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Textile activity and its tools in the culturally mixed framework of Sicily between the 13th and the fifth centuries BCE

Introduction

This PhD project from the University of Liverpool (UK) which was finished in 2019, investigated the impact of cultural contacts on the indigenous traditions of making and using textile tools in Sicily between the 13th and the fifth centuries BCE. Sicily and the Aeolian islands have been crossroads for millennia and the contacts with incomers, especially Greeks, have often been perceived to have affected the indigenous material culture. The analysis of more than 1,400 textile tools from seven sites across Sicily has shed light on how textile tools and technology might have been affected by intense cultural contacts and how people were forced to renegotiate their own identity. Moreover, the study of decoration and marks on textile implements demonstrated that textile tools could be charged with new meanings and express the identity of their owners.

Background to the project

Textile activity was an important aspect of culture and economy in ancient societies (Andersson 1999; 2007; Gleba et al. 2013). The role of other economic activities in Sicily such as metallurgy and pottery, which have usually been perceived as carried out by men, has long commanded the attention of archaeologists. In contrast, textile production, for the most part undertaken by women, has not been studied to the same extent for a long time. Recently, research on textile production has gained momentum (Landenius Enegren 2015; 2017; Militello et al. 2016; Quercia & Foxhall 2014; Quercia 2018), although textual sources and archaeological evidence are limited. Written and iconographic sources provide only a little information

on Archaic and Classical textiles and textile techniques (Brugnone 2008), while no evidence is attested for the Prehistoric period. Remains of actual textiles are rare, because the Sicilian climate is not favourable for the preservation of organic material (Gleba 2008, 62-63). Moreover, specific studies on the raw materials exploited, the yarn produced, and animal bone assemblages recorded and analysed are available only for a few sites (Gleba 2008, 71; Bartosiewicz 2012). Thus, the study of textile production in Sicily is mainly based on textile tools. Spindle whorls have received little interest due to the fact that they do not change dramatically in shape or decoration and are rarely found in the Archaic period. In contrast, loom weights have attracted more interest because of the large number in Archaic contexts and the variety of shapes, which have been traditionally explained in terms of cultural or presumed ethnic factors (Balco &

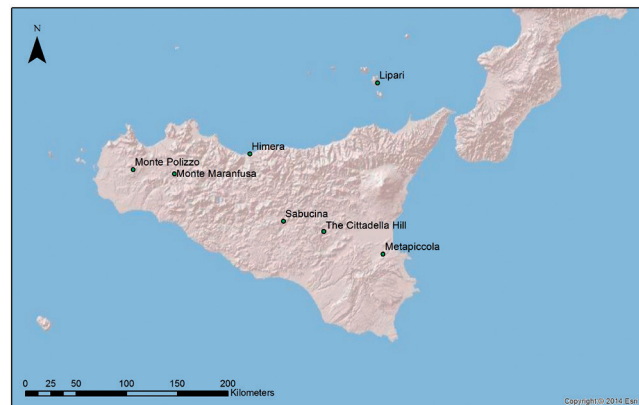


Fig. 1: Map of Sicily showing the sites relevant to the study (Image: Gabriella Longhitano)



Kolb 2009). Traditionally, the truncated pyramidal, conical, disc and lenticular types have been regarded as probably adoptions of Greek types, while the origin of the cube-shaped type is still debated and may derive from the indigenous or the Phoenician tradition on the basis of their predominance in the Phoenician sites of Motya (Quercia & Foxhall 2014).

Research aims

The PhD project “Textile activity and its tools: indicators of cultural identities and interaction processes in Sicily and the Aeolian islands” (Longhitano 2019) investigated the traditions of making and using textile tools in Sicily between the 13th and the fifth centuries BC. The aim of this research was primarily to test the hypothesis of using textile tools as means to explore how social and individual identities can be shaped and negotiated in response to cultural interactions with foreign people. Traditionally, pottery, architectural and social practices have been employed by post-colonial studies to investigate the impact of migrations and cultural encounters on material culture. However, drawing upon the concept of materiality (for example, Miller 2005), this study has demonstrated that

textile tools are deeply and uniquely embedded in collective and individual identities because they are both tools and ‘things’ (Hodder 2012, 2016; Olsen 2010; Olsen et al. 2012) at the same time. Within this social and cultural entanglement, in culturally mixed frameworks, textile tools become capable of acting as agents in the construction of social and individual identity.

