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PROduction and CONsumption: Textile Economy and Urbanisation in Mediterranean Europe 1000-500 BCE

Reporting

Project Information

PROCON

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Final Report Summary - PROCON (PROduction and CONsumption: Textile Economy and Urbanisation in Mediterranean Europe 1000-500 BCE)

The aim of the project PROCON is to test the hypothesis that textile production and consumption was a significant driving force of the economy and of the creation and perception of wealth in Mediterranean Europe during the period of urbanisation and early urbanism in 1000–500 BCE. The project structure encompasses several research strands within the operational sequence of textile economy: Resources, Production, Product, and Consumption and Exchange. The project analysed different categories of evidence (textiles, textile tools, art / visual representations, plant remains, and animal bones) from Greece, Italy, Spain and surrounding countries, using a wide array of interdisciplinary methods.

The use of Scanning Electron Microscopy to analyse over 400 samples of archaeological textiles allowed identification of the raw materials used, which included flax and sheep wool across the region, with the addition of esparto in Spain. Liquid Chromatography was used to identify plant-based dyes derived from woad and madder and, for the first time in Italy, shellfish purple, that were used to add value to the cloth. Structural analysis of the textile fragments permitted the definition of thread- and textile-making technologies, resulting in identification of distinct textile cultures in Central-West and Eastern Mediterranean regions.

Functional and spatial analysis of almost 10,000 textile tools from 50 ancient settlements and sanctuaries permitted the definition of the organisational parameters of textile production, demonstrating that it was primarily household-based, although organisation varied between regions. Burial evidence and quantitative analysis of iconographic data confirmed that primary producers of textiles were women.

The diachronic iconographic analysis demonstrated the increased demand for and importance of clothing, as indicated by the exponential increase in quantity and quality of textile depictions over the period 1000–500 BCE. Demand for large quantities of sail cloth towards the end of the investigated period appears to be behind the switch from splicing to draft spinning flax yarn around 600 BCE (identified in linen textiles), which allowed a more efficient and streamlined production process.

Exchange took place at multiple levels, including mobility of artisans (documented in the movement of textile tools), exchange of textiles (identified through textile imports), spread of specific technologies (e.g. the appearance of shellfish purple dyeing installations in Spain only after the arrival of Phoenician settlers). Textile cultures appear to have spread with human migrations (e.g. from Greece to South Italy), leading to the creation of hybrid textile forms.

The synthesis of the collected data demonstrates that textile production and consumption constituted a major economic factor during urbanisation of Early Iron Age Mediterranean Europe. Textiles served as a form of wealth which, like precious metals and exotica such as ivory and amber, underpinned the authority and power of the aristocracy.

The communities of small and large urban centres of the Early Iron Age required large quantities of textiles and were pressed to organise their consumption not only on the basis of local agro-pastoral activities but also through exchange activities. The transition from a 'rural economy' to 'urban economy' involved intensification of agricultural activity, including textile fibre production. The qualitative changes in textile production are reflected in the development of better raw materials, which allowed faster processing and production, as well as more complex techniques and patterns.

Taking developments in a specialist research field (textile archaeology) and applying them to modelling the dynamics behind the broader phenomenon of urbanisation in Europe, the project fundamentally changed the trajectory of research and thinking about the ancient Mediterranean, providing a position for textiles and textile production in the cultural and economic history of the past. In their role enabling wealth creation through enhanced quantity and quality in production, visualising political hierarchies through exclusive

clothing marking social roles, and the impact of this on social relationships of production and politics, textiles were a powerful force of urbanism from 1000-500 BCE.

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