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Textile production in the Western Mediterranean: Phoenician and Punic contexts between the 9th and 2nd centuries BCE

Introduction

The PhD project “Textile production in the Western Mediterranean in the Phoenician and Punic contexts. Analysis of contexts and materials” is hosted at Sapienza University of Rome (IT) and started at the end of 2019. It investigates textile tools, textile installations, and fabrics in handicraft, residential, and cultic settings in Phoenician-Punic settlements in the Western Mediterranean (Italy, Tunisia, Ibiza, and the Iberian Peninsula) between the 9th and the 2nd centuries BCE.

The Phoenician and Punic world was very complex and regionally differentiated due to the interrelationships that first the Phoenicians and later the Carthaginians had with local production centres. Some of the main Phoenician and Punic sites in the Mediterranean, which preserve traces of textile activity, have been taken into consideration in the project (fig. 1). So far, the study has focused mainly on the analysis of textile activity of Phoenician and Punic sites in the Sicilian region (Motya, Palermo, Lilybaeum), making comparisons with neighbouring indigenous and Greek sites. This region has proven to have been important in the exchange of technological traditions between Phoenician, Punic (Balco and Kolb 2009; Nigro 2015), Greek, indigenous (Landenius Enegren 2015; Longhitano 2021b), and Tyrrhenian Italian cultures (Michetti 2007).

State of Art

Textile production is an industry of great social, cultural, and economic importance, dealing with the sourcing and processing of raw materials to obtain the finished product. The *chaîne opératoire* is as follows: the sourcing and selection of raw materials,

the preparation of the fibre first, and the yarns after, the methods of execution for the various weaving techniques, the treatment of the fabrics, and all the operations relating to the production and use of dyes (Gleba et al. 2013; Gleba 2017).

Textile production in the Phoenician and Punic areas has been researched, but not systematically, both along the Levantine coast (Pritchard 1978; 1988; Mazar 2001; Sauvage 2014) and the Western Mediterranean (Alfaro Giner 1984; Fantar 1993; García Vargas 2010; Oliveri 2021; Pla Orquín et al. 2021). The most investigated sector of textile production in the Phoenician-Punic area is the process of making shellfish purple (Acquaro 1998; Mederos Martín and Escribano Cobo 2006; Peyronel 2006; Marín Aguilera et al. 2018), and its social, economic, and cultural value is well documented by the sources (Mazza et al. 1998; Xella 2010; Soriga 2021; De Simone 2021).

On the other hand, studies of the textile tools and their uses (loom weights, spindle whorls, spatulas, needles, etc.) are still lacking. Indeed, findings from archaeological contexts have not yet been given the attention they deserve, except for a few cases (Carriazo Arroquia 1973; Rossoni and Vecchio 2000; Nigro 2007; García Vargas 2020; Pla Orquín et al. 2021). Recently, the first foundations have been laid for an interdisciplinary investigation of textile production in the Phoenician and Punic fields (Manfredi et al. 2021; Ferrante PhD thesis).

Research aims

This PhD project investigates the traditions and innovations of textile activity in Phoenician and Punic settlements in the Western Mediterranean between the ninth and second centuries BCE.



Fig. 1: Map of the Western Mediterranean showing the sites relevant to the study (Image: Nina Ferrante)

The aim of this research is primarily to identify the contribution of technological innovations over the centuries within Phoenician and Punic societies. Secondly, a Phoenician-Punic production model will be recognised, considering on one hand the technological and cultural contribution of the motherland, and on the other hand possible interactions with protohistoric societies in the Western Mediterranean. The third aim concerns the definition of the main workers in the textile industry in the various production phases, with particular attention to the role of women in textile production.

In contrast to the studies carried out so far, which have privileged large analyses and quantitative collections over vast geographical areas and an extensive chronological period (Alberti 2008; Marín Aguilera et al. 2018), the research aims to analyse the materials in a qualitative way and their relation to specific contexts and areas. Therefore, the research started from small regions and specific case-studies to reconstruct the production process in the Phoenician and Punic areas in the Western Mediterranean. The regions examined are Sicily, Sardinia, the southern sector of the Iberian Peninsula, Ibiza and Tunisia.

Methodology

The work began with an examination of Phoenician and Punic archaeological sites in the Western Mediterranean. The research proceeded with the preliminary study of handicraft, residential and cultic

areas with evidence of textile activity. In addition to literary, epigraphic, and iconographic sources, the following archaeological indicators were used: textile tools, textiles, traces of the presence of looms, shell middens in relation to other installations essential for the production of shellfish purple, installations for the preparation of dyes of animal or vegetable origin in craft contexts. From this preliminary survey, I selected 20 sites to be used as case-studies.

