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## Textile terminologies

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# TEXTILE TERMINOLOGIES

IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN  
FROM THE THIRD TO THE FIRST MILLENNIA BC

edited by

*C. Michel and M.-L. Nosch*

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# Textile Terminologies

*Cécile Michel and Marie-Louise Nosch*

“Words survive better than cloth”, writes textile scholar Elizabeth Barber in her monograph *Prehistoric Textiles*.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true for the period under investigation, the 3rd to the 1st millennia BC, and for the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean where textiles rarely survive, with the notable exception of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> The richness and varieties of textual documentation, however, constitute a unique source of information of the ancient textiles, their production and consumption in these areas. Various scholars have over the years investigated this rich textile terminology data in comprehensive works on the role of textiles in ancient societies,<sup>3</sup> or in individual studies on single corpus terminologies;<sup>4</sup> here, for the first time, we attempt a comparative and diachronic study of ancient textile terminologies.

## 1. Chronological and geographical areas covered

The geographical and chronological framework for the present investigation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, focused on the period from the 3rd to the 1st millennia BC. During the 3rd millennium in Mesopotamia,<sup>5</sup> textile production developed from household production to standardised, industrialised, centralised production, on the basis of a division of labour. Sheep developed a white coat/wool through selective breeding,<sup>6</sup> wool was integrated into textile production as an alternative to plant fibres, which then provided the dynamics for the development of felting,<sup>7</sup> fulling, dye industries, colour extraction and intensive use of colour symbolism in dress and textiles.<sup>8</sup> Within this area we also have the development of palace economies and administrations, inscriptions with extensive records on production management, tools, glyptic, frescoes and relief iconography in which various types of dress are visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Barber 1991, 260.

<sup>2</sup> Vogelsang-Eastwood 1999; Kemp & Vogelsang Eastwood 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Barber 1991; Gillis & Nosch (eds.) 2007; Breniquet 2008; Völling 2008; Burke 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Veenhof 1972; Waetzoldt 1972; 1981; Ribicini & Xella 1985; Van Soldt 1990; Archi 1999; Pasquali 1997; Barber 2001; Zawadzki 2006; Pomponio 2008; Durand 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Breniquet 2008; 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ryder 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Burkett 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Cardon 2007; Alfaro & Karali 2008; Singer 2008.

The contributions analyse and discuss the parameters for the development of textile terminologies in these areas and periods. The textual analyses reveal how terms for tools, technology and textiles developed over the millennia to meet new demands. In the quasi-absence of Bronze Age archaeological textile remains, it is necessary to join forces and combine specialist knowledge, not only from the region itself, but also from elsewhere, such as in the Scandinavian experimental archaeological tradition,<sup>9</sup> textile expertise and tool studies from other areas,<sup>10</sup> and comparative linguistic explorations of how terminologies develop within a defined technical field.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Sources, texts and language families

This volume contains studies of textile terminologies in the Semitic and Indo-European languages. In addition, the authors combine their analyses with data from other fields of research such as archaeology, which can yield information about textile remains,<sup>12</sup> imprints of textiles on clay,<sup>13</sup> mineralised textiles on metal objects, or textile tools.<sup>14</sup> Another rich source of information is iconography,<sup>15</sup> while other scholars include results from ethnographic studies<sup>16</sup> or experimental textile archaeology.<sup>17</sup>

The texts preserved from the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in the eastern Mediterranean and ancient Near East are of a particular nature: each document has a specific function, and accordingly the data about textiles vary a great deal, depending on the category to which a document belongs. Some cuneiform documents are official texts, written for example for the king: accounts of royal victories, descriptions of the king as the builder of monuments and his cultic activities, and in such documents descriptions of luxurious textiles may occur; such types of textiles also occur in the cultic activities as gifts offered to the gods or to their statues.

Another category comprises texts describing economic and daily activities. This includes palace management of textile production (employees, production), accounts from large weaving workshops, rations for the textile workers, the administration and organisation of textile manufacture,<sup>18</sup> or the quantity and quality of wool needed or allocated.<sup>19</sup> The entire Linear B documentation belongs to this category.<sup>20</sup> However, despite the accuracy and details, such accounts rarely inform us about textile techniques or about the use of textiles.

