



Nancy Ukai Russell

Wrapping and Unwrapping the Body: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives

20-21 May 2010, Institute of Archaeology,
University College London, UK

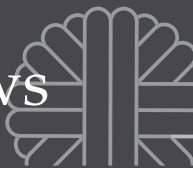
A conference at University College London on "Wrapping and Unwrapping the Body", organized by Susanna Harris (Institute of Archaeology, UCL) and Laurence Douny (Department of Anthropology, UCL), brought 14 archaeologists and anthropologists together to explore processes of wrapping the body, different types of wrapping materials and the meaning of wrapping practices across time and space. Subjects ranged from the wrapping of ancient Egyptian mummies, presented by John H. Taylor of the British Museum, to description of the cloth-wrapped carts and other burial objects at the Eberdingen-Hochdorf princely Celtic burial site in Germany, by Johanna Banck-Burgess of Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart.

For archaeologists, a discussion of wrappings and the body tends to focus on excavation findings, wrapped corpses and the technical analysis of fibers. The inclusion of anthropologists in the conference created opportunities for cross-disciplinary discussions on the act of wrapping as a transformational process, the meaning and usage of different materials, and the place of cloth as a covering that protects, conceals, transports and heralds new beginnings.

The presentations were divided into three sessions: "Wrapping as Transformation," "Wrapping the Dead," and "Wrapping the Living." Of particular interest to ATN readers would be the papers on archaeological textiles. Taylor discussed how the wrapping of the corpse in ancient Egypt was a crucial element of the formal disposal of the body, providing

the "cocoon" in which the renewal of life-force took place. This temporary state was marked by inertia and restraint before the transition to new life after death.

Banck-Burgess showed intriguing artist's renditions of the interior of the princely grave at Eberdingen-Hochdorf (late Hallstatt - early La Tène period) in which archaeologists found that all of the objects buried with the deceased prince were wrapped in textiles, "hiding" the optical value of the objects. Barbara Wills, a senior conservator of the British Museum, discussed the fragility of linen bandages and woolen shrouds of ancient mummies from Egypt and the Sudan, and the process of using fine netting, in one case, to stabilise the mummy wrappings, while Vicky Gashe of University of Manchester highlighted the noteworthy variation of materials used for corpse wrappings between the locations of nearly 1,500 predynastic-Old Kingdom period graves in the Badari region of Upper Egypt. Matting, reeds and linen were the most common wrapping materials. Beyond textiles, wrappings made of plant materials and animal skins were also discussed, providing stimulating ways to think about cloth in a wider context. Santiago Riera of University of Barcelona painted a sensory portrait of how plants were used as dyes, fragrances, resins and flower offerings in preparing corpses for burial, in conjunction with animal skin and plant material wrappings, according to findings dating from the Late Bronze Age in the Balearic Islands. Harris expanded the landscape for



thinking about animal skins as a human covering in her lucid examination of examples from 14th century BC across Europe.

Conceptual approaches to wrapping the body, space and landscapes were raised in other presentations: talismanic Islamic motifs on woolen weavings from Niger Bend, Mali (Claude Ardouin); the process of producing raw silk “tun-tun” indigo textiles in Mali and Burkina Faso, which are then made into objects of prestige worn as signs of identity (Laurence Douny); flags and costly textiles as signs of political and diplomatic power in 19th century West Africa (Fiona Sheales); and the “wrapping” of the spatial environment on Easter Island (Karina Croucher). The problem of textiles and how human bodies are wrapped was also discussed from the perspective of art history, fashion and conservation: an art historical

tour of cloth in paintings and prints (Liz Rideal); lace production and the body (Nicolette Makovicky); and the conservation process of an English court mantua at the V&A (Titika Malkogeorgou). How babies are wrapped at the beginning of life (Nancy Ukai Russell) brought full circle the discussion of textiles used to wrap the human body, which had begun with an examination of the wrappings of the dead. The conference organizers intend to publish an edited volume of selected papers from this conference and the “Wrapping Objects” session organized in December 2009 (see review in *ATN* 50).

Margarita Gleba and Susanna Harris

European Archaeologists Association: Threads to the Past

1-5 September 2010, The Hague,
The Netherlands

The aim of the interdisciplinary session “Threads to the past: novel methods for investigation of archaeological textiles and other organic materials”, organised by Margarita Gleba and Susanna Harris (Institute of Archaeology, University College London, UK) was to discuss new methods that can be applied to the investigation of archaeological textiles and demonstrate their potential for the investigation of ancient economy, technology and agriculture. The papers demonstrated how scientific methods that have been or are being developed within archaeology (such as ancient DNA studies, isotopic tracing, labo-

ratory excavation, experimental archaeology) can be incorporated into this field.

Susanna Harris in her paper “Investigating the material properties of archaeological textiles” demonstrated quantitative and qualitative methods used in textile engineering and industrial textile design to investigate the material properties of archaeological textiles through examples from the Neolithic to Bronze Age textiles in Western Europe.

Eva Andersson Strand presented experimental tests and discussed the limitations and possibilities of a new method of textile tool data analysis in her paper