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# Textile Workers. Skills, Labour and Status of Textile Craftspeople Between the Prehistoric Aegean and the Ancient Near East.

Louise Quillien, Kalliope Sarri

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# TEXTILE WORKERS

SKILLS, LABOUR AND STATUS OF TEXTILE CRAFTSPEOPLE  
BETWEEN THE PREHISTORIC AEGEAN  
AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

PROCEEDINGS OF THE WORKSHOP HELD AT 10<sup>TH</sup> ICAANE  
IN VIENNA, APRIL 2016

SONDERDRUCK

LOUISE QUILLIEN  
KALLIOPE SARRI (EDS.)

Louise Quillien – Kalliope Sarri (Eds.)  
Textile Workers

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Louise Quillien – Kalliope Sarri (Eds.)

**Textile Workers**

**Skills, Labour and Status**  
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Proceedings of the Workshop held at 10<sup>th</sup> ICAANE in Vienna, April 2016

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Picture on the opposite page:  
Peruvian weaver working on her back-strap loom with coloured warp (photo: K. Sarri)

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# Introduction

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*Louise Quillien<sup>1</sup> – Kalliope Sarri<sup>2</sup>*

Textiles have been the topic of multiple studies in recent years. In particular, the terminology of textiles, the place these objects hold in culture and society, their role in the economy and trade, and their function in society have all been explored.<sup>3</sup> In continuance of these various lines of research, the purpose of this volume is to observe both the socio-economic status of those people involved in the manufacturing of textiles and their role in the learning and passing on of their skills.

In the Near-Eastern as in the Aegean world, textile craft was a valuable skill inseparable from the people who mastered it. The aim of this book is to focus attention less on the textiles themselves and more on the people behind these objects in their daily life. Observing those who produce textiles as their work is useful for understanding who they were, what their place was in society and how they acquired and developed their specialised knowledge.

The case studies presented here are distributed over a long period of time, from the Neolithic (7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC) to Late Antiquity (600 CE), in order to reveal the continuities and evolutions. The 10<sup>th</sup> ICAANE organisation committee invited specialists of the ancient Near-Eastern and Aegean worlds to contribute to this conference. The comparison between these two areas is fruitful because it reveals many common political and economic structures as well as local differences, which impacted differently on the working conditions of the textile workers.

During its long history, Mesopotamia has known many different forms of political and social organisation, and the textile craft was adapted to these various contexts. For instance, in the Ur III period (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE), palaces possessed large workshops with teams of textile workers; this type of organisation was also found later in the palace of Mari (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE).<sup>4</sup> Domestic textile work also existed, as it was documented in the Old Assyrian period (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE) in the records of merchants trading the textiles manufactured by their wives in Aššur to Anatolia.<sup>5</sup> During the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, religious institutions employed textile workers to manufacture the precious garments that were offered to the gods' statues.<sup>6</sup> Domestic production as well as textile trade are also attested during this period. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium of Mesopotamia's history, the diversity of textile terminologies and iconography proves that craftsmen developed different local traditions and skills that have evolved through time.<sup>7</sup>

In the prehistoric Aegean, the picture of textile labour looks very different compared to the Near East, so far as the earliest contemporary periods have been examined. However, a diachronic evolution can be observed: from the Neolithic period until the age of the Mycenaean palaces textile production had distinct stages of technological evolution, but it is still considered to be a household industry that produced goods for exclusively internal use.<sup>8</sup> From the Late Bronze Age, however, textile production was centralised and directed from the palaces which organised the manufacture of standardised textile products, employed professional weavers and were involved in long-distance commercial networks in order to spread their exceptional artefacts.<sup>9</sup>

The status, the professional occupation and the working environment of the Aegean weavers involved diachronically different conditions since, as in the Near East, it was mainly the politico-

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<sup>3</sup> See the different volumes edited in the Ancient Textiles Series, Oxbow Books, Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> Waetzoldt 1972; Durand 2009; Michel in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> Veenhof 1972; Michel 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Beaulieu 2003; Zawadzki 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Breniquet 2008; Michel – Nosch 2010; Breniquet – Michel 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Burke – Chapin 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Killen 2007; Shaw – Chapin 2016, 21.

economic system that defined the position of craftsmen in society. Nevertheless, in addition to the study of social organisation, there is a fertile, though not fully explored research field surrounding the personal environment of weavers and their creations. This is defined by the family and their local community traditions but also by their personal aims and abilities, which were sometimes directed towards new forms of artistic expression and new skills made possible by the potential of the textile craft itself.