A third category of texts, particularly well attested in the cuneiform corpus, consists of the diplomatic correspondence with its lists of gifts between royal courts among which are often textiles and clothes.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Peacock 2001; Andersson & Nosch 2003; Andersson *et al.* 2008; Nosch forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman 1964; Andersson 2003; 2010; Andersson & Nosch 2003; Gleba 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Dury & Lervand 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Recent archaeological textiles published in Frangipane *et al.* 2009; Andersson *et al.* 2010; Andersson Strand & Nosch (eds.) forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Adovasio 1975/77; Möller-Wiering 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Andersson *et al.* 2008; Mårtensson, Nosch, Andersson Strand 2009; Breniquet 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Strommenger 1980/83; Barber 1991; Breniquet 2008; 2010; Foster 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Hoffman 1964; Desrosiers 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Andersson 2003; Andersson & Nosch 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Waetzoldt 1972; Biga 2010; Pomponio 2010; Verderame 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Waetzoldt 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Del Frio, Nosch, Rougemont 2010; Luján 2010

<sup>21</sup> Moran 1987; Lerouxel 2002; Biga 2008.

Finally, another rich category of textile related texts is the private archives documenting trade, daily use etc. The best example is the private correspondence between Assyrians trading textiles in Anatolia and their wives who wove at home in Aššur.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in some languages, there is only one word to designate a type of fabric or material, other languages have developed – or preserved – a richer vocabulary. For example, for the primary textile plant fibre, modern English and German have two different words: “flax” (Engl.) and “Flachs” (Germ.) for the plant, and “linen” (Engl.) and “Leinen” (Germ.) for the cloth, whereas in French just “lin” is the term used for both the plant and the cloth. This recalls the situation in English in which there is a word for the living animal and another for its meat (e.g. “cow” / “beef”). Such parallel terms may reflect various situations, but we can only understand them if we combine linguistic, archaeological and technical knowledge. When the terminological enquiries, technical analyses of tools and archaeological textiles are woven together with the historical, ethnographical, anthropological knowledge and theoretical frameworks, the results yield not only stimulating perspectives but also new knowledge about textile production and its place in ancient societies.

### 3. Topology of textile terminologies

The textile terminology of the modern era testifies to trade routes, trends and traditions. We employ textile terms with multiple meanings. “Jeans” are garments from Gênes, Genoa; “denim” designates cloth “de Nîmes”, from southern France, an area in which woad was cultivated, processed and used in the large scale dyeing manufacture of blue cloth. Generally speaking, such topographical indications are often employed to designate textiles. A 20th-century AD example of this is the artificial fibre “dederon” developed in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) as a copy of nylon and named after the acronym of DDR.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the present volume reveals the crossing, development and exchange of textile terms between eras, areas, and cultures of the past.

Words change according to languages, but also to geography and chronology. In the cuneiform documentation, each dialect, each population has developed a specific vocabulary for textiles, which seems typically local. Despite geographical proximities or linguistic and etymological connections, communities in places such as Ebla, Mari and Aššur seem to have created their own textile vocabularies.<sup>24</sup> There are, nevertheless, terms which can be traced over wide geographical areas and through the millennia: The Greek word for a long shirt, *khiton*, *Ki-to* in Linear B, derives from a Semitic root, *ktn*. But the same root in Akkadian means linen, in Old Assyrian a garment made of wool, and perhaps cotton, in many modern languages. The Indo-Iranian and Indo-European linguistic reconstruction can contribute to identify the textile terminology which existed before Indo-Iranian was divided into the Indian and the Iranian language groups: some Old Indian and Old Iranian textile terms can be traced back to Indo-Iranian; Indo-Iranian words are furthermore connected to Indo-European textile terminology.<sup>25</sup>

These examples illustrate on the one hand how related some textiles terms are across time and space, but they also show how very carefully we must conduct the etymological and

<sup>22</sup> Veenhof 1972; Michel 2001; 2006; Michel & Veenhof 2010; Wisti Lassen 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Lehmann 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Ebla: Biga 2010; Mari: Durand 2009 and Beaugeard 2010; Aššur: Michel & Veenhof 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Andres-Toledo 2010.

terminological enquiry with constantly changing semantics as the common thread. Moreover, within a specific corpus such as the Neo-Babylonian, the same term was used for very different types of clothing.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Textile terminologies and technologies: a methodology

