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Mary Harlow, Cécile Michel

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RAIJA MATTILA, SEBASTIAN FINK, SANAE ITO (EDS.)

EVIDENCE COMBINED
WESTERN AND EASTERN SOURCES IN DIALOGUE

Textiles from Mesopotamia to Greece (3rd millennium BCE – 3rd century CE)

Mary Harlow and Cécile Michel***

The craft of textile production has persisted in its traditional forms for millennia and, arguably, was only markedly changed by the coming of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. It is, however, still possible to find textiles made by hand in age-old traditional ways in many parts of the globe today. Textiles accompany us throughout our lives and, particularly in the form of dress, play a key part in the construction of individual and collective identities. This role of cloth and clothing as a vector for the expression of multiple identities has existed since the earliest times. Today we express gender, status, ethnic and religious affiliations, class, sexual availability, occupation, resistance and countless other versions of ourselves through the ways we chose to dress—and these habits and signifiers are not new to the contemporary world; they find expression far into the past. How universal is the language of dress in antiquity or should we link specific attitudes and styles to western or eastern sources? Can we see elements of exchange and influence?

Research into ancient textiles and dress represents an interdisciplinary and international field of scholarship, but is still marginal in many academic disciplines. This can be explained by a number of factors. The most obvious is the fragmentary and disparate nature of the evidence (see below). But just as important are the restrictions and constraints created by

* University of Leicester, GDRI ATOM.

** CNRS, ArScAn-HAROC, GDRI ATOM.

We wish to thank warmly the organizers of this 11th Melammu symposium for their kind invitation which gave us the opportunity to present the type of research we are conducting as part of our ongoing collaboration in which scholars working on the Ancient Near Eastern sources and those specialized in western sources maintain a permanent dialogue on textiles.

the traditional direction of many academic disciplines which view textiles and dress as lying on the periphery of ‘serious’ study. This view is often compounded by the somewhat artificial chronological and disciplinary boundaries which frame academic departments.² One of these somewhat false boundaries is the conceptualizing of East and West as a dichotomy.²

The following contributions address cloth and clothing cultures from 3rd millennium BCE Mesopotamia and Syria, and 2nd and 1st millennia BCE Cyprus—a real crossroads of east and west in the past as it is today—to 6th BCE–3rd CE clothing regulations in Greek sanctuaries. In addition to their geographical complementary specialisations, these four scholars bring a wealth of interdisciplinary knowledge to the subject. It has long been recognised that the study of textiles and dress requires a multi and interdisciplinary approach—despite our best efforts we cannot all be experts in every area we need to research and symposia such as the Melammu meeting in Beirut in 2017 are excellent forums for us to exchange ideas and understand particular disciplinary approaches. Collectively, those who study textiles and dress in the past form a group of archaeologists (including zooarchaeologists and archaeobotanists), linguists, philologists, ancient historians, art historians, museum curators and conservators, and theatre costume designers and re-enactors. Here, our main disciplines are archaeology and ancient history, with a good smattering of art history, and our research covers a period of nearly four millennia. However, we have much more in common than perhaps might be thought at first glance. The study of cloth, clothing and associated crafts reveals a multiplicity of links between the past and the present, between cultures, and between the east and west.

Cloth and dress are examples of non-verbal communication par excellence. Until recently the tools used to produce them were also silent partners in this communication. However, since the late twentieth century the study of textile archaeology has been given a great boost by several European research initiatives,³ and we are working together within the

² See Harlow and Nosch, 2014.

² Textile terminologies, for example, must be studied across East and West for a better understanding of language constructions; see Michel / Nosch, 2010, and Gaspa / Michel / Nosch, 2017.

³ Centre for Textile Research (CTR, Copenhagen); European project *Clothing and Identities. New Perspectives on Textiles in the Roman Empire* (DressID); Textiles from the Orient to the Mediterranean (PICS TexOrMed, French-Danish project).

International Research network “Ancient Textiles from the Orient to the Mediterranean” (GDRIATOM) which links together CNRS research teams in France⁴ with Leicester University School of Archaeology and Ancient History, and the Centre for Textile Research (CTR) at the University of Copenhagen. These scholarly initiatives have acted as springboards to a whole new generation of scholarship which aims to make the invisible nature of textile crafts, textiles and dress visible.

The work of Eva Andersson Strand,⁵ who currently holds the only position of Professor of Textile Archaeology in the world at the University of Copenhagen, and those who have followed in her footsteps have made textile tools reveal their potential. We now have the ability to understand the range of textiles that could be produced by a community by virtue of analysing the types of tools—particularly spindle whorls and loom weights—which survive in the archaeological record. This relatively new approach has meant that many established collections of artefacts can be re-examined to reveal new and fascinating facts about production and consumption in the ancient world (see Landenius Enegren here).