The studies assembled in this volume are created from different types of sources, such as archaeological remains, texts, and iconography which complement each other and so shed a different light on the people involved in textile production. Among the variety of approaches chosen by the authors were statistics, theoretical models, experimental archaeology, micro-study, social-psychology and more.

Three areas for reflection are merged in the studies. The first one concerns the techniques employed by the workers. Can we reconstruct the manufacturing process, skills, technical choices, tools and movements of the textile workers? How did they learn and pass on their knowledge, from father to son, mother to daughter or from master to apprentice? Was their specialised skill valued in their society? Kalliope Sarri approaches the Aegean Neolithic textile production through coding decorated pottery patterns. She attempts a visual reconstruction of the Aegean Neolithic textiles based on representations of textiles and complex geometrical motifs on pottery, often interpreted as textile patterns. Moreover, she argues that the abilities of early weavers to do calculative tasks is an indication that they understood mathematical concepts and implemented them in daily life. While attempting to explain the relationship of weaving with mathematics, she uses parallels from other time periods and cultures, where woven artefacts were used as calculation tools. Małgorzata Siennicka discusses the organisation of textile manufacturing during the Aegean Early Bronze Age through the repertoire, the development, and the innovations observed in the toolkit of this period. As a canvas for her study, she uses textile tools from some EBA key sites. The comparative analysis and the contexts of these tools sometimes reveal the status and the working conditions of the weavers: there is no evidence for specialised workshops, and spinning and weaving were mainly household-based occupations, connected sometimes with administrative practices. The diversity of textile tools demonstrates that the weavers were using different materials and techniques and could produce a wide range of textiles. The standardisation of the tool types shows local origin, while a series of innovations reveal foreign influences and cultural exchanges and foreign influences from the East to the West. Luca Peyronel addresses the introduction of the warp-weighted loom in the Levant during the Middle Bronze Age. After exploring the abundance of loom-weights in a series of key sites, he concludes that, in contrast to previous views, the appearance of the warp-weighted loom in the Levant cannot be explained by the arrival of craftspeople from Anatolia but has rather to be considered as a local development resulting from Mediterranean interconnections. This new type of vertical loom was presumably used in parallel with the traditional ground loom and its introduction was probably due to the necessity of producing a new type of textile. Karina Grömer and Abolfazl Aali, from a careful analysis of a Sassanian tunic dated from 400–600 CE found in a salt mine in Chehrābād, Northern Iran, deduce the techniques employed by the workers who manufactured it. They identify the work that was completed by the spinners, the weaver and the tailor and even evaluate their skills and ability. By doing so, they shed light on ‘the people behind the artefact’ and reveal not only the workers’ skills but also some of the living conditions of the people who wore this garment and recycled it.

A second theme deals with the working conditions of textile workers. The place where they worked, inside the house or in workshops, their organisation, individual or collective, and their position, independent or under supervision, help us to understand what their life was like as well as their role within the economic and social structures. Christopher Britsch and Barbara Horejs explore settlements and burial sites from the Early Bronze Age (3000–2600 BCE) in western Anatolia and the Aegean in order to identify who the textile workers were, where they worked and how they were organised. They conclude, taking into consideration two specific burial sites, Demircihüyük-Sarıket and Ilıpınar, that there was only a slight overrepresentation of women