In the field of textile terminology, classifications, concept systems and term collections usually include first the fibres, and then the yarns and the structures such as weaving or knitting.<sup>27</sup> As a large number of weave derivatives and variations can be created, it is almost impossible to find terms for each of them, and even more complicated to translate them from one language to another. Part of the solution to this problem resides in the use of non-verbal representations. The origin and use of a fabric cannot be represented easily by using graphic components, but the characteristics of form, structure and colour can conveniently be represented graphically. This solution is employed today in the modern textile industry and trade, and was also used in ancient societies, for example, in the form of logograms in Linear B.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the “textile” category includes artefacts, verbs, adjectives and also expressions, which (today at least) seem foreign to the concept of textiles.<sup>29</sup>

Textile classification worldwide may use various criteria; one of them is the logic of the craft.<sup>30</sup> Another angle of approach is the functionality of textile tools, which outline and determine the technical possibilities of Aegean Bronze Age textile tools and thus the functional terminology.<sup>31</sup> The research on functionality is based on textile expertise, tool studies and the experimental testing of textile tools.<sup>32</sup> The tool studies, context studies, and experiments enable an assessment of the types and qualities of textiles, which derive from the tools.

Finally, the concept of *chaîne opératoire*, inspired from anthropology and archaeology, is a valid approach to textile production, and was also the theme of a workshop convened in Nanterre in 2007 on the topic of production systems of textiles.<sup>33</sup> Catherine Breniquet’s recent monograph on weaving in Mesopotamia has introduced this concept in Mesopotamian iconography and a new reading of cylinder seal iconography along the processes of the textile production has been proposed.<sup>34</sup> This new reading of the proto-dynastic iconography seems to convey a much more realistic image than previously assumed; it is possible to see who weaves, and for what: the entire society is involved in weaving. These depictions may be used for their documentary significance but keeping in mind that they are not those of a hand weaver’s manual. We are clearly within the symbolic world. The beginning and end of the weaving process as spinning and weaving, stretching and folding, which could be a metaphor for human life,<sup>35</sup> or two different activities

<sup>26</sup> Zawadzki 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Dury & Lervad 2010

<sup>28</sup> Del Freo, Nosch, Rougemont 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Herslund 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Desrosiers 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Andersson *et al.* 2008; Mårtensson, Nosch, Andersson Strand 2009; Frangipane *et al.* 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Andersson *et al.* 2008; Andersson Strand 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Breniquet ed. forthcoming. See also Lackenbacher 1982 for a text on textile finishing, and Joannès 1984 on the organisation of crafts.

<sup>34</sup> Breniquet 2008 and reviews by Michel 2008 and Biga 2009.

<sup>35</sup> On weaving as a metaphor for destiny, see Lyle ed. 2004 with a collection of papers dealing with the metaphorical



related to a cyclic perception of the year and time in which daily and gendered activities occur: churning and weaving, ploughing and weaving, etc. These scenes are parts of more complex systems, like series as they often appear to be combined in linear but not logical compositions. We can conclude that a quite different picture of weaving can be drawn and used for comparative perspectives, where sources are not in conflict and where iconography and archaeology can finally be linked with epigraphy.

The Akkadian period, with its closely dated works of art in which clothing plays a prominent role, as well as its rich administrative archives dealing with textiles and clothes, offers therefore a particularly rewarding opportunity to correlate visual and written evidence for continuity and change in fashion during this dynamic period of Mesopotamian history.<sup>36</sup> In a similar manner, the linen lists from the earliest Egyptian dynasties can be compared with the available archaeological textile data and this can shed new light on their interpretations.<sup>37</sup> Technology can also be used for the interpretation of the linguistic evidence, deriving from a practical knowledge from experimentations. Such practical knowledge is indeed a key for the understanding of the indications of the precise amounts and weight of warp and weft yarn as they are in some texts in the Ur III documentation.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. Specific methodological problems related to textile terminologies

In an investigation of textile terminologies, we encounter several fundamental difficulties when aiming at identifying a term with a tangible item or a technical reality.

The first difficulty is that textiles rarely survive in the archaeological context and thus we have no preserved tangible remains – in museums or in the hands of archaeologists – to target identification. More fortunate situations are when identifying terms for pottery such as the two-handled cup, *depas amphikypellon*, attested both in Homer's epics and in numerous specimens in Aegean museums; a similar situation is when we need to identify the names for plants. In these cases we may be able to verify an assumption by consulting an archaeologist or a palaeobotanist. The material culture sets up a defined range of possibilities and a framework in which we should search for correlations.

