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ANCIENT TEXTILES SERIES VOL. 12

An Offprint of

TEXTILE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
ARCHAEOLOGY, EPIGRAPHY, ICONOGRAPHY

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ISBN 9781842174890

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Introduction: Archaeology, Epigraphy, Iconography

Textile is attested for more than 10,000 years in the Ancient Near East. During the Bronze Age textile production developed from household production to standardised, industrialised, centralised production. In order to visualize how textile research can contribute to a better understanding of ancient societies, the workshop *Textile Production in the Ancient Near East Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age* given at the 7th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East at the British Museum in April 2010 was organised by the Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen. During the workshop, interesting and well performed presentations were given by specialists in this research field. Furthermore, the workshop attracted a large audience and the discussions that followed the presentations were constructive, intense and scientifically well articulated. Many questions were raised and it was the impression of the organisers that a publication on these topics could contribute to a better understanding of textiles and textile production in the Ancient Near East. Additionally, it is important to analyse and discuss all the parameters of the technology and the development of textiles, their impact on society, and how textile tools and technology developed in this region. Thus, by combining epigraphic, iconographic and archaeological evidence with research on textile technology there is potential for discussion of the economic, social, and cultural impact of textiles on ancient society. In this publication several approaches are combined: textile tool studies, experimental testing, context studies and epigraphic as well as iconographical studies. The aim is first and most importantly to raise awareness of the existence of textiles and the importance of textile production and how it influenced early societies in this region. Furthermore the aim is also to demonstrate how, by combining different sources, new and important knowledge for the understanding of past can be obtained. Seventeen scholars have contributed in 13 articles. All these articles are written with different perspectives and aims but with one common thread to visualize textile and textile production in Ancient Near East.¹

In his article *Textile, Value and Early Economics of North Syria and Anatolia*, David R. A. Lumb demonstrates the importance of a theoretical approach and an essential source critical awareness. Further he introduces the reader to the importance of applying the concept of *economic* and *symbolic value* but foremost the *operational value* when discussing archaeological textiles, textile tools and production of textiles in written sources. Via this approach and focus on production and consumption of textiles, the textiles' economic and socio-political significance can be highlighted during ancient times. For example, he suggests that with these perspectives one can question the traditional modes of independent and attached production in North Syria and Anatolia.

¹ Some of the papers that were presented at the workshop dealt with earlier periods and have been published in a separate volume (Breniquet *et al.* 2012).

Janet Levi and Isaac Gilead, in their joint paper *The Emergence of the Ghassulian Textile Industry in the Southern Levant Chalcolithic Period (c. 4500–3900 BCE)*, combine archaeological explorations and experimental archaeology. It is a truly interdisciplinary work containing tool studies, textile studies, contexts and an experimental part combined with ethnographic data. The interesting contribution is their aim to calculate and quantify the work process of linen fabrics in terms of labor, skill and time consumed. The discussion of spindle whorls and loom weights at various Chalcolithic sites is confronted with the textiles from the Caves of Treasure and Cave of Warrior dated to 5th and 4th mill. The abundance of Chalcolithic textiles emphasizes how this craft is solidly established in the Chalcolithic era. This brings about the interesting observation that the Chalcolithic textiles have remains of sewing but no needle have ever come to light in the relevant Chalcolithic excavations. This enlightens how quite simple textile tools can be used for making quite complex textiles of considerable sizes and quantities. The authors conclude that a household economy can potentially provide all the necessary skill, tools and labor to produce Chalcolithic fabrics. Attached and specialised crafts people are not necessary to produce these complex fabrics.

How can scholars from a different research area contribute to a better understanding of written texts concerning textiles? In *Visualising ancient Textiles – How to make a Textile visible on the Basis of an Interpretation of an Ur III Text*, Eva Andersson Strand and Maria Cybulska are discussing textile technology. Via ethnographic knowledge of textile craft, experimental textile archaeology and mathematic calculations they conclude that all the information given in the text is realistic: it is actually a description of how this textile was going to be produced, how long it took to make and finally how much raw material was used.

In his paper *Considering the Finishing of Textiles based on Neo-Sumerian Inscriptions from Girsu*, Richard Firth shows how detailed information on the production of fulled textiles can be extracted from the Girsu tablets. By combining analyses of the texts with knowledge of different fulling processes and he discusses how different types of textiles can be related to the various process. For example, that more man-power and material such as oil and alkali are needed when fulling a high quality textile than for a low quality textile.

How different sources can be combined is excellently presented in several papers. Via *e.g.* written sources, studies of tools and iconographical sources Joanna S. Smith make the reader aware of the existence of exclusive tapestries in her article *Tapestries in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages of the Ancient Near East*. Via evidence from texts (*e.g.* Akkadian *mardatum* and Ugaritic *mrtd*), surviving textiles (*e.g.* from Egypt), iconography in a wall decoration from Mari, tools (*e.g.* bone beaters), and areas for manufacture like the specific areas in Kition, she explores the weaving technique of tapestry and further discuss the use of tapestries as prestige items.