buried with textile tools. Through the study of the EBA settlements of Demircihüyük, Poliochni azzurro and Çukuriçi Höyük, they show that textiles were produced in specific areas. The evolution of the tool shapes shows that textile technology became more complex and specialised over time. Marie-Louise Nosch proposes a new methodology combining theories of learning and textual sources from Mycenaean and Near-Eastern palaces during the Bronze Age in order to understand how the textile workers learned their craft at a young age. Through the texts of Knossos, she demonstrates that children were organised into groups according to their skill level and that the accomplishment of this training was associated with their passage to adulthood. She explains how the methods of learning had an impact on the finished products: the training of children inside the palatial workshops resulted in a conservative and standardised production. Agata Ulanowska develops the approach of experimental archaeology to investigate the non-discursive component of technology in terms of transmission of knowledge and working conditions. Teaching the Bronze Age techniques of manufacturing textiles to modern students, she observes how a skill is learned and taught and what the subjective experience of the worker was in terms of comfort, satisfaction or ability. She explains how her methodology results in a better understanding of the key role that textiles played in the economy.

A third area of research involved identifying the social status of textile workers. What was their place in society? Did it depend on the historical context? Were textile workers of a specific gender? Questions about their remuneration and about whether they were or were not the owners of the raw materials they used and the objects they made are important to answer in order to understand the way they were perceived in society. Cécile Michel studies the organisation, working conditions and status of the textile workers of the Bronze Age palace of Mari, modern-day Syria (18<sup>th</sup> century BCE) through the rich cuneiform documentation made up of administrative texts and letters. At Mari, the textile workers were mainly women, slaves or prisoners of war working in teams in workshops located outside the walls of the palaces. They therefore had a low status. C. Michel, however, shows the specific gender division of the workers according to the tasks accomplished, and she sheds light on a complex organisation of work with different levels of specialisation. Aline Tenu explores the relationship between textile tools and the gender of the people buried in the cremation burials excavated at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Syria), dated from the end of the Bronze Age to the beginning of the Iron Age. She argues that there is a correlation between the female gender and the presence of textile tools in the tombs, and she hypothesises that some of the women could have been of high status. Louise Quillien studies a family of dyers working for the temple of Sippar (a city located in the north of Babylon) during the Iron Age (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) known from the cuneiform texts. Through the reconstruction of their tasks, remuneration, organisation, passing on of knowledge through generations, she identifies the status of this family of dyers and evaluates how their skills were perceived by the temple administration.

This volume is the result of a workshop held at the 10<sup>th</sup> ICAANE (International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East) on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. We thank the OREA and the ICAANE organisation committee for having greatly facilitated the organisation and publication of this workshop. This publication forms part of the research project ‘Ancient Textiles from the Orient to the Mediterranean’ (Groupement de Recherche International GDRI ATOM), coordinated by Cécile Michel. We thank the following people for their support: Cécile Michel, Director of Research at the CNRS in the ArScAn (Archéologie et Sciences de l’Antiquité) Laboratory in Nanterre, France, and Marie-Louise Nosch, Research Professor at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. We also thank Ariana Cailin Kwok and Hazel Harrison for their significant help in editing this volume, as well as all the participants for their valuable contributions.

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S. Zawadzki, *Garments of the Gods. Studies on the Textile Industry and the Pantheon of Sippar according to the Texts from the Ebabbar Archive*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 218 (Fribourg 2006).

This volume aims at opening up new perspectives in archaeological textile research, focussing on a comparative analysis of textile workers in the Aegean and Near-Eastern world from the Stone Age to Late Antiquity. While archaeological remains such as textile tools, fibres and fabrics have been widely analysed for the technological information they contain, they have not been adequately studied for their potential to provide valuable data about the workers involved in textile production. What can archaeological remains, combined with the iconographical and textual data, tell us about the prehistoric and early historic textile craftsmen and craftswomen? Using all available sources, the contributions of the volume set various questions about those involved in textile production. What was their gender and social status? What type of labour did they perform: domestic or professional? What was their specific working space – a house or a workshop area? How were they organised: working alone or in teams? What was the position of their body and what were their movements while working? Could they choose freely between different patterns, colours, materials or techniques? What specialised skills and intellectual knowledge did they apply during their work? Thanks to this collective work, we will be able to explore whether in all the fields and circumstances mentioned above we can detect exact parallels, similar patterns and mutual influences or, instead, major differences between Near-Eastern and Aegean worlds.