Another difficulty is to identify terms within a technology, which is completely foreign to us today. Basic textile knowledge, understanding of techniques, evaluations of possibilities and plausibilities, distinctions such as the fundamental difference between tabbies and twills, these no longer form part of acquired general knowledge among scholars. Furthermore, we hardly possess knowledge of textile terms in our modern languages, or master textile techniques.

An example of the difficulties in understanding and interpreting ancient textile terminology is the term *mazrum* attested at Mari. According to J.-M. Durand, “la laine *mazirtum napistum* doit être celle dont le fil a été tordu par simple cardage”.<sup>39</sup> There are precise philological, lexical and etymological reasons for this translation. However, in terms of textile techniques, it remains

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meaning of weaving in various cultures. This aspect is also discussed in Vogelsang 1986 and Pasquali 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Foster 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Jones 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Waetzoldt 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Durand 2009, 143, 600.

obscure: a thread cannot be twisted by carding; carding does not exist in the Bronze Age where wool fibres are instead combed or treated with a thistle.

Another difficulty is the fact that textile terms appear primarily in lists and inventories without pertinent data about the nature of the textiles. The aim of such lists is not to qualify the textiles (their quality could provably be verified by sight and touch in the storeroom). Instead they register the number, the recipient and sometimes the price of the textiles.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. Origins and textile categories of textile terminology

In some languages and cultures, textile terminology developed according to materials, in others, according to topography, techniques, colours, qualities, function and usage. The term “undergarment” indicates function and shape; “blue-collar” indicates colour, usage and social context; “lining” is not directly derived from “linen” but from Latin *linea* meaning a “linen thread, string, line”; French “soie de Chine” indicate fibre type and topography, just like the East German nylon type fibre “dederon”. One of the most productive terminological Bronze Age categories for textiles seems indeed to be topology. However, this is perhaps also due to the fact that this topological category is the easiest for modern philologists to identify.

The exact meaning of the topographical indications connected with textile terms is not easily understood. Textiles are “from Akkad” or “Akkadian” in the Old Assyrian documentation, and this opens up the debate about whether the geographical designation indicates origin, place of production, or certain characteristics such as weave or decoration.<sup>41</sup> In Linear B, groups of female textile workers and their children are designated by Anatolian toponyms outside the Mycenaean palace area, and again we must ask whether they come from these places, were purchased or kidnapped at these places, or whether these women and children produce textiles of a quality which is typical for these places.<sup>42</sup>

The textile terminology thus develops and changes according to languages, but also to time and place; despite the overarching developments, textile terminologies are created locally and acquire their specific meanings within a limited area. In the Linear B documentation, we can furthermore investigate textile terminology on a personal level: palace scribe 103 at Knossos has a distinct handwriting and his records can be identified including his usage of the textile terminology.<sup>43</sup> It is, for example, his personal preference to classify textiles from previous years as *pa-ra-ja*, ‘old’, while his fellow scribes chose to designate such textiles with the term *pe-ru-si-nwa*, ‘from the previous year’.<sup>44</sup> The two designations are employed as synonyms and depend entirely on personal style, and can therefore also form a defining feature for the identification of a scribal hand.

## 7. The nature and function of the items recorded in the texts: textiles or garments?

In recent years, several studies of ancient clothing have been published, in particular the clothing worn by rulers and the elite.<sup>45</sup> The majority of texts, however, do not clearly indicate the type or

<sup>40</sup> Pomponio 2008; 2010; Vita 2010; Nosch 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Michel & Veenhof 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Chadwick 1988; Nosch 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Luján 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Killen 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Biga 1992; Pasquali 2005; Sallaberger 2009.

quality or whether the item is a piece of textile or a piece of clothing. The issue of problematic generic translations such as “a garment”, “a cloth” or “textile” and the nature – textile or garment – is addressed and discussed by several authors. Many of them reach the conclusion that the various Bronze Age archives record untailed fabrics rather than tailored ready-to-wear costumes. This again raises the question of how to define a garment, in a world of kilts, cloaks, capes, wrap-around garments, and a habit of using complex devices for attachments. Sewing often seems useless and tailoring a waste of resources.<sup>46</sup> A way to address the issue is to combine texts and iconography: we find types of wrap-around garments and togas in the Sargonic iconography and texts.<sup>47</sup> In Ur III, two different terms for textiles are used side by side mixing a piece of clothing with a type of weave.<sup>48</sup>