Subsequently, I conducted research stays in the museums of Motya, Palermo, Marsala, Ibiza, and Carthage, leading a joint study of the contexts, installations, and objects to understand the production process at the selected sites.

Textiles preserved in the main Punic necropolises of the Western Mediterranean (Motya, Birgi, Lilybaeum, Monte Sirai, Palermo, Carthage, Gadir, Puig des Molins, etc.) were also analysed. Analyses were also conducted on some fabric from the necropolis of Motya (Ferrante et al. 2023), and analyses are planned for the other necropolises mentioned above.

Regarding the analysis of specific materials, such as spindle whorls and loom weights, the method adopted by the Centre for Textile Research (CTR) in Copenhagen (Nosch 2009; Andersson Strand 2012), as part of the scientific project "Tools and Textiles – Texts and Contexts" (TTTC), will be applied. For spindle whorls, a lot of importance is given to the weight, which can indicate the diameter and the twist angle of the yarn. For loom weights, the decisive factors



Fig. 2: Triangular clay tablets from tomb 2 of the Archaic necropolis of Motya (Image: MAM archive)

are the weight and the thickness, as the loom weight must provide the correct tension for each thread in the warp, and even a small difference affects the produced fabric. In the following paragraph, I will present the case study of Motya.

The case study of Motya

The island of Motya was of particular interest in the PhD research due to the large amount of textile-related material (approximately 1500 textile tools) found in various areas of the island (craft, residential, cultic, and funerary areas) – a rare and precious situation since such tools are preserved in only a few cases. Located on the western cusp of Sicily, the island



Fig. 3: A loom weight from Motya bearing a rosette impression on the top probably using *Papaver somniferum* L. (Image: MAM archive)

has long been renowned for its involvement in textile production. Textile tools are attested from the 15th century BCE until at least the 4th century BCE, when it became a prevalent centre for the production of rich garments and was mentioned by Diodorus (Brugnone 2003, 55). The island can be considered an important Phoenician and Punic centre from the 8th to the 4th centuries BCE. During these four centuries, there is a large amount of evidence that reveals the importance of textile activity on the island: loom weights, spindle whorls, fragments of textiles, and – an exceptional case – remains of a carbonised warp-weighted loom as well as crafting areas where dyeing activities (Tusa 1996) were most likely carried out.

The best-documented type of textile manufacture in Motya is weaving. As in the rest of Sicily (Longhitano 2021a), the most quantitatively interesting textile implements are loom weights that evidence the use of the warp-weighted loom. It does not, however, appear to be the only weaving technique used, as it was most probably complemented by tablet weaving used to decorate clothing (Ferrante 2022). In this regard, two triangular clay tablets were found in the Archaic necropolis as part of the furnishings of an incineration tomb dated to the 7th century BCE (Cintas and Jolly 1980) (fig. 2), and bone spacers associated with this technique were found in the “Zone B” of the settlement (Ferrante 2022).

The technique of the warp-weighted loom on the island of Motya is corroborated not only by the consistent presence of clusters of loom weights, but also by the extraordinary finding in the “Zone D” of remains of a carbonised warp-weighted loom (Nigro 2007, 45). Loom weights were found in almost all excavated areas, especially in the “Zone A” of the settlement. G. Rossoni defined the following typology for the “Zone A” loom weights: truncated pyramid, parallelepiped, and discoidal loom weights (Rossoni 2002).

Another particularly interesting aspect is the decorations and signs on the body of the loom weights: engraved and painted crosses, small dots and circles arranged in the shape of a cross, oval gem and lozenge-shaped impressions, rosettes, stars, simple grooves, or engraved dots (Rossoni 2002; Oliveri and Lo Porto 2018) (fig. 3). The value and function of these marks on loom weights are still unclear, but it has already been noted as a common activity in Sicily (Longhitano 2021b).

The presence of markers that could attest to operations related to dyeing yarns, textiles, and mats is noteworthy. In the Phoenician-Punic settlements in the Mediterranean, some areas attest to the presence of spaces used for such practices, but they are not homogeneously documented. In Motya’s “Zone T”,

