

The fabric of society: recognising the importance of textiles and their manufacture in the ancient past

Lin Foxhall*

* *School of Histories, Languages & Cultures, University of Liverpool, 12 Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 7WZ, UK (Email: lin.foxhall@liverpool.ac.uk)*

EVA ANDERSSON STRAND & MARIE-LOUISE NOSCH (ed.). *Tools, textiles and contexts: investigating textile production in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age* (Ancient Textiles Series 21). 2015. xiii+383 pages, numerous b&w and colour illustrations. Oxford & Philadelphia (PA): Oxbow; 978-1-84217-472-2 hardback £48.

MARIA C. SHAW & ANNE P. CHAPIN. *Woven threads: patterned textiles of the Aegean Bronze Age* (Ancient Textiles Series 22). 2016. 264 pages, numerous b&w and colour illustrations. Oxford & Philadelphia (PA): Oxbow; 978-1-78570-058-3 hardback £38.

STELLA SPANTIDAKI. *Textile production in Classical Athens* (Ancient Textiles Series 27). 2016. xxvii+228 pages, numerous b&w and colour illustrations. Oxford & Philadelphia (PA): Oxbow; hardback 978-1-78570-252-5 hardback £38.

<Woven Threads.jpg, place to left of text and wrap around> Until recently the study of textiles was a neglected specialist niche in archaeology, pursued by only a few scholars, the majority of whom were women. It was a field deemed to be of little significance and was largely marginalised by ‘mainstream’ archaeologists concerned with more ‘important’ themes. Fortunately, this situation has changed radically in the past 15 years. The critical roles that textiles and their manufacture played in past societies from before the Neolithic is increasingly recognised and taken into account in our understandings and interpretations of the past.

Elizabeth Barber (1991) correctly observed that one of the most important technological developments in prehistory was the invention of string, the first step in textile manufacture. Textiles were a major component of both ancient economies and social relationships. They were essential for many aspects of life from clothing, blankets and household furnishings, to hafting for tools, sacking, sails, tents, fishnets and lines, rope and numerous other uses. Their manufacture consumed thousands of hours of human labour. That this was, in a number of past cultures, largely women’s labour and skill is well documented, adding an important gendered dimension to our interpretations of how past societies

operated. The practices of textile manufacture also imply the development of other skills such as counting and weighing.

Beyond the utilitarian, textiles came to be used as clothing. In almost every society, people have used dress to define themselves and show others who they are, or at least who they want to be. Dress can also be used as a mode of displaying power or exerting control, to define others or to assign them a place in the hierarchy. Luxury textiles—woven to be beautiful and valuable things—were used to express specialness in many different ways, and to decorate and ornament homes, graves and sanctuaries. They demanded even more time to make than simpler utilitarian ones, and used more refined or expensive materials (e.g. gold or silver thread, purple dyes). Textiles became valuable objects of trade, and commodities central to diplomatic and other kinds of exchange. This is documented by sources such as royal correspondence between the Bronze Age rulers of the Eastern Mediterranean (e.g. the Amarna Letters), the Old Assyrian trade with the outpost in south-eastern Anatolia at Karum Kanesh, or the apparently thriving textile business run by the Queen of Mari in the Old Babylonian period. Similarly, palatial interests in textile manufacture are documented in Linear B tablets from Pylos and Knossos.

Except in very particular conditions and contexts, few textiles from the ancient world survive, but there is much we can learn from the fragments that do remain. Moreover, their indirect imprints, sometimes literally left on pottery and other materials, as well as representations of textiles in iconographic and textual sources, provide further valuable evidence of their manufacture, uses and meanings. The most important revolution in the study of textiles, however, is how much we can now learn about the people who made them and the kinds of products they made from the tools that they used. Generations of archaeologists ignored or even disposed of mundane household objects such as loom weights and spindle whorls, and certainly never published them properly. Sometimes tools associated with textiles or textile manufacture have not been recognised by excavators; for example, the bone tablet-weaving cards at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta (Dawkins 1929: pls CLXX, CLXXIII). This can make it difficult to seek out and study weaving tools from past publications, and indeed scholars have often struggled to find definitive evidence of tablet weaving in ancient Greece (*Textile production in Classical Athens*, pp. 72–73; *Tools, textiles and contexts*, p. 12).

One of the most important agents of change has been the Centre for Textile Research (CTR) at the University of Copenhagen, funded for ten years by the Danish National Research Foundation. All three of the volumes under review, in one way or another, have emerged from the environment of the CTR, and the authors of the two volumes not produced directly by the CTR (Spantidaki, and Shaw and Chapin) warmly acknowledge its support and inspiration. It is no exaggeration to say that the CTR,

under the leadership of Marie-Louise Nosch, has not only consolidated research around ancient textiles worldwide, it has also transformed it.

CTR's remit is very broad, covering the whole of the ancient world and, more recently, carrying out some activities in developing countries. But the core focus has been on the ancient Mediterranean, the Near East and Europe (including Viking Scandinavia); Nosch herself specialises in the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age. CTR's most important contribution to the field, however, has been methodological. The meticulous analysis of textiles and tools combined with a rigorous experimental programme has produced not only a useful database, but also a series of principles, guidelines, standards and formulae that enable other researchers to work out what kinds of textiles their surviving tools were best suited to make and how much time and labour it might have taken to make them. Their achievements have greatly expanded our knowledge of the technological processes involved in making textiles in the ancient world, and how the work of doing this was woven into the fabric of social life. They also have made it possible for other researchers to contribute easily to this ever growing body of knowledge.