This better understanding of textile production has fed into studies of dress history which might previously have privileged art historical or textual evidence. These more traditional approaches remain absolutely essential but, as we are now better informed about the processes of production and potentialities of cloth as well as cultural predilections for particular styles, traditional methodologies become ever more sophisticated. As historians of cloth and clothing we are all working our way around the Barthian problem of how to align our major sources of evidence: texts which describe, images which depict, and textiles which represent the material reality; they do not speak the same language but they do deal with the same things.⁶ We are constantly aware that one type of evidence should not dominate, but face the problem that in many periods and places in the past only one or at best two of these sources survive. Only very rarely do we find all three together in the same context.

⁴ ArScAn-HAROC (Nanterre), Archéorient (Lyon), Centre de Recherches Historiques (CRH) Université d’Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand) ; <http://www.mae.parisnanterre.fr/gdri-atom/>.

⁵ Eva Andersson Strand is also the current director of the CTR. See for example Andersson Strand, 2010 and Andersson Strand / Nosch, 2015.

⁶ Barthes, 1957.

The non-verbal nature of dress means that as historians and archaeologists we exploit all the evidence to hand while at the same time resisting the urge to make dress and cloth simply the passive receptors of all that we think we know about a culture. The temptation is to impose on dress the elements of cultural norms that we associate with any given group and not to allow dress to become part of the dynamic.⁷ Dress can be both an expression of identity but also an agent of change and resistance. Notions of belonging and exclusion—and particularly of gender difference or, indeed, gender blurring—could and were all expressed through dress. What might come as a surprise are the ways in which the languages of dress and cloth are cross-cultural, and cross-cultural across time and space. Many cultures see the acquisition of clothing as a mark of civilisation, while nakedness or the discarding of clothing can be seen as both erotic and empowering or disempowering depending on the context (see Cecile Brøns and Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel here).

Images allow us to visualise the clothing of the past and are often seductive in their realism. However, the often fragmentary nature of the surviving material and conventions of representation mean even the most apparently obvious image must be treated with circumspection. Barbara Couturaud's detailed examination of female garments depicted in shell inlays from Mari (Syria) demonstrates the care the dress historian needs to take with ancient evidence, and also in making connections to clothing as worn. For ancient historians the move from evidence to social reality requires a range of methodological gymnastics—again the Barthian problem—moving from text or image to clothing as worn.

Written evidence for dress can be found in literature, religious, economic and legal texts or official inscriptions. When textiles and dress are mentioned in writing it is rarely simply to describe cloth or garments. Rather, descriptions of textiles and clothing are used to encompass a much wider range of subject matter, such as the character and status of an individual, to mark the differentiation of one group from another and to ascribe moral or immoral characteristics to the wearer. This is a code that presumably would have been understood by audiences in the past but often needs careful analysis by scholars to decipher the nuanced meanings associated with dress and textiles in the past. Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel examines Akkadian literature to uncover attitudes to gender,

⁷ McCracken, 1986.

masculinity and civilisation which are expressed through the ways in which an individual is dressed (or undressed) and accessorised. In the *Epic of Gilgameš*, Enkidu, a poverty-stricken individual living on the edges of society both literally and physically by inhabiting the steppe, wears his body hair as clothing. This lack of clothing associates him with the beasts and we understand that he is uncivilised, living outside the community. Clothing is thus used to reflect the cultural values of a society. The type of dress an individual is wearing at any point in the Epic not only defines their social status but also their mental state and their closeness (or distance from) nature/civilisation.

Coming forward in time, Cecilie Brøns addresses some similar themes to that of Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel. She deals specifically with regulations concerning clothing in Greek sanctuaries. Clothes as ritual garments and as gifts were circumscribed by a series of prohibitions or prescriptions. Here the evidence is primarily epigraphic, so part of the public record of the time. The regulations deal with the colour, shape and type of textile and demonstrate the many ways clothing could be used to identify priests, neophytes, initiates or just visitors to a sanctuary. As well as identifying individuals, dress plays a part in the performance of the ritual by establishing a particular space around the participants, moving them out of the profane everyday into sacred space.

With Hedvig Enegren's contribution we return to the material reality of textile production and perhaps an insight into how the textiles discussed by Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, Barbara Couturaud and Cecilie Brøns might have been constructed—and perhaps might have looked. Research into textile tools together with minute investigation of not even textiles but imprints of textiles (pseudomorphs)⁸ demonstrates the wide range of materials available to peoples across the Mediterranean in the Bronze Age. If there is one thing this collection of papers demonstrates it is that in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean areas shared a very vibrant cloth culture and the craft ability to create very diverse textiles.

⁸ Andersson Strand / Breniquet / Michel 2017.

Addendum

The text of this contribution was submitted in February 2018. On 4-6 December 2018, the international and final conference of the GDRI ATOM took place in Nanterre (France) on “Production to wardrobe from the Orient to the Mediterranean in Antiquity”. The proceedings of this conference have been published in Harlow, M. / Michel, C. / Quillien, L., (eds) 2020: *Textiles and Gender in Antiquity From Orient to the Mediterranean*. London: Bloomsbury.

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