Winter) 2015, 41-44).

The chronological focus of the session was on the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, divided into five sections on methodology, Anatolia and the Levant, the Aegean, the Carpathian Basin and the Balkans, as well as a poster session. The introduction by Lorenz Rahmstorf demonstrated various approaches used to investigate ancient textile production: ethnographic, iconographic, textual, contextual, experimental and material-typologic. In the methodology section several topics were discussed: ways of approaching textile production without preserved textiles or tools (E. Andersson Strand), studying textile impressions and imprints (S. Möller-Wiering), the famous iceman in the Ötztal Alps as a starting point for a discussion about regional and social variations in plant fibre technology, and the spread of textile techniques in Europe in around 3500 BCE (E. Wigforss).

In the Anatolia and Levant session the following topics were explored: Neolithic Anatolian stamp ‘seals’ and their possible use in textile production (A.U. Türkcan), textiles and textile tools from the Chalcolithic Southern Levant (O. Shamir), textile production in Western Anatolia in the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE (C. Britsch and
B. Horejs), textile manufacture at Arslantepe in Turkey during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC (R. Laurito), and secondary urbanisation and textile industry in the early Bronze Age in the northern Levant (L. Peyronel). In the third session on the Aegean, the focus was on iconographic evidence from Neolithic Greece (K. Sarri), the Cretan Neolithic and early Bronze Age evidence for the production of cloth (J. Cutler), archaeological evidence for textile production from the early Bronze Age in southern Greece (M. Siemicka), yarn production on the Aegean islands in the early Bronze Age (S. Vakirtzi), and the potential use of specialised band looms for weaving bands and starting borders in the Aegean (A. Ulanowska). The presentations in the last section on the Carpathian Basin and the Balkans treated the major Neolithic innovations in textile manufacture in south-eastern and central Europe (I.J. Chmidelewski), textile tools and other implements possibly associated with textile manufacture during the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age in Bulgaria (P. Hristova), textile tools and the introduction of the woolly sheep in central and south-eastern Europe (A. Grabundzija), the extraordinary find of a mineralised wooden structure from a burial tumulus in eastern Romania dating to the early Bronze Age (N. Bolohan, C. Lazanu and P. Mazure) and important changes in weaving technology and the organisation of textile production in early Bronze Age Bulgaria (V. Petkova). In the poster session we were introduced to atypical textile tools from Bulgaria (I. Valchev), woven fabrics in the Andronovo culture (E. Usmanova) and semantic web ontologies for ancient textile production (F. Lynam).

The aim of the two-day international conference First Textiles. The Beginnings of Textile Manufacture in Europe and the Mediterranean in 2015 was to present and discuss recent achievements in the field of textiles and textile techniques in Europe and the Near East in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age (c. 8th-3rd millennia BC).

The first day of the conference was hosted by The Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre for Textile Research at the University of Copenhagen. The first session was dedicated to fibres and textiles: textile plant production and trade (D. Fuller; S. Karg), development and changes in textile techniques from the Neolithic period to the Chalcolithic period in the southern Levant (O. Shamir), textile provenance investigations by isotopic tracing techniques (K.M. Frei), rare finds, unusual materials and different technologies for studying early textiles (L. Hurcombe), textiles from lacustrine Neolithic settlements at Lake Constance in south-west Germany (J. Banck-Burgess), the earliest cloth (skin and fur) culture in Denmark (U. Manering), and a review of clothing traditions in the southern Levant 13,500-4,000 BC (I. Levy). In the second session, experimental archaeology and cultural comparisons were discussed. Eva Andersson Strand introduced us to the world of the first looms. Karina Grömer dedicated her paper to experiments with Neolithic crescent-shaped loom weights from central Europe. Kalliopi Sarri explored the subject of decorative craft transfer in the Aegean in the Neolithic (textiles, baskets and pots). Finally, the functionality of early Bronze Age weaving tools from Greece was discussed by Agata Ulanowska.

The second day of the conference was hosted by the National Museum of Denmark. This day was dedicated to textile production and textile tools from different archaeological sites and contexts. Miriam de Diego presented a joint paper on textile technology in the Neolithic site of La Draga, Spain (M. de Diego, A. Palomo, R. Piqué, M. Saña, X. Terradas, I. Clemente, M. Mozota). Textile production in western Europe from the late Neolithic to the early Bronze Age was discussed in detail by Fabienne Médard. Maria Irene Ruiz de Haro presented an overview of the rare use of spinning bowls from the Chalcolithic period (in the Balkans, Palestine and Egypt) to the Iron Age (Iberian Peninsula). Ana Grabundzija debated the symbolic and functional role of early spindle whorls from south-eastern Europe, while Georgios Gavalas focused on textile production in the early Bronze Age in the Cyclades. Lisa Völling questioned the interpretation of early Bronze Age clay objects from Troy as spindle whorls. Textile implements from the Eskelehr region in north-western Anatolia were introduced by Deniz San. Carmen Maram presented an interpretation of textile impressions in clay on pottery, and finally Maria Rosaria Belgiorno summarised textile production in Pyrgos/Mavroraki on Cyprus c. 2,000 BC.

The proceedings of these two conferences will be published in 2016/2017 in a peer-reviewed volume edited by Małgorzata Siemicka, Agata Ulanowska and Lorenz Rahmstorf in the Ancient Textile Series published by Oxbow Books.