It should not be forgotten that textile is not only used for clothing:<sup>49</sup> In palace archives as Ebla and Mari, besides garments, the administrators also deal with large amounts of textiles for furnishing.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it must be taken into account that a majority of the written documentation deals only with luxurious textiles and do not give a complete overview of the many types of textiles used in antiquity.<sup>51</sup> Or when they do, the data are very precise for luxurious garments but remain quite vague for the clothes of ordinary people.<sup>52</sup>

### 8. Colour indications: dyed textiles or the natural pigmentation of wool, or both?

This question is raised by several scholars, in particular inspired by the attestation of the term “multi-coloured” in various languages and cultures: In Linear B *po-ki-ro-nu-ka*, ‘with multi-coloured fringes’;<sup>53</sup> Numerous multi-coloured (Sum. *gùn-a*) textiles are mentioned in the texts from the royal estate of Garšana;<sup>54</sup> and in the Neo-Assyrian texts the standardised description of textiles as *lubulti birme u kitû*, ‘multi-coloured textiles and linen textiles’ occurs frequently.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, the recurrence of fabrics described as white, dark/black, and red/brown leads to the discussion of the available resources of both dyed and naturally pigmented wool. Several scholars come to the conclusion that the bulk of fabrics recorded with colour indications may possibly have been naturally pigmented.<sup>56</sup>

In the Ur III documentation, the natural colour of wool and clothing was light and white. Occasionally the wool of animals with various naturally pigmented wool hues was used to achieve colour effects. Generally, however, wool and textiles were only dyed in exceptional cases.

Colours are deliberately used to express status and symbolic meaning. Shining, yellow-dyed clothing was reserved for the king.<sup>57</sup> Colours of textiles bear a symbolic and ritual value, thus

<sup>46</sup> Wees 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Foster 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Vogelsang 1986; Waetzoldt 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Waetzoldt 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Durand 2009; Beaugeard 2010; Pasquali 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Vigo 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Joannès 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Del Frio, Nosch & Rougemont 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Waetzoldt 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Villard 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Nosch 2004; Waetzoldt 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Waetzoldt 2010.

in Ebla we find black textiles for purification rituals after death.<sup>58</sup> In the Hittite documentation many luxurious linen textiles are blue,<sup>59</sup> which can only be obtained through dyes containing indigotin, probably from plants, or, alternatively, purpurin from murex.<sup>60</sup> In the Neo-Assyrian corpus the red colour dominates; but here again, it is primarily valuable textiles that are quoted in the documentation.<sup>61</sup>

\* \* \*

These overarching themes and classification frameworks for terminologies are relevant for most languages and cultures of the 3rd to the 1st millennia BC and even beyond. Textile terms indicate origin, material, techniques, at least in their first stage. With time, and over longer distances, these meanings then become blurred or fade, or the terms acquire a new meaning appropriate to a new context. Furthermore, textile terminology seems closely linked to expressions for destiny, cosmology and myths. The Indo-European root *\*ues-* “to dress” was also used in Indo-European poetic formulas, for example *\*ues<sup>o</sup> ues-* “to dress a dress”, and applied to gods who dressed the sky.<sup>62</sup>

There is no doubt that textiles generate a comprehensive vocabulary via the development of technologies and the emergence of specialised occupations and division of labour. The costume development and experimenting with wrapped clothing, fibulae, fixation devices, and tailored garments generate yet new terms for the clothing elements, and for the ensemble and combination of such elements.

The present survey includes textile terminologies in various languages and cultures but it also demonstrates the need to carry this investigation further. Diachronic studies and interdisciplinary approaches are the only viable way to continue this endeavour. In a future perspective, it would be interesting to review the relationship between textile terminology, textile production and labour, in continuation of the 1987 publication *Labor in the Ancient Near East*.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, gender in production and costume use should be further explored. The interaction and cross-craft aspects between textile terminologies and terminologies in other crafts would also be a stimulating approach in a future study.

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<sup>58</sup> Biga 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Vigo 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Cardon 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Villard 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Andres-Toledo 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Powell (ed.) 1987.

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