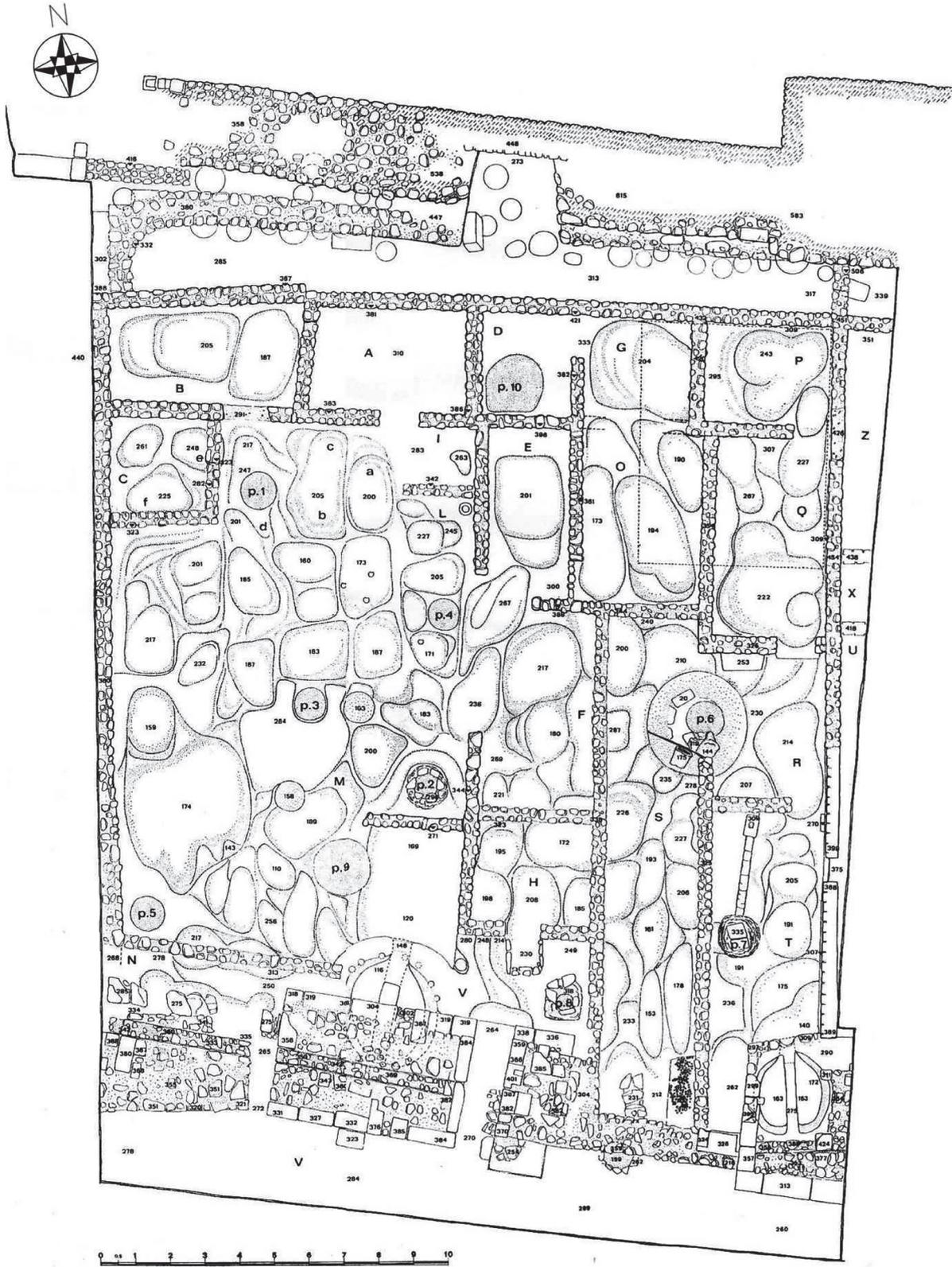


Fig. 4: Plan of the "Zone T" of Motya (Image after Orsingher 2013, fig. 5)

