

Final Report Summary
ASTEX (Assyrian Textiles: A Study on the Terminology and the Material Culture of the Textiles in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, no. 326501)

Overview of Results and Impact of the Project

The project was aimed at collecting and analysing the textiles in the sources of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (9th to 7th centuries BC). The research was intended to fill gaps in the present-day scholarly knowledge about textiles in the first-millennium BC ancient Near East. Previous Assyriological scholarly works on Mesopotamian textile terminology focused on Sumerian texts, second-millennium BC Akkadian texts from the city of Mari and some of the archival documents from the Neo-Babylonian period. No specific study has previously been devoted to the textiles attested in written sources of the Assyrian Empire. The progress in the publication of the Assyrian texts from both the first and second millennia BC by international scholars has made this project timely and relevant in Assyriology.

The major research goals of the project concerned the investigation of the whole terminology of textiles in the written documents stemming from all the Neo-Assyrian archives. The Assyrian vocabulary of textiles has been analysed within the broad linguistic context of Assyria in the first millennium BC, characterized by the persistence of second-millennium Assyrian terms and Hurrian loanwords and of new words from West Semitic languages. The analysis has also included a comparison with Old and Middle Assyrian attestations, in order to evaluate phenomena of continuity and change in the lexicon of the Assyrian material culture. The results achieved will now enable scholars to update some of the translations for textile terms included in the major dictionaries of Assyrian language.

Thanks to training in textile techniques, tools, and materials at the Host institution, the fellow reached a deeper awareness of textile production that led him to identify some of the textile procedures on which the Assyrian terms are based. The meaning of these terms, both those of genuinely Assyrian descent and those belonging to the common first-millennium Akkadian terms, has been investigated in light of the present-day knowledge of textile techniques and tools in experimental archaeology and ethnographical evidence. These lexical data document the late development of Akkadian terminology of textiles in Mesopotamia, reflecting circulation of new products and materials within the palace milieu, orientation of textile production and consumption towards specific products and enlargement of the trade network of Assyria's economy.

The research has also shown the importance to use material culture in the elucidation of the textual data about textiles, thus combining the traditional lexicological approach within the new perspective of interdisciplinarity between archaeology, history of technology, tool studies and iconography. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of the rich decorative elements from the Nimrud tombs that originally adorned the garments of the buried Assyrian queens. These textile-related items, whose importance has been underestimated by archaeologists, are probably the star-shaped and the rosette-shaped objects mentioned in the contemporary Neo-Assyrian texts. The same elements are also represented in the royal garments depicted in the Assyrian palace reliefs now kept in various museums. Analogous observations may be made about certain qualifications for parts or decorative details of garments, which were not completely understood by scholars and which can be explained using pictorial representations of garments from palace bas-reliefs. Therefore, research combining different sources and methodologies has the potential to reach a deeper understanding of the *realia* of ancient civilizations.

In order to increase their impact in the field of interdisciplinary research, the mid-term results of the projects were presented in the second international conference on textile terminologies, *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe 1000 BC – AD 1000*, held in Copenhagen and co-organized by the fellow. This represented an opportunity to share ideas on textile terms and techniques with experts in other ancient languages and to reconsider the Assyrian textile nomenclature within the broader perspective of first-millennium societies, from East to West. The research on the Assyrian textiles was also presented in an outreach seminar entitled *Meaning and*

Symbolism of Textiles and Clothing in Ancient and Modern Societies, organized by the fellow at the National Museum of Denmark with specialists of different disciplinary fields. This event was aimed at disseminating research results towards the public of non-specialists about the role of textiles in both profane and religious contexts in ancient and modern societies, thus giving full visibility of the work currently carried out by European scholars on textiles used in the ancient Near Eastern, Mediterranean, and Scandinavian societies. Non-academic people participating in this event were interested to learn about the religious representations decorating the royal garments of the Assyrian kings and how these were used to convey religious ideas in the Neo-Assyrian political discourse.

The results of this project, disseminated through lectures and publications, confirm the importance to continue the research on the terminology of textiles in the sources of the ancient Near East in the first millennium BC. It has also the potential to be integrated into new projects aimed at comprehensively studying the Neo- and Late Babylonian archival documents dealing with textiles. Given the important cultural legacy of the Assyrian Empire, the first world empire, in the later civilizations of Iraq and of the ancient Near East, the knowledge of the Assyrian roots of the later Aramaic and Arabic textile terminologies is of paramount importance in the present-day research on the history of textile manufacture in the Middle East. The preservation of this cultural legacy concerning the Assyrian textile terminology has an impact not only in historical research. Seen in the perspective of long-term impact on the academic community and general society, this work represents another important contribution to ongoing international efforts to preserve, defend, classify, and study the huge cultural heritage of ancient Iraq, the Land of the Two Rivers (“Mesopotamia”), for next generations of scholars. In the field of European research excellence in the Humanities Area, this project has demonstrated the importance of integrating philological and historical research with material culture studies and ethnography in the understanding of ancient textile procedures and function of textile end products. It is hoped that future cooperation initiatives between EU and Middle Eastern countries for the preservation and study of the rich textile traditions in the Middle East will take into consideration the significant role played by EU-based textile research as a new scientific and truly interdisciplinary domain in the study of the economy, society, and culture of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations. More importantly, its contribution to the understanding of the role of textiles in shaping ancient and modern societies must be stressed, also in future studies.

As a final outcome of this project the fellow has written a number of published and forthcoming conference articles and book chapters focusing on different aspects of the Assyrian textiles and their roles in the Assyrian society. In addition, one manuscript is currently in preparation and will appear in an ancient Near Eastern scholarly series.

Project website: http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/108484_en.html

Contact details:

Salvatore Gaspa
Tel.: +0039-3486409942
E-mail: gaspasal@libero.it
The Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre for Textile Research
Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen
Karen Blixensvej 4
2300 Copenhagen S
Denmark

