



Mary Harlow

Dressing the Dead. Clothing, textiles and bodily adornment from funerary contexts in the Graeco-Roman World

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This stimulating day conference was organised by Maureen Carroll and Jane Rempel (University of Sheffield, UK) and attended by speakers and delegates from Europe, Israel, the US and Canada. Thirteen papers were given, covering a range of subjects from protocols for conserving textiles on site, conservation and preservation techniques, interpreting finds from Egypt, Palmyra, Rome, Tripolitania and reading a range of visual and literary references. The conference began with a keynote lecture from Barbara Borg (University of Exeter) discussing the ostentatious and luxurious depiction of clothes and jewellery on mummy portraits from Antinoopolis. Borg argued against the current orthodoxy, based on the ornate nature of the clothing and accessories, that these portraits come from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Rather, she backdates this tendency towards ostentatious display to the third century, arguing that the contact with Palmyra might have triggered its development at Antinoopolis. John Peter Wild (University of Manchester) raised the issue of how to approach the precise role of textiles in funerary practices across the Roman empire. Presenting a range of examples from both eastern and western provinces, from contexts which provide relatively extensive textile remains (Egypt, Syria) to those which leave only scraps or impressions of cloth or tantalisingly tiny fragments of gold thread – Wild stressed the need for multidisciplinary approaches among archaeologists and conservators. Such approaches, engaged across the varied cultural contexts of the Roman empire, will also raise awareness of the presence (even if it is literally an impression) of textiles in funerary contexts.

Mark Van Strydonck (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels) presented the recent re-dating of the mummy Euphemia and textiles associated with her burial ensemble. Radiocarbon and stable isotope analyses date Euphemia herself to 6th century A.D. but some of the textiles in the panoply turned out to be older than that, while others up to one hundred and fifty years younger. Sewing thread from the nineteenth century was also discovered in the borolet. Study of acquisitions reports suggest that these varied dates might be the consequences of two sets of finds being misleadingly put together when the museum exhibit was first arranged in the 1930s. Annemarie Stauffer (University of Applied Sciences, Cologne) looked at dress as a social marker in Palmyrene tombs from 1st – 3rd centuries A.D. Funerary representations in the tombs come in a variety of modes: portraits, loculi reliefs, sarcophagi and paintings. Since most figures are individually identified by inscriptions it is possible to track family descent. Various elements of Greco-Roman and local dress styles have been identified and from this it is clear that dress in funerary contexts is not dependent on the official dress found in public sculpture in Palmyra. The different conventions found in the tombs allow for identification of different ranks within the clan group. The Fag el-Gamous necropolis, on the eastern edge of the Fayum, was the focus of two papers. This site has been excavated by the Brigham Young University, Utah, for nearly three decades and includes two Greco-Roman cemeteries, Middle Kingdom tombs and a small Old Kingdom pyramid of the 4th



Dynasty; so far some 1700 burials have been uncovered. David Whitchurch discussed the cultural symbolism of some of the artefacts found, focussing on an intricately woven pomegranate textile found in 1987, dating to the 4-5th centuries A.D. Kristin South has studied the minor textiles from Fag el-Gamous, particularly the ribbons and face bundles (see *ATN* 48). Given the eastward facing placement of the bodies bearing such textiles, and comparison with similar finds at other sites, South has identified these as Christian burials. The preservation and conservation of textiles on site and in museum collections was the subject of Emilia Cortes' paper. She presented the protocols developed for the conservation of textiles by the Metropolitan Museum of Art at their excavation at Dahshur, Egypt. Emphasis was given to the importance of preliminary work to define context and to minimal intervention on site to allow for long term research. Such an approach will not only allow for more holistic understanding of the mummy, associated textiles and iconography, but also help recover contexts for those less well recorded in the past. Annette Paetz gen. Schieck and Sylvia Mitschke (Riess-Englehorn-Museen) presented the results of very recent research (October 2009) undertaken in catacombs in Rome. They were granted access to two late Roman *in situ* burials in Sant' Agnese and a rich assemblage of textiles from a sarcophagus burial of late antique/early medieval date from San Sebastiano. From a cinerary urn from Via Ostiense a fringed linen textile was examined. This was perhaps used as a shroud as examination showed signs of preparation of the body for the funeral. It appears the body was embalmed, wrapped in the linen, than unwrapped for cremation. The linen was then used to hold the ashes. The fully published results will demonstrate the positive use of variety of techniques to extrapolate information from both large textiles like the linen shroud, but also very small and degraded scraps, and mere impressions on plaster.

Jane Rempel (Sheffield) presented an examination of the relationship to and importance of the cult of Demeter in female graves in the Bosporan kingdom from the 4th century B.C. to the Hellenistic period. Using both tomb paintings and associated finds, particularly jewellery, Rempel argued that this imagery was key to female identity in the area. Lucy Audley-Miller (Oxford) re-assessed the iconography of dress on the tomb sculpture of Ghirza, in the Tripolitanian pre-desert. The paper offered a nuanced view of the way Roman and local dress styles were manipulated and negotiated to express local constructions of status, gender and social role.

The evidence of the child clothed and sometimes

adorned for death was the subject of two papers. Maureen Carroll (Sheffield) argued that the archaeological, visual and textile evidence, from Italy and the European provinces, for the burial of very young children, shows concern for the age and status of the child. Such material throws light on attitudes towards children, especially in the case of the burial of the very young infant. Taking slightly older children, Mary Harlow (Birmingham) argued that the jewellery and other accessories deposited with girls and young women might have a direct relationship to the stage these individuals had reached in the life course – ready to leave childhood behind, but not yet fully transposed into full womanhood.

Nahum Ben Yehuda (Bar Ilan University) presented the Jewish attitudes to the clothing of the dead and mourners in Talmudic law. Shrouds were subject to regulation in terms of fabric, colour and relative lavishness. Regulations also extended to mourners where certain behaviour was controlled (no injuring of the face or tonsuring, for example) and dress was subject to prescription both at the funeral, during mourning and visits to the cemetery.

The conference was a prelude to the 5th General Meeting of the European Dress ID project: Clothing and Identities. New Perspectives on Textiles in the Roman Empire.