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Wild Silks traces in Europe
Circulations, usages and acclimations from Antiquity to the present day

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Wild Silks uses on the longue durée

Archaeological finds show a long-lasting use in Human industries and activities of various species belonging primarily to the Saturniidae family but also to the Lasiocampidae and Notodontidae families, i.e. species qualified as 'wild' by silk specialists. While Asia – notably China, India, Japan, Thailand, and Korea – is well known for its wild silk moths industries, Europe seems less resourceful from this perspective. Nevertheless, from the Roman Period, it proves to have been a steady destination for wild silks textiles and fibres made in Asia, and much later a hub for acclimation attempts. In this poster, we shall review some samples gathered from a selected bibliography or studied by our project, WILDSILKS, MATERIAL & CULTURE, focusing on the longue durée – since Antiquity to the present day. We aim to highlight the main issues these samples raise for the history and anthropology of silks in Europe besides the prevalent *Bombyx mori* L.

Objectives

Our project aims at examining wild silkS in two ways:

- 1/ by collecting and geo-localising data on archaeological finds and historical documents in French and European museum collections and archives – textiles, cocoons, textiles and written commentaries by 19th-early 20th century scientific & industrial researchers.
- 2/ by comparing the past situation with what can be observed today on the same 'living' documents and wild silkS producers and users in Asia, Europe and West Africa.

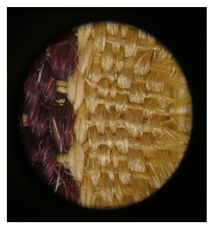
Collaborations with entomologists, physicians and chemists should help to connect past and present and to unveil some aspects of the wild silkS routes.

Findings: A great variety of wild silk samples discovered in French museums

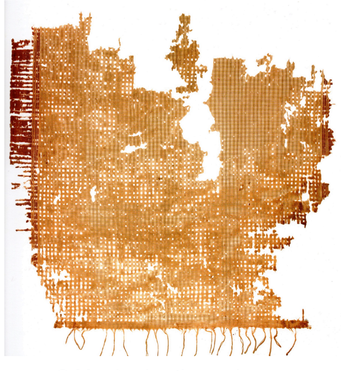
Research in French institutions during the COVID pandemic have been proven to be very rich, testifying a wild silks trade – of textiles, materials and also biological species – to Europe from various Asian areas, on the longue durée.

Early evidences of wild silks trade to Europe

This fragment of a so-called 'Coptic tapestry' is a mix of wild silks with white linen and violet wool, Egypt 6th c.



Musée des tissus, Lyon.
© S. Desrosiers



This shawl found in Antinoé, Egypt, in a tomb of the 5th-early 7th c. shows specific technical characteristics including the weaving of both cotton and non mulberry silk. This piece may be the result of trade across the Indian Ocean.

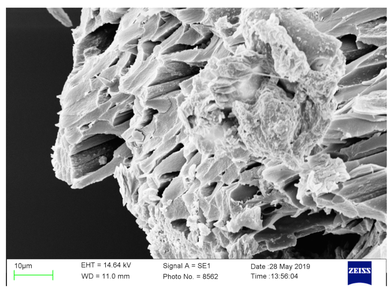
© Musée des tissus, Lyon.

Latest news

Wild silks found in queen Arégonde's tomb

The wild silk fragment was used to brocaded the motifs of the braid with woolen plates which decorated the front of the purple silk coat of the Merovingian queen Arégonde (a. 516-580). She is considered one of the oldest queen of France found to date.

Reconstitution of the costume of queen Arégonde after A. Rast-Eicher and M. Volken © Drawing F. Vincent.



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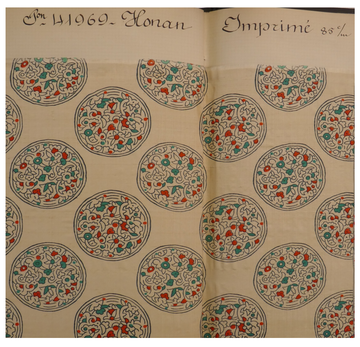
20th century experiments in European fashion

The 19th and early 20th centuries European fashion proved to be particularly rich in experiments with wild silks. Threads were imported to be weaved and fabrics to be printed.



1/ Hindoue & 2/ Honan textiles, imported respectively from India and China, and printed by Coudurier-Fructus-Descher in Lyon (early 20th century)
© S. Desrosiers

Raoul Dufy draw this piece that had been woven from imported yarns by Bianchini-Férier in Lyon (1919) © S. Desrosiers

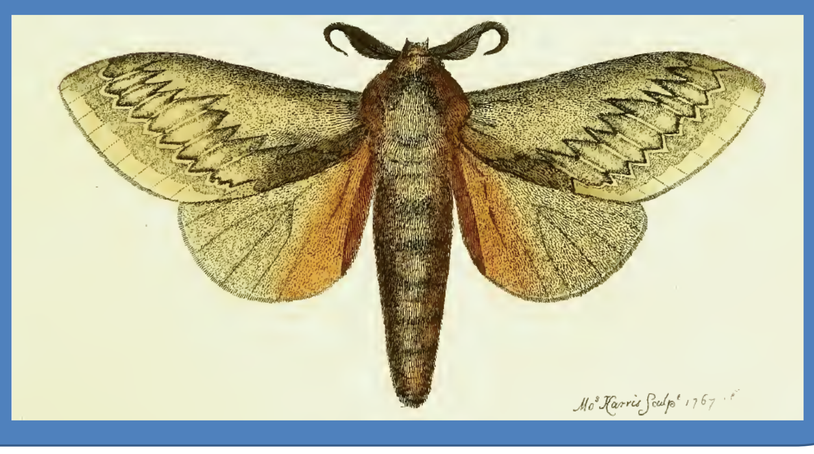
Akrotiri's cocoon: an early trace of native European wild silk ?

© Panagiotakopulu & al 1997, A lepidopterous cocoon from Thera and evidence for silk in the Aegean Bronze Age, *Antiquity* 71 : 420-29 (photo S. Eales)

Found in Akrotiri, a settlement in the volcanic island of Santorin (Greece) destroyed and buried by an eruption in the mid 2nd millenium BC, this cylindrical object – 44mm long and 18mm wide –, with flattened ends is identified by archaeologists as a "cast of a cocoon and part of the enclosed pupa", most likely *Pachypasa otus* (one of the two endemic species of Southern Europe with *Saturnia pyri* identified in various images produced during European Antiquity) (Panagiotakopulu & al 1997).

Does this object is really a cocoon or some other natural object? If yes, is it possible to identify its species by the means of other techniques than morphological analysis (size and/or shape), the geographical distribution of the insect in the present day and/or ancient iconography?

In the future, our project aims to try new techniques on this calcified object such as proteomics and 3D scanning to confirm – or infirm – previous identifications.



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