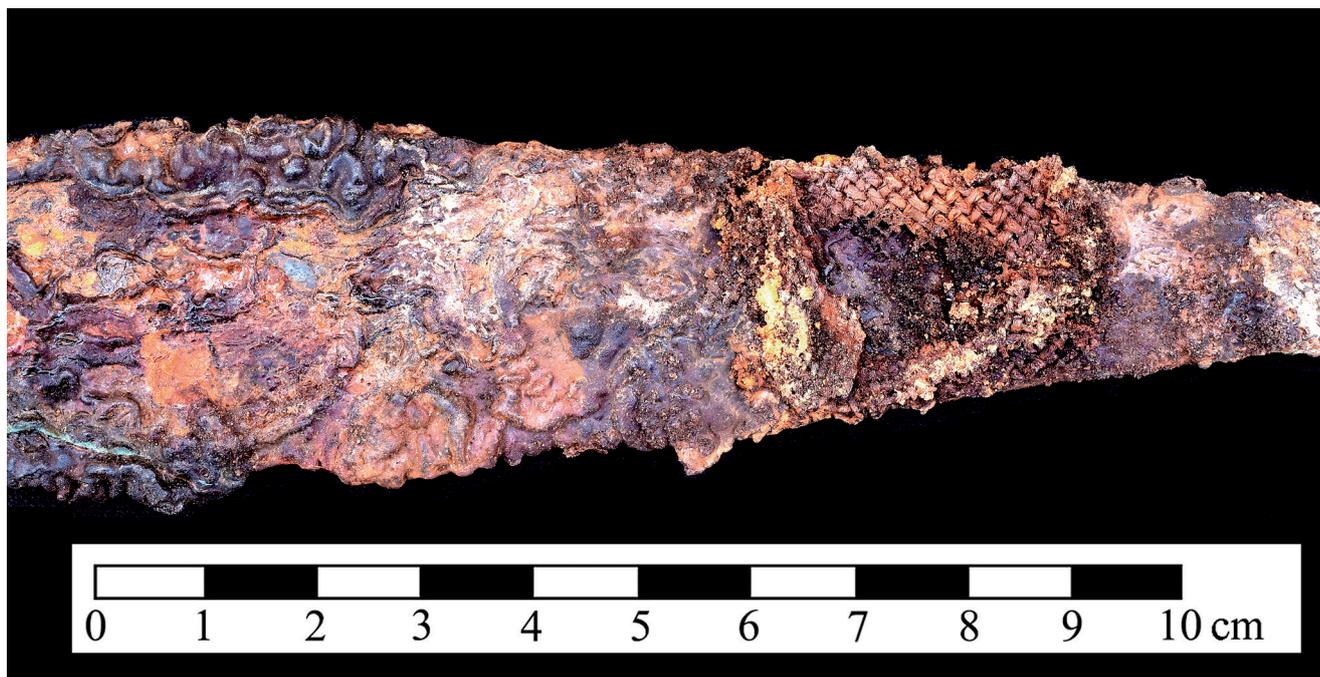


Fig. 5: Iron knife broken in half with fragment of a textile from tomb 172 of Motya (Image: MAM archive)

tanks and installations were interpreted as being used for the various phases of shellfish purple production (Tusa 1996; Reese 2005; Orsingher 2013) (fig. 4).

Finally, remains of textiles – the final products of textile production – are very scarce on the island, as they are in the other Phoenician-Punic settlements in the rest of the Mediterranean due to their perishability. During the excavation of an incineration tomb (T.172) along the Motya city wall, an iron knife was found among the grave goods, which had a rare fragment of mineralised fabric on the blade (Ciasca 1979, 215; Nigro and Spagnoli 2017, 69) (fig. 5). The fragment is a balanced tabby and probably belonged to a fabric that wrapped the object at the time of its deposition (Ferrante et al. 2023).

In the Phoenician and Punic world since the 6th century BCE, it was a common activity to wrap valuable objects in textiles. Comparisons were made in this regard with the Punic necropolis in Palermo and Birgi, where there are some weapons with textiles (Tisseyre 1998; Griffo 2018).

The analysis of textile production in Motya, showing all phases of the *chaîne opératoire*, has acted as a driving force for the identification of comparisons with other sites across the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

The PhD project currently underway at Sapienza University of Rome (IT), studying materials related to

textile production in the Phoenician and Punic areas, will provide countless opportunities to understand the textile traditions of the areas investigated and how the Phoenician and Punic contribution influenced the Western Mediterranean settlements.

The future research questions are the definition of weaving in the Phoenician and Punic society as well as understanding its patrons and workers. This can only be achieved through the combination of archaeozoological data, iconographic sources, epigraphic sources, and archaeological remains, combined with ethnographic studies.

Much still needs to be researched and studied in order to better understand the possible relationships between Phoenician centres and local production centres in the Western Mediterranean. For the time being, it can only be stated that textile production has regional characteristics, even if it features technological innovations brought by foreign peoples. This can be seen in Motya, where the Phoenician and Punic traditions are combined with Tyrrhenian, Greek, as well as local features. However, detailed analyses of individual sites will help broaden the panorama of weaving practices in the Western Mediterranean. In the end, the main research gain for the field of textile archaeology is to observe the different types of textile that may have been produced in the Phoenician and Punic areas. In addition, it is also important to consider the impact of the different types of textile

on the society, economy, and culture of the Western Mediterranean to gain a complete picture of this still little-known area of textile archaeology.

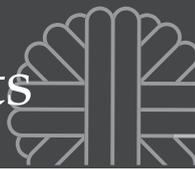
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