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Cloth Cultures in Prehistoric Europe: Project concept and approach

"Cloth Cultures in Prehistoric Europe" is a British Academy post-doctoral fellowship awarded to Susanna Harris at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL from 2008-2011. The aim of this research project is to bring together and examine the evidence for the cloth cultures of prehistoric Europe from 5500-1200 BC.

Classification concepts

Textile researchers are familiar with definitions and classifications of textiles that incorporate aspects of raw materials and technique, notably that cloth (fabric or textile) is made from interlaced fibres and threads (Barber 1991, 5; Good 2001, 209-10). Where people draw the line in these definitions varies; to some, textiles are strictly about weaving on a loom, to others, they incorporate a wider range of materials and techniques. These classification systems can be sub-divided according to weave or fabric structures (Emery 1966) and technique (Seiler-Baldinger 1994). Such terminologies are essential aspects of typologies, shared language and research analysis. Yet, wherever there is classification and sub-division there is also a separation of aspects that could otherwise be considered together and thus requires other definitions and grouping.

The concept of cloth cultures is based in the idea that all societies use cloth-type materials, but how they do this is specific to each culture. By cloth-type materials, I refer to those flexible, thin sheets of material that can be wrapped, shaped and folded and are used to cover, clothe and contain (Harris 2008). Although similar to definitions of textiles, this does not require the use of fibres and threads. Instead, cloth-type material is a term that can be used to include woven textiles, twining, looping, netting and animal skins, whether depilated or furry. It can also include more unusual materials such as sheets of bark, large leaves and fine, sheet metals. The purpose of considering cloth-type materials is, therefore, to embrace the relationship between individual technologies and raw materials that are usually considered separately. How this is achieved in different societies of course varies, which means this needs to be considered as a cloth culture, specific to where it belongs in time and place.

Grouped through broad shared properties, cloth-type materials have the potential to be used in similar ways, while also holding unique properties that may be understood through physical, chemical and aesthetic criteria, but also by culturally attributed values. Investigating these materials as cloth cultures, rather than individual technologies or techniques draws attention to the role and relationship between these materials in past societies and the comparative study of cloth cultures. This is important from the Neolithic to Bronze Age Europe where these relationships are poorly understood.

Chronological time span

The chronological time span of the project ranges from 5500 to 1200 BC and includes societies classified as Mesolithic, Neolithic, Copper Age and Bronze Age. This time span covers a number of well documented horizons of change including the introduction of domestic flax as part of the Neolithic package of plants. There is evidence for the earliest wool use, developments in weaving technology and the proposed role of wool as part of a secondary products revolution (Sherratt 1997). More recent claims incorporate the role of raw materials that were previously overlooked, notable the suggestion of a "(Deleted - tree) bast culture" in the late Neolithic of Switzerland (Rast 1995, 149; Rast-Eicher 2005, 119). Earlier claims that textiles replaced skins have been cast into doubt following the discovery of the Copper Age Iceman on the Italian / Austrian border which has opened up debates on the role of animal skins at this time (Spindler 1995, 132-134; Winiger 1995). More recent

finds from frozen deposits continue to add complexity to the understanding of organic materials in the past. This whole time period is therefore one where the relationship between textiles, animal skins and other cloth-type materials is varied and changing.

Method and approach

A major area of this research is to bring together the evidence for textiles and animal skins. There is now a well established field of textile research with defined methods and increasingly sophisticated techniques of research, resulting in an improved understanding of textile technology and chronology. By comparison research into animal skins is less cohesive, although this is improving all the time, partly due to new finds from frozen contexts. Evidence for tools associated with processing animal skins and from faunal remains needs to be brought together and looked at in comparison to preserved skins and the evidence for textiles. Another of the hindrances to understanding past cloth cultures is recognising the way these materials were used in the past. Here the underlying problem of the poor and fragmentary preservation of organic materials, makes it difficult to understand how the different cloth-type materials were used. This is especially the case with materials that are not commonly encountered in the present. In this project the nature of these materials will be investigated through a comparison to modern materials as understood by textile technologists, leather and fur technologies, craft practitioners and experimental archaeology. Ethnography and recent historical examples also provide avenues to investigating the potential role of materials such as twining, skins and bark sheets.

Case studies

In this project I will be looking at a number of case studies of cloth cultures. These incorporate sites where textiles and animal skins are present in the same preservation contexts, such as the Bronze Age Hallstatt salt mines and the Danish oak coffin burials. In these studies a sample of the animal skins will be examined for dimensions, thickness, stitching and seams and compared with the textile evidence. Studies are also drawn from contexts without organic preservation and include the middle to late Neolithic sites of northern Italy. Here twining and plaited basketry are preserved as impressions on pottery and processing animal skins has been detected through use wear analysis of stone and bone tools and faunal remains.

Through these and other regional studies, the aim is to bring together the range of cloth-type materials that were used by past societies and stimulate discussion on the cloth cultures of prehistoric Europe.

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