In *Throwing the Baby out with the Bathwater. Innovations in Mediterranean Textile Production at the End of the 2nd/Beginning of the 1st Millennium BCE*, Laura B. Mazow argues convincingly that the many Aegean and Cypriot large containers interpreted as ‘bathtubs’ instead are fulling installations. Her arguments are both contextual (coexistence with textile tools) architectural (with drain systems), practical (inbuilt bathtubs fixed in the floor would not be practical for bathing). Her study of the archives room at Thebes, in particular, makes an attractive case. She explains this popular ‘bathtub’ interpretation as a mixture of modern western ideas of cleanliness and hygiene combined with an unfortunate lack of knowledge about textile techniques.

In Agnete Wisti Lassen's paper *Technology and Palace Economy in Middle Bronze Age Anatolia: the Case of the Crescent Shaped Loom weight*, it is clearly demonstrated how discussion on the economic and social impact of textiles production can benefit from combining written documentation from e.g. Kültepe (ancient Kanesh), archaeological materials, for example loom weights and spindle whorls and finally experimental archaeology. In the conclusion she suggests that twill weaving and the crescent shaped loom weights were characteristic features of the Anatolian economy and textile technology and furthermore, that they reflect elements of both organization and ethnic identity in local society.

With a perspective of historiography and feminist theory, Allison Karmel Thomason discusses in her paper *Her Share of the Profits: Women, Agency, and Textile Production at Kültepe/Kanesh in the Early Second Millennium BC* the documentation of the Old Assyrian letters and in particular the status of Assyrian women. She highlights how women, who are generally absent or passive in ancient documentation, in the Old Assyrian letters are active players and voiced producers. When we take a closer look into the case of these Assyrian women, we come to appreciate their agency in economic matters, both on the social stage, but foremost from how they use their labour to produce textiles, which were then used to negotiate their financial and kin-related situations. She demonstrates how these sources can be used to deconstruct the preconception of female labor as confined to the private sphere and male commercial activities to the public sphere. Feminist historians have argued that this dichotomy was constructed in an 18th century Europe marked by the industrial revolution and that it was instrumental in the gendered ideology of the emerging middle class.

Catherine Breniquet-Cory's article *Functions and uses of textiles in the Ancient Near East. Summary and Perspectives* gives, with a source critical approach, an overview on which sources can be used when studying textiles. She discusses the value and use of textiles and adds to this the practical and also symbolic value. A very interesting but often neglected topic is textiles and their magical protection but also textiles for burial uses and prestigious gifts. The paper also considers the economic value of textiles and concludes that the level of socio-economic development in a long term perspective seems to be the key parameter to understand the role of textiles.

In *The Costumes of Inanna/Ishtar* Bernice R. Jones demonstrates how iconographic interpretations can be done to gain a better understanding for dress and how different garments can have been worn. Via experimental archaeology and detailed analyses of costumes on the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar she discusses how Ishtar's clothes are arranged in different situations and how the garments can be interpreted.

Nurith Goshen, Assaf Yasur-Landau and Eric H. Cline discuss in *Textile Production in Palatial and Non-Palatial Contexts: the Case of Tel Kabri* the difference in production between these types of contexts and also in the kingdom of Hazor. They conclude that Tel Kabri is located at the fringe of the Syro-Mesopotamian north-south trade networks that gave Kabri a very peripheral place in that interaction, and instead it turned towards the Aegean and Egyptian influences. This may explain why Tel Kabri did not develop the excessive textile production systems like neighboring cities and palaces further to the east. In their conclusion they argue for a difference in the organization of textile production that rather may be explained by different social-economic and political strategies than in palatial and non-palatial contexts.

Caroline Sauvage discusses in *Spinning from Old Threads: The Whorls from Ugarit* the Late Bronze Age spinning and textile industry in Ugarit from a carefully and well presented analysis of a large

group of spindle whorls from this area. She observes how the stone whorls primarily come from the settlement while bone and ivory spindle-whorls come from tombs. She also observes that both groups come in similar weight ranges, have similar morphologies and traces of wear, and she concludes that both stone and bone whorls had been in use, but are preserved in different contexts. Additionally, besides the interesting results on *e.g.* decoration, morphology and function, this study clearly demonstrates how new analyses of material from older excavations still can contribute to a better understanding of the textile production in the past.

Textile Production and Consumption in the Neo-Assyrian Empire is studied and discussed in detail by Salvatore Gaspa. Via documents from *e.g.* the archive of Nineveh he evaluates how raw materials and the finished products were managed by the central administration. The importance of textiles and textile production is clearly demonstrated via the rich terminology of textile products but also processes. Furthermore, he gives an overview of textile consumption within the palace, the government and private sectors and he discusses the consumption/production of textiles for different occasions, for example religious, military but also textiles mentioned in marriage contracts and given as gifts, and concludes that textiles have been powerful social indicators.

From Sir Leonard Wooley, we have an amusing statement, a quite significant attitude towards textile tools in archaeology:

*"I suppose it was Schliemann who first brought the spindle-whorl into prominence – a venial error in his case, but today there is no excuse for wasting space and money on this monotonous and profitless material."*²

Authors in this volume, however, show that Schliemann was right and Wooley was wrong in the assessment of the potentials of spindle whorls. To this end all the papers in this volume clearly demonstrate the potential of textile research. We thank all authors for their important contributions.

Finally, we kindly thank The Queen Margrethe's and The Price Consort Henrik's Foundation and the Danish National Research Foundation who funded the organisation of the workshop and this publication.

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October 2012

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² Wooley 1955, 271.