Sicily and the Aeolian islands offer distinctive examples of the co-existence of different local communities which came into contact with incomers (Leighton 1999, 215-217, 219-235; Albanese Procelli 2003, 18-25, 131-136). In particular, two events have been regarded as crucial for the local communities: the movement of peoples from the Italian Peninsula during the Final Bronze-Early Iron Age and the establishment of Greek colonies from the end of the eighth century BC. Within cultural interactions, all cultures were forced to renegotiate their own identities through a process of adoption, rejection or adaptation of foreign elements. This research demonstrated that the choice of textile technology and textile tools was used as an element of self-identification and self-representation. The analysis of textile tools suggested that local communities had different approaches towards foreign textile traditions. Some local communities appear more reluctant to assimilate foreign textile tool shapes, while others seem willing to be associated with new traditions. Cultural contact mostly affects those communities where the socioeconomic relationships with the Greeks were intense. In contrast, numerous indigenous centres, mainly those of western Sicily, where the communities were also exposed to the Phoenician culture, demonstrably maintained their local weaving traditions (Longhitano 2019, 251-256).

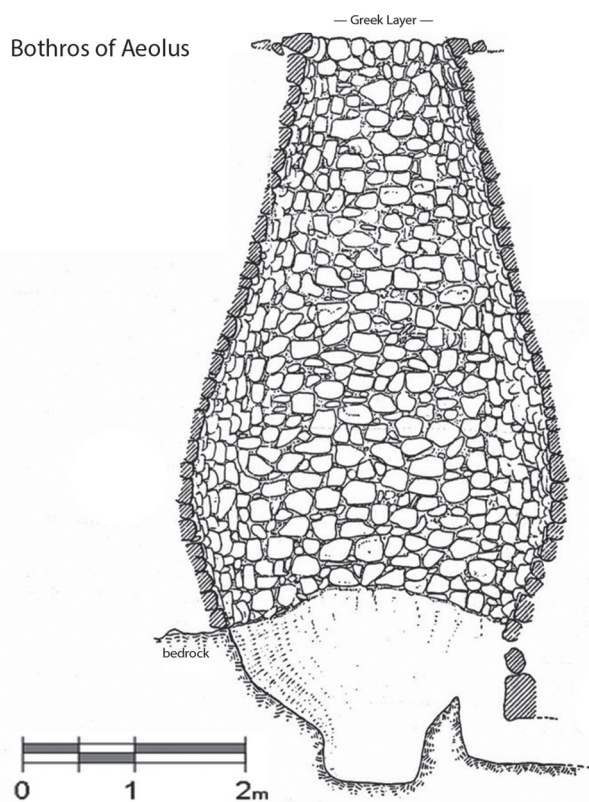


Fig. 2: The so-called Bothros of Aeolus (After Bernabò Brea et al. 1998)

Textile tools from settlements

For the purpose of this study, spindle whorls, loom weights and spools from seven sites across Sicily (Lipari, Metapiccola, the Cittadella Hill, Sabucina, Himera, Monte Maranfusa and Monte Polizzo) (fig. 1) were analysed. The analyses of textile tools from settlements with long lifetimes enabled the detection of changes in textile and textile tool production between the Final Bronze Age and the Archaic period (circa 1200 BC to 400 BC). One of the main changes in the Archaic period is that the number of spindle whorls fell sharply in number in the archaeological record. It is a strong possibility that ceramic spindle whorls were replaced by those of perishable materials or even by wooden spindles operated without a spindle whorl, which have resulted in a lack of archaeological evidence (Longhitano 2019, 245-246). In contrast, the



Fig. 3: A customised loom weight from Lipari bearing an oval gem impression with a flying Nike on the top (Image: Gabriella Longhitano, with the permission of Parco Archeologico delle Isole Eolie, Museo Luigi Bernabò Brea-Lipari)

analyses demonstrated that at the same time, the number of loom weights significantly increased and was accompanied by standardisation in shape and size, and a reduction in size. This result is particularly evident at the Archaic sites of the Cittadella Hill and Sabucina, where the poor quality and heavy loom weights of the Iron Age were replaced by good quality, standardised, lighter ones. This new production mode suggests that a new weaving technique (a different way of setting up looms with larger sets of lighter loom weights) was in use with an emphasis on the production of finer textiles. The turning point for this change was the arrival of Greeks, who brought and used their own textile tradition at their Sicilian settlements (for example, Himera, Lipari and Selinous) which was characterised by a focus on the production of fine textiles (Longhitano 2019, 251-256).

Textile tools and textile production in sacred contexts

This research included textile tools recovered from two sacred contexts in the Greek settlements of Lipari and Himera. These two case studies have provided the opportunity to investigate the significance of the presence of textile tools in sacred areas and explore whether weaving was practiced in connection with sacred activities. Although the interpretation of textile tools in sacred contexts is not always straightforward, their presence in such contexts adds another dimension to the relationship between these implements and their society, and enhances our understanding of the social significance of textile manufacture.