Tools, textiles and contexts, edited by Strand and Nosch, presents the bulk of these technological and methodological results. The volume addresses the various processes of textile manufacture across the different stages of production from raw materials to finished products, and the range of technical parameters associated with them.

The first part of the volume (Chapters 1–5) focuses on textile tools, considering the types found in archaeological contexts as well as the full range that are likely to have been used in the technological and social settings of the ancient Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, especially during the Bronze Age. These are presented along with the results of meticulously documented experimental reconstructions of how these tools might have been most effectively used and for what. This work is developed further in Chapter 5, where the results of experimentation are combined with the data in the CTR database (for which there is a useful guide) to produce quantitative analyses and formulae for working out what kinds of textiles could be produced and how. So for example, using the CTR formulae and guidelines it is possible to calculate for one of my assemblages of pyramidal loom weights, each weighing about 60g with a maximum thickness of 3.3cm, that these could be used to make a fine, open-textured cloth with about 15 threads tied to each loom weight, producing a warp with about 9 threads per cm. Hence a 1m-wide loom would need about 60 loom weights (arranged in two rows); a 2m-wide loom would need about 120. It is also possible to adjust the calculations for alternative parameters, for example, how many loom weights would be needed for a tighter weave or a slightly heavier cloth, or indeed what is the range of different types of cloth it would be most feasible to make with these loom weights? The

technological studies are set alongside a series of short case studies varying in quality and depth, from Bronze Age assemblages in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean demonstrating the CTR methodologies in action.

This book is a ‘must-have’ for anyone engaged in the study of textile tools, or who might encounter them in the course of any kind of archaeological research. I can see that I will wear out my copy very quickly. I found only one minor terminological error in the discussion of flax processing (pp. 42–42), where the term used for smashing up the flax stems and woody material is ‘breaking’. While this sounds logical, the English language, sadly, is not; the normal term for this process is ‘braking’. It is also annoying that there is no index. Much more importantly, the scholarship and the methodologies are rigorous. The book is beautifully and clearly written throughout—a huge achievement given the wide authorship and collaborative nature of the project. The adoption and further development by other researchers of the CTR methodologies and approaches presented in this volume will continue to advance knowledge incrementally in textile research.

Woven threads is the outcome of a project initiated by Maria Shaw that with the help of Anne Chapin and contributions from other scholars, she has now brought to fruition. The core idea—and it is a very good one—is to investigate how the elaborate patterned textiles that appear in Minoan and related artistic traditions might have been produced. This volume provides a convincing body of evidence and scholarship to demonstrate that almost all could have been made with the tools available to Bronze Age weavers, particularly in the setting of palatial workshops. Due to the composite nature of the volume (some of which reproduces and adapts pieces of Shaw’s earlier work), there is a certain amount of repetition and patchiness. There is a unified bibliography, but, unfortunately, no index. The overall argument is not always clearly framed, and the theoretical underpinning lacks sophistication, but there is much to be learned from this book and its insights into wall painting and other representative art, textile production and the many connections between them. Scholars of the later Bronze Age Aegean will find this a useful volume.

Stella Spantidaki’s *Textile production in Classical Athens* moves us forward in time to fifth- and fourth-century BC Greece. This volume, based on the author’s 2013 PhD thesis, focuses primarily on the technical aspects of classical textile production, drawing on a range of literary, epigraphical, iconographic and archaeological source material. Hence engagement with broader scholarly debates in the wider literature is limited and very general, concerning, for example, the many questions about gender in relation to textile-making and textile workers, the roles of textiles in the economy, the problems surrounding the loci of their production, and the greater significance of textiles and their associated material culture. The book would have benefited from more intensive editing and correcting

of the English (e.g. the use of ‘weaved’ for ‘woven’ throughout, or the misuse of the term ‘carding’ (p. 90) for raising the nap on finished fabric—‘napping’ or ‘raising the nap’ is the correct term while ‘carding’ is a completely different process that ancient Greeks did not use for preparing wool before spinning). The bibliography draws heavily on older scholarship, omitting some important, relatively recent work (e.g. Cahill 2002; Ferrari 2002; Bundrick 2008), and there is no index.

One passage that could mislead is the statement that in Greek houses “weaving space can be identified from the discovery of holes in the ground indicating the uprights of the loom and grouped loom-weights in one of the rooms of a house” (p. 10). The reference given here is to Lillian Wilson’s (1930) chapter on the loom weights and spindle whorls found at Olynthus. In fact, Wilson makes little mention of find spots and none of loom emplacements. Cahill’s (2002) extensive re-analysis of the Olynthus also shows that there were no loom emplacements found, and that clusters of loom weights were found in storage areas and courtyards, with no definitive evidence that they had fallen from working looms. The great contribution of this book is the wonderful catalogue of Attic textiles, accompanied by excellent photographs. Virtually all of the surviving examples of ancient Greek textiles come from funerary contexts, so the range of textile types is not representative of the many different kinds of textiles that would have been used in ancient Athens and Attica. Most are linen, and we know from other sources that wool was also widely used. Nonetheless, there is a huge amount to be learned from these surviving examples about the techniques of their manufacture and ornamentation, and Spantidaki’s excellent presentation of them is a huge service to scholarship.

All of these volumes are a tribute to the transformation that has occurred in how textile manufacture is regarded by archaeologists, and the recognition of its importance in the ancient past. They indicate how far we have come, as well as how much still remains to do.

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