Spindle whorls, spools and especially loom weights are ubiquitous votive offerings in Italian sanctuaries and deposits from the first millennium BCE. Loom weights sometimes come in very large quantities, which might indicate the practice of weaving (Gleba 2009, 81), although the evidence for this is ambiguous.

Votive loom weights can fall into two broader categories: those manufactured for general use and then deposited and those produced specifically for ritual purpose. It is difficult to distinguish between these two categories. The analysis of use-wear marks was sometimes useful in identifying used loom weights deposited at the so-called Bothros of Aeolus in Lipari (fig. 2). This deposit, likely related to a cult area on the Acropolis and dated between the sixth and the end of the fifth centuries BCE, yielded an extremely intriguing assemblage of loom weights (Bernabò Brea et al. 1998). The analysis of functional parameters, along with that of use-wear marks and decorations pointed to a peculiar practice of dedicating complete or partial sets of either miniature or actual loom weights along with single votive offerings. Some of the loom weights deposited in the Bothros of Aeolus are likely customised as they bear impressions of local seals or finger rings (fig. 3) (Longhitano 2019, 111-112).

Deposited loom weights usually do not differ from those found in domestic contexts. However, this is not the case of the exceptionally large assemblage of loom weights recovered from the Eastern District sanctuary at Himera (fig. 4). This small sanctuary yielded a large number of loom weights in two votive deposits (rooms 39 and 25) dated between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (Allegro et al. 1976, 473-550). These loom weights differ substantially in shape and weight from those found elsewhere at the site (fig. 5 and fig. 6). At least three recognisable groups of loom weights were identified and the analysis pointed to the production of particular kinds of dense fabric (Longhitano 2019, 187-202). This result, together



Fig. 4: Plan of the Eastern District with the urban sanctuary (After Allegro et al. 1976)



Fig. 5: Example of a discoid loom weight from Himera recovered in deposit 25 (Image: Gabriella Longhitano)

with the specific nature of this urban sanctuary strongly connected with the life of the district and the female deity worshipped there, strongly suggests that weaving activity was likely to take place at the sanctuary, perhaps under the protection of Athena Ergane (Allegro et al. 1976, 491).

The role of women in the construction of social identity through textile technology

In the study of cultural interactions in Sicily, research has been mainly devoted to pottery, metallurgy, ritual and social spaces and habits, particularly those associated with the male sphere. Recently, female roles have been investigated more closely and it has been observed that, unlike what was believed for a long time, women participated in communal ceremonies and took part in drinking and feasting in some communities along with men (Antonaccio 1997; Ferrer 2016). Although this research has represented a breakthrough in the study of Sicilian communities, scholars still recognise women as merely participants of communal ceremonies along with men, who seem to be the dominant figures. In contrast, as textile activity was mainly practiced by women, this study of textile tools showed that women played a crucial role in the choice of technology as well as in the construction and representation of social identity. They were also instrumental in the transfer of textile related knowledge and skills contributing to sharing and spreading textile tradition. This is what clearly emerges from the analysis of loom weights at the Cittadella Hill. This indigenous site shows a major change in textile production from the sixth century BCE simultaneous with the adoption of Greek urban and architectural models (Antonaccio 1997). The community develops a new way of setting up looms

with a larger number of smaller and lighter loom weights, which is consistent with the Greek tradition, and points to a new and different textile production. This new textile tradition may have been adopted from a desire to produce Greek forms of dress, perhaps to be seen in a particular way or to be associated with a certain social group. It is likely that women as both producers and consumers played a crucial role in choosing new styles inspired by or imitating the Greek ones. The adoption of new technology would necessitate a period of interaction between indigenous and Greek women living at the site or at the nearby Greek settlements. Indigenous women working together with Greek women might have become familiar with new traditions and learned how to set up a loom with smaller and lighter loom weights and to produce new quality fabrics (Longhitano 2019, 147-148).

Conclusion

By applying a variety of approaches, this study of textile tools and technology has greatly enhanced our understanding of local communities in Sicily and the effects of cultural contacts on textile traditions. Local communities have shown a variety of approaches towards foreign influences confirming that mechanisms of transmission in situations of cross-cultural encounter were varied, complex and dependent on local choices and social relations. However, the picture that emerges from this study is not complete because important questions about textile culture remain unanswered. For instance, did indigenous communities, which adopted Greek elements of textile technology, also adopt other aspects of their textile culture, such as motifs, patterns, colours, or only select specific elements? Further investigation is needed to answer this and other questions.



Fig. 6: Example of pebbles likely used as loom weights from Himera recovered in deposit 25 (Image: Gabriella Longhitano)

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